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## The Dantean Structure of *The Great Divorce*

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

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### Abstract

Examines the underlying structure of Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, and its mirroring of the *Purgatorio*.

### Additional Keywords

Dante. Purgatory—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*—Influence of Purgatory; Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*—Sources



## THE DANTEAN STRUCTURE OF *THE GREAT DIVORCE*

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

### I. Genre and Settings

IN 1945 C. S. LEWIS PUBLISHED A SMALL BOOK TITLED *The Great Divorce: A Dream*. The subtitle appears on the British edition, but not the American. The story in this book is, in medieval terms, a dream vision—for, despite there being no falling asleep, over a book or otherwise, the dream experience does end with a bookish awakening. Robert Boenig, in an essay, has discussed Lewis's indebtedness to a variety of medieval dream visions (excluding the special case of Dante's *Divine Comedy*), drawing a number of parallels.<sup>1</sup> He finds the most direct borrowing is the description of Lewis's river (37, 47-49), indebted to one in the *Roman de la Rose* (Boenig 32); the brightness of Lewis's saved souls (e.g., 30) may be due to descriptions in several medieval works (Boenig 32-33). Lewis's use of a "summer morning" (26-27) for the setting after the bus ride also has medieval precedents, as in the first line of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* (cf. Christopher, "Considering," Part I, 40, although Boenig finds springtime—May—to be more typical [31, 34]).

Thus the genre has been defined. But the structure, the organization of the literary work, has proved to be more bothersome. The thesis of this paper is that *The Great Divorce* is heavily influenced in structure by Dante's poem—but in a complicated way. A background of the settings will be helpful for the basic discussion, before one considers the structure.

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<sup>1</sup> *La Divina Commedia* can be considered several things in terms of genre. As a dream vision, it is certainly a vision, but it does not have the opening "falling-asleep" episode nor the conclusion with an awakening. On the other hand, the symbolic opening cantos (being astray in a dark wood, the three beasts, etc.) are more like a literary dream than the verisimilitudinous journey following. (As a vision, it has certain affinities to the prophetic visions of the *Tanach* and of the Book of Revelation.) The poem can also be considered an elaboration and expansion of the classical epic's visit-to-Hades episode (*Odyssey*, Bk. XI; *Aeneid*, Bk. VI). As a quest romance, it can be considered an elaborate version of the poet's search for his beloved in the afterworld (cf. Orpheus and Eurydice)—unusual in having a middle-aged quester. The wall of flames the quester has to go through before finding his beloved has various analogues, including the wall of thorns around Sleeping Beauty. And, of course, Dante's poem can be called a comedy, as Dante did—in the medieval use of the word for narratives that have happy endings.

Christopher Derrick has written:

[L]ook what Lewis does in *The Great Divorce*. He has two scenes there, both English and both entirely obvious: a squalid industrial slum on a winter's evening, and a lovely countryside on a spring morning. A pair of clichés, you might say, until you see what Lewis does with them. (6)

Thus the basic imagery is very British. At first the narrator—who in good medieval fashion is never named—is wandering the poor streets of a city. He mentions having seen “dingy lodging houses, small tobacconists,” and “windowless warehouses” (11). In America, such areas do not have “tobacconists,” since in the poorer areas cigarettes used to be sold from machines and now are sold in grocery stores, drug stores, or filling stations. In America, nowadays at least, the “dingy lodging houses” are often run-down motels. But the urban situation is certainly recognizable.

Then, after a supernatural bus ride, the narrator reaches a rural countryside, “a minute or two before the sunrise” (27). There are fields with daisies, a grove of cedar trees, and a wide, flowing river, with a waterfall upstream (28, 31, 47, 49). In the distance are mountains (29). Probably these are inspired by the Castlereagh Hills Lewis saw in the distance as he was growing up on the outskirts of Belfast (Lewis, *Surprised* 71). At any rate, although his description in *The Great Divorce* is exaggerated for rhetorical purposes, the basic details—the wild daisies, the lilies around an apple tree (50), the hawthorn bush (49)—sound typically British.

Of course, as readers of Lewis's book know, “the grey town” (18, 19) is Lewis's depiction of Hell—or of a spiritual area on the edge of becoming Hell—and the landscape is on the fringes of Heaven, Heaven itself being in the mountains. This religious emphasis in the urban and rural settings is rather like what would have been produced by a Christianized early Wordsworth—the city is evil (of a banal sort), the country good. Here, certainly, is a non-medieval emphasis—at least, insofar as the rural scene is really “wild” nature, not a parkland.

A final element needs to be added to this description. When the narrator and his fellow bus passengers climb out into the countryside, most of them soon are met by “Bright Spirits,” as they are called, or “Bright People,” who have come down from the mountains to meet them (30, cf. 32, 37). These are mainly the saved souls of fellow humans, although one of the passengers is met by an angel and another encounters an angel in a waterfall. Most of the book is made up of the accounts of these meetings.

## II. Two Preliminary Points

At this juncture, two critical points need to be made. First, the *content* of Lewis's book is indebted to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Lewis himself says this in one of his letters:

[. . .] the bus-driver in the *Divorce* is certainly, and consciously, modelled on the angel at the gates of Dis, just as the meeting of the 'Tragedian' with his wife is consciously modeled on that of Dante & Beatrice at the end of *Purgatorio*: i.e. it is the same predicament, only going wrong. I intended readers to spot these resemblances [...]. (*Collected Letters*, Vol. III, 313-14; letter of 28 March 1953, to William L. Kinter)

Lewis's letter does not indicate how *much* of an influence Dante was on the content, nor specifically whether the influence extends to the organization of Lewis's book. Illustrations of the indebtedness will be discussed below, in the next section.

Second, Lewis's book does not have any *apparent* order to the meetings of the passengers (or, to follow the usage of the book, the Ghosts) and the Bright Spirits, which the analogy to the supremely well-organized *Divine Comedy* leads one to expect. Indeed, if the present writer may shift to the first person for a personal example, many years ago, the director of my dissertation on Lewis asked me why Dante was so orderly and Lewis so otherwise. I forget what I answered—probably it was in terms of the original newspaper publication of Lewis's book in short installments—although I avoided what I believe he expected: that Dante was orderly because Roman Catholic theology is based on the orderly writings of St. Thomas Aquinas, while Lewis was not because Anglican theology is fairly amorphous. I still believe that this theological explanation is erroneous. Lewis was enough of a medievalist that he could have gone to Aquinas's writings if he had wanted to; he was enough of a conservative to avoid (and satirically denounce) the more extremely liberal ideas in Anglicanism.

