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C.S. Lewis's Prufrockian Vision in *The Great Divorce*

Abstract

Examines the influence of Eliot's early poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" on Lewis's dream vision fantasy *The Great Divorce*.

Additional Keywords

Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."; Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*

C. S. Lewis's Prufrockian Vision in *The Great Divorce*

Charles A. Huttar

ONE of the cornerstones of C. S. Lewis's literary criticism is his insistence on historicizing texts and authors. Today this principle is a truism; but Lewis is ahead of many current critics in realizing that one's own time is just as much a "period" as any past age, and having the humility to apply the principle to himself. "Every age has its own outlook," he wrote. "All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it" ("Old Books" 202). My purpose here is not to discuss Lewis's criticism but to use his observation as a springboard for examining some striking things that Lewis has in common with T. S. Eliot, a writer with whom Lewis's disagreements are most conspicuous, sometimes even paraded. For example, when Lewis undertook in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* to defend Milton against various contemporary errors and blind spots, he had to rebut Eliot, whose voice had been a leading one in denigrating Milton. Yet at the outset he is anxious to make clear that his agreements with Eliot are larger than his disagreements: "If I make Mr Eliot's words the peg on which to hang [my] discussion," that does not mean "that I wish to attack him *quâ* Mr Eliot. Why should I? I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial" (*Preface* 9). He means, of course, that they share a Christian faith. (In this regard they stand together in opposition to a great deal in contemporary culture.) So much is obvious and will not be disputed.

My more particular thesis is that Lewis's dream fantasy *The Great Divorce*, written just a few years after his book on Milton, is significantly indebted to at least one of Eliot's early poems, written long before his conversion, and one of which Lewis had been outspokenly critical in that same book on Milton. I refer to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," written in 1911, first published in 1915 in an American magazine and later that year in an English anthology, and then in book form (*Prufrock and Other Observations*) in 1917 when Lewis was newly at Oxford and beginning his training for military service. How early

Lewis read it I have no idea, but it seems most unlikely that, passionately interested in poetry as he and his Oxford friends were, they could have ignored for long a poet a decade their senior who was making such a splash; but the time does not matter to my argument.¹ It is clear that Lewis knew “Prufrock” well enough to quote and comment on a line in it—admittedly, a line that occurs quite early in the poem, but Lewis was not given to reading poems piecemeal. And anyhow, the essential quality of “Prufrock” that I argue he absorbed and that later came to influence *The Great Divorce* is already established in those early lines. I must make clear right away that by “influence” I mean something of which Lewis was probably not aware; there are many other examples in his writing of the resurgence of buried memories of things he had read and made somehow so much a part of his own mind that in the creative process he was not aware of their having any prior source.

“Prufrock” presents a further difficulty, however, in that everything Lewis did say about it (in three different places) seems so negative, one may well ask how he could possibly have been struck favorably enough by anything in it to give it a place in his memory in the way I have just described. To put the question in a more extreme form, but one that many readers of Lewis have considered appropriate, how could he be influenced, even in that way, by a poem that he disliked and therefore—the inference is almost inevitable, given the nearly universal appreciation of Eliot’s work—must not have understood?

I have argued elsewhere (Huttar 94–97) against putting the question so; for a careful reading of Lewis’s poem “A Confession,”² together with his other remarks about that line from “Prufrock,” gives no grounds for supposing he failed to appreciate Eliot’s poem. A brief recap of that argument (with some slight expansion and alteration) is now necessary.

The persona in “A Confession” begins by lamenting, and attributing to his own lack of refinement, the fact that he has looked at many sunsets but, try as he might, has never been able to see one as “a patient etherized upon a table.” It goes on for another twenty-four lines to argue with Socratic irony for the value of more “normal” responses to such stimuli as natural beauty and heroic achievement. It is an indirect argument (more against the influence of I. A. Richards than against Eliot) in favor of the “stock responses” that have been part of the moral heritage of humankind. I find it disheartening how many readers have jumped upon these opening lines as evidence of Lewis’s supposed antipathy to modern poetry and to Eliot in particular. To do so betrays the