But the problem of the organization of Lewis's book remained with this writer. In an essay in 1972, he published a discussion of the Dantean parallels and concluded that *The Great Divorce* was poorly organized because it raised Dantean expectations that it did not fulfill ("Considering," Part IV). The present essay is an attempt to go in the opposite direction: *The Great Divorce* has more of an organizational pattern than the dissertation director, the present writer, or anyone else recognized in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For the present writer's blindness to the structure of *The Great Divorce*, see Christopher, *Romances* 180-82; "Considering," Part IV, 14-15, 16-18; and C.S. Lewis 105-07. Despite these early writings on the topic, Daigle's dissertation is used in this essay as the major authority

Why this concern with the structure? Many critical approaches are possible. Three examples: the didactic (“What did Lewis intend to teach us?”), the Freudian (“Notice Lewis’s description of the bus’s journey: ‘We were mounting all the time’” [26]), the Romantic “Anxiety of Influence” (“I tried, *trembling*, to tell this man all that his writings had done for me” [stress added, 65]). Indeed, twenty some discussions have been published even of this short book. And certainly Dantean allusions are of interest in themselves, for cultural reasons, and for Lewis’s work within a tradition. But here only those allusions that are, so to write, acted out in the “real time” of the dream vision affect the structure (distinctions will be made in the next section).

The structural approach is valuable simply because it is part of the aesthetics of a literary work. As a reader contemplates the work in his or her memory, a good work—*good* in the aesthetic sense—will have a pattern to its presentation. In modern terms, one might call that pattern a literary flow chart. The present discussion is focused on the pattern of Dantean allusions. This essay picks no quarrel with other approaches—and certainly does not claim this approach is the most important one; but in an aesthetic contemplation of the literary work as an object made, it is a significant topic.

### III. Dantean Resemblances

Three episodes in *The Great Divorce* will illustrate what Lewis said about his use of *The Divine Comedy*. The first of these occurs about halfway through the book when the narrator, the dreamer who has projected himself into the vision, meets George MacDonald, come from the mountains to talk to him:

“Where are ye going?” said a voice with a strong Scotch accent. I stopped and looked. [...] On one of the rocks sat a very tall man, almost a giant, with a flowing beard. [...]

“I—I don’t quite know,” said I.

“Ye can sit and talk to me, then,” he said, making room for me on the stone.

“I don’t know you, Sir,” said I, taking my seat beside him.

“My name is George,” he answered. “George MacDonald.”

“Oh!” I cried. “Then you can tell me! You at least will not deceive me.”

Then, supposing that these expressions of confidence needed some explanation, I tried, trembling, to tell this man all that his writings had done for me. I tried to tell how a certain frosty afternoon at Leatherhead Station when I first bought a copy of *Phantastes* (being then about sixteen

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on many resemblances between *The Great Divorce* and Dante’s poem—that is because Daigle offers a fuller discussion than does the present author.

years old) had been to me what the first sight of Beatrice had been to Dante: *Here begins the New Life*. (64-65)

Since this description of the narrator's indebtedness to MacDonald echoes Lewis's statements elsewhere (*Surprised* 178-181; "Preface" 20-22), obviously the narrator is a fictional projection, just as the Dante of the poem (named only once in the whole length of *The Divine Comedy*) is of Dante the author; but this in *The Great Divorce* is not simply the same thing as referring to Lewis by name. The point is two-fold: first, it creates a history, something that happened before the current vision, as the experiences of Dante's *New Life* preceded *The Divine Comedy*; second, it creates an analogy between Dante and Lewis. Just as the young Dante saw Beatrice and fell in love with her, and as this love created in him the *New Life*, *La Vita Nuova* in the title given to his earlier book, and caused him to write the love poems of that book about her, so also Lewis read MacDonald's *Phantastes* when he was young and the romantic fiction baptized his imagination, creating in him the start, only a start but at least that, of the *New Life*—of a religious life, unlike the atheism and anti-theism of his teens and twenties.

This clear analogy between Lewis and Dante as writers, MacDonald's *Phantastes* and Beatrice as influences, might seem to ruin any possibility of considering a structural debt to Dante, for here the equivalent of the end of "*Il Purgatorio*," with the coming of Beatrice to Dante, appears at the *middle* of *The Great Divorce*, with the meeting of MacDonald and Lewis. Further, since Lewis planned for the meeting of the Smiths to be his use of the Dante-Beatrice meeting, the meeting of Lewis and MacDonald is redundant.

An elaborate reply may be made to these arguments. Lewis's book, unlike Dante's, is one which focuses on the *choice* of individual souls—Dante shows the *results* of the choices (a distinction from Daigle, *Dante's* 141). Thus, Lewis has a number of meetings between souls—a soul who is choosing between Heaven and Hell, in each case, and a soul who already has chosen God: each of the Bright Spirits, the redeemed souls, is a potential Beatrice. They are "God-bearing images," as Beatrice was for Dante (cf. Williams 222; Sayers 94, 96). Thus, MacDonald—as well as his prose romance is—possibly could be a God-bearing image for Lewis. However, MacDonald and *Phantastes* must be carefully distinguished. *Phantastes* is compared to Beatrice; MacDonald is not. At this point, at the equivalent of half-way up Mount Purgatory (as will be argued later), George MacDonald "is" Virgil, not Beatrice. This justifies his discussions of the choices being made, without urging Lewis to walk to the mountains.

Another passage in the conversation between MacDonald and the fictive Lewis involves a Dantean allusion—but an allusion forward, to "*Il Paradiso*," not back to *La Vita Nuova*. When the narrator asks his question—to

which MacDonald would give him a true answer—it is simply about whether or not any of the passengers on the bus can actually stay in this world they are visiting. MacDonald says, “Aye. Ye’ll have heard that the emperor Trajan did” (66). In “*Il Paradiso*,” Canto XX, Dante sees both Trajan and Rhipeus the Trojan in the Heaven of Jupiter (that of the Just Rulers); the explanation of the salvation of the two pagans is obviously not a bus ride—or a chariot ride, in terms of their times—but the point is that MacDonald is using Dante for an authority for the salvation of unlikely figures: the Emperor Trajan, a pagan, is found in the Christian Heaven. (One may remember that in the last of the Narnian books Aslan accepts Emeth, a follower of Tash, into the New Narnia [*Last Battle* 165-66]; Lewis is making the same point there.) Finally, in this passage in *The Great Divorce*, an allusion to Trajan, an allusion to “*Il Paradiso*,” simply arises in a conversation between two men, one of the nineteenth century and one of the twentieth, who both know their Dante; it is not of *structural* significance.

The conversation-upon-meeting between MacDonald and the narrator is the first of the three passages promised as examples. The second occurs during the meeting of the Ghost of a once-famous painter and a Bright Spirit who also was once a painter. The Spirit refers to those painters on Earth and in Hell who have become only interested in their own reputations.

“I don’t think I’m much troubled in *that* way,” said the Ghost stiffly.

“That’s excellent,” said the Spirit. “Not many of us had quite got over it when we first arrived. But if there is any of that inflammation left it will be cured when you come to the fountain.”

“What fountain’s that?”

“It is up there in the mountains,” said the Spirit. “Very cold and clear, between two green hills. A little like Lethe. When you have drunk of it you forget forever all proprietorship in your own works. You enjoy them just as if they were someone else’s: without pride and without modesty.”

“That’ll be grand,” said the Ghost without enthusiasm. (81-2)

Dante, of course, comes upon Lethe in the Garden of Eden. Actually, Lewis is combining the two streams of Eden: Lethe, which gives forgetfulness of past sins (II.xxxi.91-105), and Eunoë, which restores the memory of past sins but so that they are seen objectively (xxxiii.91-145). (So Sayers [Intro., *Purgatory* 68]; this interpretation of Eunoë is not that given by all critics.)<sup>3</sup> Lewis’s simplification of

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<sup>3</sup> In her essay “The Meaning of Purgatory,” Sayers explains her point about Eunoë this way: “immediately [Dante] is plunged into Lethe, and that final, unmitigated knowledge of evil in its essence is taken from him, to be restored by Eunoë as Adam’s [pre-Fallen] knowledge of all things as good” (97). The effect of Eunoë does not seem as objective in this version as in her Introduction.



streams is not the point, however, nor is his shift of the spring from the culmination of the purgative process to seemingly one step in it; rather, the point is simply that this is another clear, direct parallel between *La Divina Commedia* and *The Great Divorce*. It does not affect a structural analysis because the fountain is not met with in the present context; it is referred to as being somewhere “in the mountains.”

The third passage occurs when Sarah Smith—in her previous life of Golders Green—comes to meet her husband, Frank:

Some kind of procession was approaching us, and [its] light came from the persons who composed it.

First came bright Spirits, not the Spirits of men, who danced and scattered flowers—soundlessly falling, lightly drifting flowers [...]. (106)

After these Angels come parallel processions of young men and young women, with musicians playing between them; next comes “a lady in whose honour all this was being done” (107); when he sees her, the narrator comments:

[...] only partly do I remember the unbearable beauty of her face.

“Is it? . . . is it?” I whispered to my guide. (107)

Three strong similarities exist between the coming of Sarah Smith and the coming of Beatrice in “*Il Purgatorio*.” First, both come in processions filled with light. Indeed, both Dante and the fictive Lewis ask questions about the light, when it is first seen, although this essay has not quoted Lewis’s (Dante II.xxiv.16-21; Lewis 105). Second, both appear with Angels tossing flower petals before them (Dante II.xxx.20, 28-30). Third, Lewis’s words, “Is it? . . . is it?”—in which the narrator, conceived in a slightly comic way, is obviously trying to ask if he is seeing Beatrice—echoes Beatrice to Dante: “We are, we are Beatrice” (“*Ben sem, ben sem Beatrice*,” II.xxx.73). After this careful three-step build-up to the meeting, then Lewis can more effectively make the contrast that follows.

These then are the most obvious parallels between the two works.<sup>4</sup> Both the appearance of MacDonald and the marital meeting will fit into the Dantean structure.

#### IV. The Dantean Beginning

Lewis’s dream vision, as said, begins in “the grey town” (18, 19), which in a very general way is parallel to Dante’s City of Dis in “*Il Inferno*” (the City is named in I.viii.68). Dante has simply a city wall, and Lewis has a lower-class area

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<sup>4</sup> Marsha Daigle’s dissertation has many parallels which are not mentioned here (see *Dante’s* 142-46); a few others appear in Christopher (“Considering” Part I).

of a modern town; but both are urban pictures of Hell. Probably Lewis mentions *The Works of Aristotle* in store windows because Virgil's explanation to Dante of the organization of Hell (in I.xi) involves a citation of Aristotle's *Ethics* (80) and a reference to his *Physics* (101); Lewis is making an indirect indication of Aristotle's importance in understanding the ethical basis of damnation (11). Lewis, despite these connections, has used his version of the City of Dis for his own purposes, to set up a presentation of choices, not for Dante's use to separate an upper Hell from a lower one.

Another parallel occurs as the narrator waits in line at the bus stop in this city. Several people leave the queue as he stands there:

- (1) A woman and a man show tension in their relationship and leave the line. She snaps at him that she will not go; he replies that he had been going only for the sake of peace, that he did not care about going (12).
- (2) A short man says he is used to better company and the Big Man (or Big Ghost, who figures in later events) hits him; the short man limps away (12-13).
- (3) "[T]wo young people" leave, "arm in arm. They were both so trousered, slender, giggly and falsetto that I [says the narrator] could be sure of the sex of neither" (13).
- (4) A woman complains they will never all get in the bus; a man offers to change places with her for money; she pays; then she screams when she learns she has been tricked (perhaps he was not in line—the situation is not clear); she leaves line to attack him; the line closes up, and the people will not let her back in afterwards (13).