most casual of readings, one that seizes proof-texts rather than considering a work as an artistic whole, that confuses the “I” of a poem with the person of the author, and that is oblivious of such ordinary devices as hyperbole, understatement, and irony, which are prominent in Lewis’s poem. What Lewis had against Eliot’s famous image was not what Eliot made of it but what some of Eliot’s readers, reading perhaps equally casually and carelessly, have made of it. That he understood and even appreciated Eliot’s poem is suggested by his Milton lectures, where he deftly describes the image as “a striking picture of sensibility in decay” (*Preface* 55). It is, of course, Prufrock’s sensibility that Eliot is so picturing. Prufrock sees a beautiful sunset and it reminds him—of himself: his objecthood, his moral paralysis (“etherized”), his inability in the long run to be a person. Toward this diseased outlook Eliot is empathetic enough that his poem cannot be called satire, yet the empathy does not render him uncritical of Prufrock’s state. The “Love Song” of a man incapable of love reveals an all-too-possible human condition (I do not say *the* human condition), and even if it echoes an emotional experience the author has had, still, by proceeding to make that experience into poetry, he implicitly rejects it. There is a difference between a state of mind that is transient and one that is, like Prufrock’s, fixed. But Lewis was appalled to hear in some readers’ comments mere delight in Prufrock’s “pain”; they “praised, nay gloated over” Eliot’s objective correlative for spiritual malaise, finding it “so ‘pleasantly unpleasant’” (*Preface* 55). For this unfortunate by-product of his poem Eliot must be held in some sense responsible, as the dispenser of a medicine that has proved to be a “poison” (so Lewis calls it in a letter written about the same time as “A Confession”).³

I would not avouch that my analysis of “Prufrock” corresponds exactly to Lewis’s understanding of it. Yet I find suggestive what Lewis said about Eliot in 1936 in the course of discussing a mediocre fourteenth-century poet who nevertheless displayed a certain

power [. . .] in his unrelieved picture of evil, of bewildered degradation, of nausea. Milton’s or Dante’s hell, superior as they are by innumerable degrees in art, yet do not come so near to the worst we can imagine. There we have grandeur, fortitude, even beauty; but Deguileville’s vision is of [. . .] ultimate deformity. From this point of view (though of course from no other), if I had to mention a modern poet who affects us in something the same way as the blackest parts of Deguileville, I think I should choose Mr. Eliot. (*Allegory* 271)

(It is significant that Lewis parenthetically, if obliquely, acknowledges Eliot's greatness as a poet.) He does not specify in what works of Eliot's he finds this ultimate vision of evil, and of course by 1936 Eliot had written a great deal besides "Prufrock." But it is clear that Lewis knew, and appreciated, Eliot's portrayal(s) of hell.

For, as Grover Smith has observed, Prufrock "is in hell" (Smith 17). We turn now from the "patient etherized" line to Eliot's other images of hell, those that Lewis echoed when he came to write most directly of hell. *The Great Divorce* opens with this scene:

I seemed to be standing in a bus queue by the side of a long, mean street. Evening was just closing in and it was raining. I had been wandering for hours in similar mean streets, always in the rain and always in evening twilight. Time seemed to have paused on that dismal moment when only a few shops have lit up and it is not yet dark enough for their windows to look cheering. And just as the evening never advanced to night, so my walking had never brought me to the better parts of town. However far I went I found only dingy lodging houses, small tobacconists, hoardings from which posters hung in rags, windowless warehouses, goods stations without trains, and bookshops of the sort that sell *The Works of Aristotle*. I never met anyone. But for the little crowd at the bus stop, the whole town seemed to be empty. (11)

The bus queue as an image of waiting, mingling despair and hope, may look ahead to the theme of waiting in Samuel Beckett's work. But more to our purpose, there are many resemblances between Lewis's picture and those found in "Prufrock." They may not be enough to establish borrowing, even of the unconscious sort I have stipulated, and of course in one respect the scene is different: instead of a presumably gorgeous sunset, drizzle. But consider Prufrock's twilight wandering in "half-deserted streets" in a squalid quarter of a smoky, foggy city with cheerless "window-panes" (lines 4-7, 15-16), his "go[ing] at dusk through narrow streets" (l. 70), and the "lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows" (l. 72). Prufrock, it may be noted, does not see them, but merely infers their existence from the smoke rising from their pipes. Like Lewis's narrator, he sees no-one in his wandering; and the persons who occupy his thoughts evoke anxiety when he considers how they will victimize him, or merely ignore him, behaving somewhat as the characters in the queue in the long second paragraph of Lewis's narrative. There are later details that enforce these parallels. One conversation dwells on the emptiness of the "grey town," and we learn that it is the inability of the inhabitants to get along with anyone