The discussion of the first of these four may be delayed until after the others, for the later three make an interesting pattern. In Canto XI of "*L'Inferno*," Virgil explains to Dante the arrangement of Hell, based on classifications of Aristotle and Cicero: the three large areas (each subdivided in ways not important here) are those of Incontinence, Violence, and Fraud (or Malice). The first, as one enters Hell proper, is where the Incontinent are punished. The Big Man is wrathful, one of the types included in this area of Hell. The second, where the Violent are punished, includes homosexuals as those violent against nature. The young couple, whether male or female, are presumably of the same sex since they are described as a matched pair. The third is where the Fraudulent are punished. Whatever may be said of the woman's desire to buy her way forward in line, fraud is practiced on her. If these latter three episodes are meant to suggest the three-part division of Hell, as they seem to be, then Lewis has recapitulated Dante's pattern in small.

But what about the first of the four? It is quite possible that Lewis meant to suggest Dante's Ante-Hell, the final placement of those who did not choose for or against God, since the couple first plans to go on the bus to the edge of Heaven and then, for personal reasons, fails to go. The argument against this analogy can be stated this way: "In the context of Lewis's book, a decision not to go on the bus is implicitly a decision to remain in Hell. This makes the analogy to Ante-Hell imperfect. Perhaps Lewis meant that those who do not choose are in *his* version of Hell. They are in the city which is in the process of becoming Hell." But Marsha Daigle, whose dissertation on Dante and Lewis is the fullest study of the subject yet, wrote this in a letter:

I'm strongly inclined to bold[ly] state the "wishy-washy" couple at the beginning *do* represent Ante-Hell because there is a lukewarm refusal to make a solid choice. [...] the "Sunrise" has not yet occurred [nor has the eternal darkness in Hell] and so their walking away is not eternal—they could, technically, show up at the next bus ride(s) as long as the angel keeps coming back. So the couple really does fit the scheme [.]

If so, these four episodes sum up Hell. One would expect what follows to be parallel to Dante's Purgatory, but things will prove not quite so simple.

## V. The Bus Driver and the Bus Ride

Two further points about the first part of the narrative are of interest before a consideration of the structure of the Ghost-Spirit meetings. In Lewis's letter quoted above, he said that the Driver of the bus is parallel to the Angel outside the City of Dis. The Driver, says Lewis in his book, uses one hand "before his face as if to fan away the greasy steam of the rain" (13). This echoes the Angel who walks across the Stygian swamp in order to break open the Gate of Dis for Dante and Virgil with a touch of his wand: "His left hand, moving, fanned away the gross / Air from his face" (*Hell*, Sayers trans. 125;<sup>5</sup> "*Dal volto rimovea quell' aer grasso, / Menando la sinistra innanzi spesso,*" *I. ix. 82-83*). Although the two figures are given different jobs, symbolically they are both re-enacting the Harrowing of Hell. The Angel in *La Divina Commedia* both walks on water, as Christ did in earthly life, and opens this lower gate, as Christ permanently broke open the upper gate of Hell—for Christ, to free many souls (from Limbo at least) (cf. *I. viii. 124-27*).<sup>6</sup> The Driver, in *The Great Divorce*, presumably an Angel, takes

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<sup>5</sup> The translations used throughout are by Sayers (*Hell, Purgatory*) and Sayers and Reynolds (*Paradise*).

<sup>6</sup> When the open gate is first met with in "*L'Inferno*," no reference is made to Jesus's forcing it open (see the start of *I. iii*), but later Virgil says that the gate "*senza serrame ancor si trooa*" (*I. viii. 126*)—if Dante's *ancor* is the modern Italian *ancora* ("again" among other meanings),

souls from Hell to the edge of Heaven for a *potential* Harrowing, and occasionally a *real* Harrowing, if that term may be used. Later in *The Great Divorce*, a hint is dropped that the Driver is Christ, not an Angel. George MacDonald comments, "Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell" (123-24). But this (if not just a slip by Lewis) is probably a hint at an allegorical level. Just as Dante hints at a re-enactment of Christ's Harrowing of Hell by the divine opening of a gate, so does Lewis by alluding to the action of Dante's Angel. Literally two Angels. At some allegorical level—probably the anagogical—two depictions of Christ descending to Hell (or perhaps just Limbo) on Good Friday and then leading the souls of the good who died before his time out of the underworld (probably on Holy Saturday). Whether or not a reader of *The Great Divorce* worries about an allegorical level, the Angel and the Driver are a certain parallel, given by Lewis in his letter.

Once the passengers get on the bus, the narrator interacts with (1) the Tousle-Headed Poet, (2) the Intelligent Man (called "Ikey" by the Big Man),<sup>7</sup> and (3) a cultured man (later identified as a bishop) (14-24, 40). No one, so far as this writer knows, has found any organizational pattern to these three. Both Ikey and the bishop, in different ways, give a goodly amount of background information on the City they have left, so their purpose is partly expository. The Tousled-Headed Poet, besides being a type character (a humour character, in Ben Jonson's terms), probably reflects Lewis's own self-centered concern with poetry in his early years. In "A Slip of the Tongue," Lewis says, that "When a layman has to preach a sermon, [...] he is most likely to be useful, or even interesting, if he starts exactly from where he is himself" (384). Presumably this beginning from one's own position also applies to writing satire of sins. But what, if any, is the pattern here? (1) Egocentricism (pride) of a writer; (2) rationalized materialism, followed by spiritual fear; and (3) what later will be labeled (upon the bishop's

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then the passage implies the gateway was once closed but can never be closed or fastened again. The implication is that Jesus with some sort of power (no doubt appropriate spiritual power) not only opened the gate but acted so that the gate is forever open. One could assume Jesus used some sort of permanent magic spell on it, but in human experience only a gate thoroughly shattered cannot be repaired.

<sup>7</sup> "Ikey" is a slang form of Isaac, implying the Intelligent Man is Jewish. Cf. the first name of the Victorian criminal Ikey Solomons (a model for Dickens' Fagin). J.J. Tobias, in his biography of Solomons, uses *Ikey* in his title but refers to him as *Isaac* in his narrative. Judith Sackville-O'Donnell, in her *The First Fagin*, gives the titles of the second and third pamphlets published about Solomons during the nineteenth century (of 1829 and after 1830); both identify the two forms of his first name: "Isaac Solomons; Better know to the public by the Cognomen of Ikey Solomons" (xii) and "Isaac Solomons, the Notorious Receiver of Stolen Goods, better known as Ikey Solomons" (xiii). If this implication of background is correct, Lewis is using a Jewish stereotype—note Ikey's later attempt to carry golden apples back to Hell to set up a business (21-22, 49-51).

reappearance) apostasy. Probably these should be considered simply as part of a transitional episode (as a transition is being made by the bus): the poet's pride as preparation for the artist's pride; the other two as preparing for their reappearances. If it were not that the seemingly casually presented sequence of the people leaving the bus queue proved to echo the organization of Hell, a critic would not qualify the last statement with "Probably." Possibly, just possibly, Lewis had an order in the three that has not been found. But it will be argued later that this absence of Dantean allusion is part of a larger pattern of only partly building on Dante.

## VI. The 5 + 5 Structure

Evan K. Gibson in a 1980 book first pointed out there were five depictions of Ghosts before the meeting with George MacDonald and five after (111). These are outlined, by number, in Appendix One, but it will be useful to list them here. Here are the first five:

- (1) The meeting of the Big Ghost and his former employee (31-36). The Big Ghost keeps insisting he wants his rights.
- (2) The meeting of the Episcopal Ghost and Dick, an earthly friend (37-46). The Ghost says that he believes in Christian doctrines "in a spiritual sense" (e.g., 38). This is Lewis's satire on what in Anglicanism is called "the Broad Church"—cf. the bishop's hymn at the end of his conversation, "City of God, how broad and far" (46).<sup>8</sup>
- (3) The "meeting" of Ikey and the Angel of the Waterfall (49-52). Ikey is trying to carry an apple back to the bus, for sale in Hell as he indicated earlier (21-22).
- (4) The discussion between the Hard-Bitten Ghost and the narrator (53-57). The Ghost is cynical about Heaven (doubting one could become acclimatized) and about the run-down urban Hell (with none of the traditional tortures for spectators to see).
- (5) The meeting of the well-dressed female Ghost and the naked male Spirit (60-62). He addresses her as "Friend" (61, 62), but no clear indication of an earlier acquaintance occurs. She is bothered by people seeing through her body (as a ghost), she says; but perhaps it is the possibility of people seeing her body through her ghostly clothes, since one passage suggests she is bothered by the Spirit's nakedness (61).

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<sup>8</sup> The significance of the hymn was first pointed out by an earlier critic—perhaps in *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*—but the citation has not been located.

And here are the second five:

- (6) The meeting of a once-famous painter and a Spirit, also once a painter (79-83). The artistic Ghost wishes to paint pictures of Heaven—and ultimately worries about his own reputation on Earth.
- (7) The meeting of the Ghost of Robert's wife and Hilda (84-89). (Hilda seems to be Robert's sister, but it is not explicit.) The wife wants to have Robert back, to make something out of him.
- (8) The meeting of Pam (Michael's mother) and Reginald, apparently her brother (90-96). Pam wants Michael with her; she is celebrating Mother Love as the greatest of loves.
- (9) The meeting of the Ghost with a red lizard and an Angel (98-104). The most allegorical of these episodes—the red lizard = lust, whispering thoughts to the young man. The Ghost's salvation is the only one shown of those meetings that have conclusions.
- (10) The meeting of Frank Smith, a Dwarf Ghost, with a Tragedian persona, and Sarah Smith, his wife (106-120). The parody (in its odd way) is of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice.

One of the things to say about this structural analysis is that it omits several things in the center, in the discussion between George MacDonald and the narrator: (A) an anecdote of MacDonald's about Sir Archibald, who was interested in proving the survival of death, but did not enter Heaven because all there had no need of proof (70-71), (B) the meeting of the Grumbling Ghost and a Bright Spirit, overheard by MacDonald and the narrator (73-74), and (C) a series of Ghosts briefly observed—the would-be femme fatale (76), the lecturers on Hell (76-77), the would-be extenders of Hell (77-78), the traditionally haunting Ghosts (78), and the haters of Heaven (78-79). Obviously, these short Ghostly appearances are used by MacDonald as bases for discussion; the difference between them and (particularly) those in the last half of the major ten, upon which MacDonald also comments, is a matter of degree, not of kind. But Gibson's structure is based on the fuller sketches.

His theory of the types of emphases in the two sets of five portraits each does not work perfectly. He says the "first five [...] illustrate the desires which turn inward and [...] weaken or destroy the power of a self-forgetful decision"; the second five have desires which "have turned outwards, [feeding] on the attitudes and activism of others for their own pleasure" (116). This scheme works in part, but not wholly. As the present writer has asked elsewhere, "Is the young man with the lizard (lust) really outwardly corrupt? Nothing clearly indicates he is a seducer or womanizer: the lizard whispering in his ear suggests lustful *thoughts*" (C.S. Lewis 134, n.14). This may not be entirely true, for the lizard says to the man, "I know there are no real pleasures now, only dreams" (101)—which

implies that once (when the young man was alive) some kind of “real pleasures” existed. Masturbation? Prostitutes? Some easily available young woman? An older woman? But the young man is not aggressive—he starts to turn back on his own, before any discussion with the Angel—so he seems not likely to turn his sins outwardly in any extreme way.

Daigle, in the page and a half of her dissertation that she has given to the organization to this book by Lewis, makes a sharper, more Dantean distinction between “illustrations of sinful attitudes,” for the first five, and “illustrations of disordered love,” for the second five. She sees these as parallel in a general way to the organization of the cornices on Mount Purgatory (164-65): the first five tied to the first three cornices (perversions of love), and the second five tied to the last four cornices (disordered love). More fully, Dante has three types of “love of neighbours’ hurt” being purged at the bottom of Mount Purgatory (199; “*il mal s’ama è del prossimo*,” II.xvii.113), followed by four types of the love “which seeks the good, although in disordered fashion,” being purged higher up the mountain (199; “*che corre al ben con ordine corrotto*,” II.xvii.126). The second appendix outlines Daigle’s scheme. The most bothersome point is that the third portrait of the first five is of avarice (Ikey and the golden apples), but Dante puts the purgation of that sin on the fifth cornice, in the second, or the upper, groupage.