else that leads to “more and more empty streets” (*Divorce* 18–19). They are “sad streets” (67), “lonely, lonely streets” (116), peopled by wraiths whose self-centeredness paralyzes any ability to choose their own good when it is placed before them, and in many cases even to recognize it. That the grey town is hell becomes explicit on page 39, but—aided no doubt by Lewis’s title and preface—we have realized that long before. One of the forms that damnation takes, in Lewis’s story of the dwarf and the tragedian (109–19), may be compared to Prufrock’s self-dramatization, constantly imagining scenes in which he might take part, and (especially) ruminating on what roles he might play on stage: not the martyred John the Baptist (lines 82–83, an allusion to Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*)⁴ and not Hamlet, though perhaps some less exalted Shakespearean role (ll. 111–19; here there is, perhaps, a degree of potentially saving self-knowledge).

But there is a still closer connection with Eliot’s poem. Before even getting to the anesthetized patient, Lewis would have noticed the epigraph, the quotation from the Italian of Dante. It comes from the *Inferno*, canto 27, and has been translated as follows:

If I thought my reply were meant for one
 who ever could return into the world,
 this flame would stir no more; and yet, since none—
 if what I hear is true—ever returned
 alive from this abyss, then without fear
 of facing infamy, I answer you. (lines 61–66)

In these lines Guido da Montefeltro in the Circle of the Fraudulent decides to tell Dante his story, since there is no danger of its going farther. Ironically, the deceiver is deceived. He supposes Dante belongs to the realm of the dead, while in fact Dante will return above ground and broadcast this very tale (the fictitious Dante, the traveler, here merging into the real Dante, the poet) in a work designed, at least in part, to teach virtue by warning of the effects of vice. Alongside this Eliot introduces a further irony, setting the ostensible aim of the *Inferno* over against the futility of such warnings, as taught in our Lord’s story of the rich man and Lazarus: “If they will not listen either to Moses or to the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16.31, Jerusalem trans.). Prufrock understands this lesson of futility. “I am no prophet” (l. 83), and even if he were able “to say: ‘I am Lazarus, come

from the dead, / Come back to tell you all” (ll. 94–95) he foresees the probable rejection and asks, “Would it have been worth while” (l. 90).

Although Lewis in *The Great Divorce* splits this Lazarus figure into two separate roles, and without any explicit allusion either to Dante or to Eliot, or to Christ’s story, I suggest that Dante certainly, and Eliot very probably, were so lodged in Lewis’s memory that they each played a part in his creative process. The role of a revealer returned from the dead, which Christ disallows and Prufrock disbelieves, is assumed in Lewis’s book first of all by the Bright People who have come down from the mountains to try to help the busload of visitors understand the choices that are before them. By an ingenious device, Lewis gets around the plain dominical teaching that such efforts are futile. Unlike Lazarus’s hedonistic brothers, the ghosts in Lewis’s story have already died and have experienced first-hand the emptiness of the after-life that is theirs. One would think they might therefore be less satisfied with their present condition and more open to the new insights that the Bright Spirits offer. The idea of such a *post mortem* chance is not found in the New Testament, but Lewis makes use of its one example in Dante (*Purgatorio* 10.73–93; *Paradiso* 20.106–17) by having “George Macdonald” remind his protégé of the legend of Trajan’s redemption (*Divorce* 66). Even so, Dante explains Trajan’s presence in Paradise as the result of a choice made not by a disembodied spirit but by one who, through prayer inspired by Christian charity, was permitted after death to return to the body long enough to believe in Christ.⁵ Lewis’s account differs from this; he employs a variant Christian tradition, handed down by Prudentius and Jeremy Taylor, as Macdonald explains (*Divorce* 66). Like Dante, Lewis is wary of allowing a mere ghost to choose, but he gets around it by enabling them to grow in solidity by degrees as they grow in openness to the possibility of redemption. At any rate, such happy endings—if we may judge by the fates of the ghosts in *The Great Divorce*—are few and far between. Much more commonly, the ghosts’ decisions attest to the futility of bringing them news from beyond the grave; and essentially for the same reason as with Lazarus’s brothers, that they are too committed to the values according to which their lives have been shaped to be able to engage seriously with the challenge of truth contrary to those values.