The present writer wishes he had an answer to the classification problems of these two types of portraits, but he does not. Daigle seems more nearly correct than Gibson; certainly she is more Dantean. Both have some problems, perhaps partly caused by Dante’s arrangement of the purgations on his mountain in terms of the Seven Deadly Sins. Lewis, if one omits his tenth meeting as parallel to an episode beyond the sins being purged in Dante (as will become clear in the next section), has nine major meetings to Dante’s seven. (His minor meetings in the center would complicate this still further.) No one yet has investigated fully the lists of sins by the Church Fathers and other early Christian writers; some of them had lists of more sins than seven. (John Cassian, in his *Collationes* XXIV, lists eight: gluttony, impurity, covetousness, anger, dejection, *accidia* [ennui], vainglory, and pride; he is writing of sins besetting monks. But Lewis does not have anything in *The Great Divorce* about gluttony in its most obvious sense.) It is *possible* that Lewis did use some non-standard list of sins in order to avoid sounding too obvious; but, if so, are not the seventh and eighth nearly on the same topic? It is also possible that he wrote sketches as he thought of them, without concern for an overall thematic order; but the structure of the wait for the bus suggests a largely concealed orderliness.

The next section will argue that two of the meetings are of significance in the Dantean scheme. The others must be left to some future critic.

## VII. A Dantean Order

Some comments on an overview of the Dantean structure of *The Great Divorce* can now be attempted. The section on the wait for the bus will not be repeated, but the wait is in Hell (or what will become Hell eventually). Thus the pattern of the sections of Dante's "*L'Inferno*" is appropriate for that period. When the passengers get in the bus and leave the stop, they are no longer in Hell and thus critics have tried to apply the structure of "*Il Purgatorio*" to the later material.

The rural edge of Heaven to which the bus arrives can itself be considered an amalgamation of the plain at the bottom of Dante's Mountain and the Garden of Eden on top. The former, because Dante describes a plain with a divine Mountain in the center, something like Lewis's longer plain and range of mountains at its end. The latter, because Lewis's plain, like Dante's Garden, has groves, fields, birds singing, and a river. The parody of the meeting of Dante and Beatrice takes place there. (Daigle gives several other parallels to the lower plain [142-44].)

Daigle has pointed out other parallels to the climb up Mount Purgatory. First, that the first Ghost—the Big Ghost, who asks for his rights, who does not want "anybody's bleeding charity" (34)—is an example of pride; and pride is purged on the first cornice of Dante's mountain. So both writers' series of examples begin with instances of pride.

(Perhaps this paper has created problems for its reader—or Lewis has—by using the Big Ghost as an example of anger, suggesting the area of Incontinence, in the bus queue, and then as an example of pride here. But pride, a root of sin, is not punished in Dante's hell—instead, the sinners are classified by their manifestation of their sins. So the Big Ghost can have pride as a root sin [in this near Purgatory] and have anger as its manifestation [in the near Hell]. But the separate appearances of Pride and Wrath in the Seven Deadly Sins might mean that one has to do some precise defining to decide where the Big Ghost should fit in the Purgatorial scheme. On the other hand, a person certainly can have more than one sin. His pride is operative here.)

Next, the penultimate meeting in Lewis's work—that between the "young man" (103) with the red lizard on his shoulder and the Angel—is, in being concerned with lust, like the top cornice on Mount Purgatory. Daigle has pointed out that Lewis's Angel and the Angel of Dante's cornice resemble each other. Lewis says of his Angel that he was

[...] so bright that I could hardly look at him. His presence smote on my eyes and on my body too (for there was heat coming from him as well as light)[...]. (98)



More briefly, the Angel on the Cornice of Lust is described as “a core of blinding light” (283), which was too intense for Dante to look on (“*un lume che li era, / Tal che mi vinse, e guardar nol potei,*” II.xxvii.59-60). So both episodes have a sin and an Angelic likeness in common; in addition, the necessity of crossing the wall of flame in “*Il Purgatorio*” and the killing of the lizard by the Angel’s “burning hands” (99) in *The Great Divorce* suggest the purging of lust by flames in both instances.

Not a direct parallel between the salvation of the young man and the Cornice of Lust, but at least a parallel from the top part of Mount Purgatory, is the singing when a soul is freed to enter Heaven. As Virgil and Dante are on the fifth cornice, that of the covetous, the mountain shakes and they hear the “*Gloria in excelsis*” sung by all the souls on the mountain upon such an occasion (II.xx.127-141, xxi.67-73). Likewise, after the young man with the lizard is purged and transformed, the “Nature or Arch-nature of that land rejoiced” (103); instead of the *Gloria*, Lewis provides a type of imitation Psalm for Nature to sing (103-04).

Thus, as Daigle has shown, Lewis has framed his equivalent of Mount Purgatory with pride and lust, matching Dante’s scheme. But the conversation between MacDonald and the narrator in the middle of *The Great Divorce* is also structurally significant, not just a matter of allusions to *The New Life* and “*Il Paradiso*,” and not just a divider between character sketches. Daigle, again, points out that one of the things which MacDonald and Lewis discuss concerns “the nature of the Plain and [...] freewill” (165); likewise, Virgil and Dante, stopped in their ascent of Mount Purgatory on their second night there, spend their time with Virgil’s discourse on the nature of the Mountain (Canto xvii) and on free will—admittedly on love as well as free will (Canto xviii)—but the free will is the significant element for the parallel. These discourses appear in the middle of *The Great Divorce* and after the fourth cornice in “*Il Purgatorio*,” with three cornices and the Garden of Eden to go.<sup>9</sup>

The likeness of the appearance of Sarah Smith to that of Beatrice has already been discussed and need not be repeated; but just as Dante’s adventures in the Garden of Eden (on top of Mount Purgatory) follow his crossing of the Cornice of Lust, so the meeting of Sarah Smith and Fred Smith follow the episode of the young man with the lizard. Sarah Smith and Beatrice are not just alike in their presentation; they are alike in their *placement* in the two works—and that placement, that organization, is what is being stressed here.

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<sup>9</sup> Marsha Daigle Williamson points out in an email of 30 July 2009 that the discussion by Virgil and Dante is not only in the middle of “*Il Purgatorio*” but is also in the middle of *The Divine Comedy* as a whole (cantos 49-51 out of 100).

One final point will conclude this survey. As has been said, when the bus reached the countryside, the time is “a minute or two before sunrise.” The vision ends with the sunrise as, or just before, the narrator awakes:

I stood at that moment with my back to the East and the mountains, and [George MacDonald], facing me, looked toward them. His face flushed with new light. [...] One dreadful glance over my shoulder I essayed—not long enough to see (or did I see?) the rim of the sunrise that shoots Time dead with golden arrows and puts to flight all phantasmal shapes. Screaming, I buried my face in the folds of my Teacher’s robe. “The morning! The morning!” I cried, “I am caught by the morning and I am a ghost.” (127-28)

No close parallel to this exists in Dante’s poem, of course; but some suggestive passages appear in “*Il Paradiso*.” One will be illustrative. The passage in Lewis suggests divine overtones to the sunrise, as the end of time, the time of God’s judgment (the full passage, without the ellipsis, is even more so oriented). In Dante’s poem, in the Heaven of the Sun, a brief passage identifies the sun’s rays with God the Father: the saved souls in the Fourth Heaven, Dante says, are

[...] there set  
In endless joy, bathed by the Father’s rays [...]  
(136)

Tal era quivi la quarta famiglia  
De l’alto Padre, che sempre la sazia,  
Mostrando come spira e come figlia.  
(III.x.49-51)

In contrast to being bathed in joy by the sun’s rays, the narrator is “bathed”—so to speak—in terror; but that is a function of the reaction of different types of souls to God. (The Italian does not have the “rays” of the translation; it says that the High Father always satisfies those in the Sphere of the Sun by showing how He engenders and breathes forth—but the sun’s rays were supposed to engender life on earth, so the rays are implied.)

The structural point is that Lewis’s book ends its imitation of “*Il Purgatorio*” as the sun begins to rise—the sunrise itself is the touch of “*Il Paradiso*” to the book. Thus, any appropriate passage from “*Il Paradiso*”—particularly one, as here, from the Fourth Heaven, the Heaven of the Sun—appropriately follows Lewis’s “*Il Purgatorio*,” as in the larger sense the Dantean Heaven follows Purgatory. Of course, many comparisons of the Sun and God exist in traditional literature; but in the Dantean context that has been developed, the Dantean source seems certain.

To recapitulate: *The Great Divorce* opens in an urban setting, with touches of Dante's Hell, particularly in the bus queue and the bus Driver's reaction to the atmosphere. Lewis's book moves to a rural setting, which has some parallels to Dante's setting of "*Il Purgatorio*." The action in both works at that point begin with depictions of pride, have locodescriptions and discussions of free will in the centers, and conclude with depictions of lust purged by an Angel and of the meetings of a female saint and her earthly beloved. The episodes in both *perhaps* are organized with some equivalent of perverted loves first and disordered loves after the central discussions, but that is not necessary for the present argument. Finally, both the conclusion of *The Great Divorce* and passages in "*Il Paradiso*," following "*Il Purgatorio*," depict God in terms of sunlight. Thus:

**Hell**

The queue and the driver.

**Purgatory**

An example of Pride

A central discussion

An example of Lust

**The Earthly Paradise**

The meeting of the Smiths

**Heaven**

The divine Sun

Obviously Lewis wanted enough Dantean details to put his book in a greater literary context, but enough freedom to reach his audience with English descriptions and English characters.

**VIII. A Brief Conclusion**

One way of considering the Dantean elements in *The Great Divorce* is to note two ways in which they function, both of them in traditional terms, as the beginning, the middle, and the end. First, one may consider the book as a whole:

**Beginning**

Allusions to "*L'Inferno*"

**Middle**

Allusions to "*Il Purgatorio*"

**End**

An allusion to "*Il Paradiso*"

But the central part of the book—the presentation of characters making spiritual choices, with allusions to "*Il Purgatorio*"—can also be handled in the same way:

**Beginning**

The example of Pride

**Middle**

The discussion of free will

**End**

The example of Lust + the parodied Lovers' Meeting

Both the macrocosm and the microcosm (so to term them) show the same organizational pattern. Lewis wants the Dantean imagery to frame and support his material.

The wit of presentation and the spiritual value of parts of Lewis's book have long been recognized, but critics are only beginning to understand the skill of its overall presentation. The Dantean structure is clever, enhancing the content but not overwhelming it, revealing the dream-vision tradition but not turning it into a mechanical imitation, paying homage to Dante's great work without requiring reader's to know it. The recognition of Lewis's skill can only enhance his reputation as a writer.



**APPENDIX ONE**

**An Outline of *The Great Divorce***

In the citations below, the first set of numbers refers to the first British edition (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1945 [dated 1946]) and the second, to the first American edition (New York: Macmillan, 1946). NOTE: the divisions in the British edition, marked by capitals, and the chapter numbers in the American edition, have no certain authenticity; see Christopher, "Considering *The Great Divorce*, Part III: The Various Versions."

The "grey town" (phrase, 36/38)

Reminiscent description (13/11)

Including "bookshops of the sort that sell *The Works of Aristotle*" (13/11)

The bus queue (13-15/11-13)

The unhappy couple (13/12) [Ante-Hell]

The Big Man (13-14/12-13) [Sins of Incontinence]

The giggling couple (14/13) [Sins of Violence]

The cheated woman (14/13) [Sins of Fraud]

The bus's arrival at the bus stop (15/13)

Including the Driver: "The other [hand] he waved before his face as if to fan away the greasy steam of the rain."