The role of one who returns from the dead to “tell all” is taken in the second place by the narrator of Lewis’s story. The story itself, of course, is his telling, just as Dante’s entire poem is his. In neither case is the dreamer

commissioned or given the responsibility to relate his dream (unlike, in that respect, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*). In other words, there is no higher authority, whether divine or delegated, countermanding the warnings that such telling is useless. Both Dante and Lewis undertake the responsibility on their own; so, it may be added, does Eliot, if (as I believe) his work has any social or moral purpose as distinct from the aesthetic purpose of exquisite portraiture. In Lewis's case, George Macdonald in their parting conversation takes for granted that he may try, and does not seek to dissuade him. He does, however, do two things. First, he casts doubt on any literal understanding of the meaning of the narrator's story (or, as it turns out to be, his dream). Perhaps the apparent choices made on the bus excursion were "only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago," or perhaps "anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things" (127). Our limited knowledge, Macdonald says, or rather our limited capacity to know, our imperfect "lens," does not let us be sure which of the three possible explanations is right. Furthermore, the need we may feel to see these as distinct, mutually exclusive explanations may itself be the product of our limited knowledge. "Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give" (*Divorce* 127). The multiplication of inexactitudes here—vision and dream—is reminiscent of Dante's threefold distancing in his final canto, as he remembers the cumulative inadequacies of human vision, memory, and language to capture the Divine reality. Second, Macdonald warns: "If ye come to tell of what ye have seen, make it plain that it was but a dream. [. . .] Give no fool the pretext to think ye are claiming knowledge of what no mortal knows" (127).

These reservations tend to exonerate Lewis from the charge of violating the caveat contained in the Lazarus story. The author is not in fact doing what Lazarus was not allowed to do. The artistry that achieves such fluid transition from Lewis the bus passenger, observer, and pupil to Lewis the dreamer to Lewis the real-life author may tempt us to forget that he is not really coming back with first-hand knowledge from beyond that famous bourne. He insists even more plainly at the end of his preface:

[R]emember that this is a fantasy. It has of course . . . a moral. But the transmortal conditions are solely an imaginative supposal: they are not even a guess or a speculation at what may actually await us. The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity about the details of the after-world. (*Divorce* 7–8)

Somewhere behind this insistence may (all too likely) be memories of violence wrought on *The Divine Comedy* by one or more students who approached it looking for entirely the wrong sort of things.

Still, Lewis is quite frank about the fact that his purpose is to teach as well as delight. Such is the time-honored definition of poetry, and he must have perceived it as Eliot's purpose too. At least, he found little delight in the imagery of Eliot's "Prufrock" per se and had little patience with those who did (one can delight, however, in the artistic skill that makes disgust a vehicle for something higher; this is part of the paradox of the beauty of ugliness). Not that Eliot was ever (in his poems and plays) as transparently didactic as Lewis often was. That difference comes from their having chosen, for the most part, different genres; and that, in turn, no doubt from differences of temperament. But if we were able to look into the hearts of Lewis's and Eliot's readers, I believe we would find a good number who were sufficiently receptive to their respective moral visions—which are, after all, not that disparate—that they could escape the fate of Lazarus's brothers, or Lewis's ghosts.⁶

Notes

¹Lewis's diary records his "look[ing] into" a copy of Eliot's poems borrowed from his pupil John Betjeman in 1926 (*All My Road*, 410). One supposes it was the 1925 *Collected Poems*.

²Originally published in *Punch* under the title "Spartan Nactus," a phrase that puzzles me. I take it as a metonymy for someone who feels out of his element (literally a Spartan, a dweller inland, who finds himself swimming in the sea)—so that the Socratic irony is present there as well as in the later title, "A Confession." If this interpretation is faulty, I should welcome a correction.

³I paraphrase radically. For the full relevant text, see Hurrar, 95–96. The word "normal" placed in quotation marks above also comes from that letter.

⁴See Ledbetter, 42.

⁵Lewis's opinion on this story before his own conversion may be noted in a diary entry for 1927 (*All My Road*, 449).

⁶After completing this essay I found that a somewhat similar comparison had been offered between T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and certain works by Charles Williams, who was a friend of both Eliot and Lewis. Of possible relevance to Lewis's *The Great Divorce* is Williams's remark in *Poetry at Present* (1930) suggesting that the city Eliot portrays may "perhaps" comprise the "refrigeria of Mr. Eliot's hell" (qtd. in Keesee 48)—alluding to the patristic concept that also provides the premise for Lewis's novel.

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