The bus trip (15-26/14-26)

Conversation with the Tousel-Headed Poet (15-18/14-18)

Conversation with Ikey (18-23, 25/18-23, 24-25)

Conversation with the Episcopal Ghost (24/23-24)

The countryside, with a river

The disembarking (26-29/26-30)

Recognition of others as ghosts (27-28/28)

Description of the far mountains (29/29-30)

The approach of the "solid people" (29/30)

Transition: the narrator goes into a grove of cedars (30/31)

- (1) The meeting of the Big Ghost and his former employee (30-34/31-36)

Transition: the narrator moves away from two lions, down to the river (35/37)

- (2) The meeting of the Episcopal Ghost and Dick (35-43/37-46)

Transition: the narrator manages to walk on the river, later reaches the waterfall and an apple tree (43-46/46-49)

- (3) The "meeting" of Ikey and the Angel of the Waterfall (46-48/49-52)

Transition: The narrator goes back down stream (49/53)

- (4) The discussion between the Hard-Bitten Ghost and the narrator (49-53/53-57)

Transition: the narrator's depression; he goes into a grove (54-55/58-59)

- (5) The meeting of the well-dressed female Ghost and the naked male Spirit (55-58/60-62)

Transition: the narrator flees from the unicorns summoned by the naked Spirit (58/63)

- (Center) The narrator's meeting with George MacDonald (59-72/64-79)

The narrator's confession of indebtedness (60/65)

Including the comparison of first reading *Phantastes* to Dante's first sight of Beatrice, with the quotation of the first clause of *La Vita Nuova*

An explanation of the *Refrigerium* (60-62/66-68)

With reference to the salvation of Trajan (61/66)

The nature of Heaven and Hell (62-63/68-69)

The choice to be saved or damned (63-67/69-73)

With the example of Sir Archibald (64-65/70-71)

With comments on the Spirits' return from their journey, in order to meet the Ghosts (66/72)

The meeting of the Grumbling Ghost and a Bright Spirit (67-68/73-74) [Fairly brief; not included in Gibson's ten meetings]

Followed by MacDonald's explication (68-69/74-75)

The narrator's leaning on MacDonald (69-75)

- A series of Ghosts observed (69-72/75-79)
  - The would-be femme fatale (69-70/76)
  - The lecturers on Hell (70-71/76-77)
  - The would-be extenders of Hell (71/77-78)
  - The traditionally haunting Ghosts (71-72/78)
  - The haters of Heaven (72/78-79)
- (6) The meeting of a once-famous painter and a Spirit (72-74/79-83)
  - Including mention of a fountain “up there in the mountains. [...] A little like Lethe. When you have drunk of it you forget forever all proprietorship in your own works.” (75/82)
- (7) The meeting of the Ghost of Robert’s wife and Hilda (77-81/84-89)
- (8) The meeting of Pam (Michael’s mother) and Reginald (82-87/90-96)
  - A follow-up discussion on natural feelings (87-89/96-98)
- (9) The meeting of the Ghost with a red lizard and an Angel (89-95/98-104)
  - With the celebration by the Nature or Arch-nature of the land of the young man’s transformation and journey to the mountains (94-95/103-104)
  - A discussion afterwards (95-96/104-105)
- (10) The meeting of Frank Smith, the Dwarf Ghost, with a Tragedian persona, and Sarah Smith, his wife (97-110/106-120)
  - A follow-up discussion (110-113/120-123)
- A final vision and an awakening
  - The discussion continues (113-115/123-125)
    - The action of Pity (111/121)
    - The size of Hell (112-113/122-124)
    - Universalism *vs.* choice (114-115/124-125)
  - A vision within the dream, of the immortal souls of people being like chess-players around a board on which the representatives of the souls act in time (116/126)
  - A brief discussion (116-117/126-127)
- The coming of dawn (in the dream vision) and the awakening at 3 a.m. (117-118/127-128)
  - With sun imagery

## APPENDIX TWO

### **Marsha Ann Daigle on the Ten Character Sketches**

The following outline is based on an analysis of the structure of the ten major presentations of Ghosts in *The Great Divorce*, as made by Marsha Ann Daigle in her dissertation, *Dante’s “Divine Comedy” and the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*, 164-65. The square brackets contain the present writer’s slight differences in emphasis and other comments.

### The First Five

These “illustrations of sinful attitudes,” says Daigle, = the lower three cornices of Mount Purgatory, where various perversions of love—pride, envy, and wrath—are purged.

- (1) The Big Ghost = pride. Lewis begins with an example which matches the first cornice.
- (2) The Episcopal Ghost = heresy. [Apostasy?]
- (3) Ikey = avarice. [This rather threatens Daigle’s scheme since Dante puts the purgation of avarice on the fifth cornice.]
- (4) The Hard-Bitten Ghost = cynicism.
- (5) The well-dressed female Ghost = vanity. [Shamefulness?]

### The meeting with George MacDonald.

The discussion by MacDonald and the narrator concerns “the nature of the Plain and [...] free will,” just as Virgil and Dante discuss during a night halfway up Mount Purgatory—between the fourth and fifth cornices—“the general scheme of the Mount [...] and [...] free will” (cf. Dante II.xvii and xviii).

### The Second Five

These are “illustrations of disordered love,” just as the top four cornices on Mount Purgatory are used for the purgation of disordered love of good—sloth (defective love); and avarice, greed and gluttony, and lust (excessive love of secondary goods).

- (6) The once-famous painter = love of art for art’s sake. [Love of worldly reputation?]
- (7) The Ghost of Robert’s wife = excessive (smothering) love. [Desire to control another?]
- (8) Pam = possessive love. [Inability to see another’s good?] [MacDonald later suggests that Pam does not love her son enough, rather than too much (95-96/105); as such, this could be an example of sloth—defective love; if so, this—so far as the analogous structure of Dante and Lewis is concerned—is misplaced. Sloth was purged on the fourth cornice, *below* the conversation between Virgil and Dante mentioned above, but here sloth is described *after* the analogous conversation between MacDonald and the narrator.]
- (9) The Ghost with the red lizard = lust. Lewis’s penultimate presentation is an example that matches the seventh—the top—cornice.
- (10) Frank Smith, with a Tragedian dummy = misuse of love (love used as a weapon for blackmail). [Self-dramatization of slights to one’s self, *etc.*; a form of egotism?] Lewis’s final presentation of a meeting, when considered as a portrait of the Bright Spirit, Sarah Smith, not of her Dwarf Ghost-husband, becomes parallel to the appearance of Beatrice on top of Mount Purgatory.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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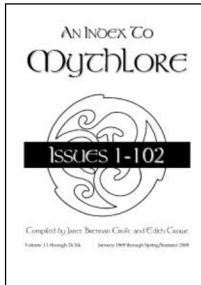
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