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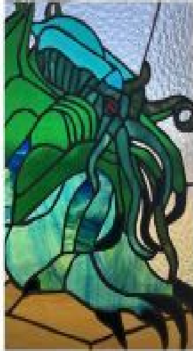

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Abstract

Praises *The Great Divorce* because in it the two sides of the author—"the atomically rational Lewis and mythopoeic Lewis—I will not say united, but they do at least join hands." Cogent argument is combined with "vividly imagined" narrative and descriptive imagery.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce

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Some Reflections on *The Great Divorce* of C. S. Lewis

by Owen Barfield

THERE ARE TWO THINGS above all that characterize the world we have lived in since what is called the scientific revolution, by contrast with the world before it. One is the overriding importance of solidity in our estimate of what constitutes reality, and the other is our tendency to conceive of space as an infinite number of points and of time as an infinite succession of moments. The differential calculus, as its name testifies, originated as a device for applying exact quantitative measurements to motion, and therefore to both space and time. But it soon became more than that. Already before 1850, as William Whewell pointed out, people had begun "to mistake the use of the differential calculus for the evidence of a physical truth." The two together—the notion of "extended substance," used by Descartes to designate everything in the universe that is not mind or spirit, and the habit of thought induced by the calculus—led inevitably to "atomism" in physical theory. Atoms were the only ultimate reality, and atomism the only reality principle.

I am not referring to modern atomic theory, but to the "billiard ball" atoms, as they are sometimes called, of classical, nineteenth-century physics, since it was these that became the reality principle for ordinary men and led in their turn to the atomic psychology of thinkers like Hartley and Condillac and later of Bertrand Russell and others. During the nineteenth century, and it is still going on, the attempt was made to conceive not only psychology but everything under the sun, including sociology and ethics, in atomic terms. This need not have mattered much, since atomic thinking—that is, thinking solely in terms of isolated causes and effects—has the capacity to be very precise, very accurate, quite indispensable for practical purposes. What was disastrous was the failure to distinguish between atomism as *method* and physical atomism as the sole reality principle. For the result was that people gradually became incapable of thinking precisely, or indeed without hopeless confusion, about anything at all that was *not* reducible to physical units. Bentham, for example, reduced ethics to the physically atomic and quantitatively measurable principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." But Comte and Bentham were only the beginning. By the early part of the twentieth century it had become much more than the fashion, it had become the ingrained habit of thought, often called "common sense," to regard ethics, and with it of course religion, as a mere offshoot of psychology, and psychology itself as an offshoot of phsyiology.

It remained for the twentieth century, in the person of C.S. Lewis, to detect and expose the disastrous confusion, to discover that thinking atomically is not the same thing as thinking about atoms, and especially to show that it is possible to think in that way even about ethics without simply turning it into something else. That, it seems to me, is his distinctive contribution as a moralist and as a controversial writer in general. For his own thinking is eminently atomic. It is ruthlessly cause-and-effect; it is hard-hitting as billiard-balls are hard-hitting when they meet each other on a table. And it was badly needed, because it was relentlessly either/or in a mushy intellectual milieu where (provided it is the non-material you are talking about) nothing is definite, and anybody can always have everything both ways. Look again at the *Pilgrim's Regress*. Lewis was Jack the giant killer in an empire of King Huggermugger and Queen Mishmash; or he assailed the sullen concrete blockhouse of materialism (which is the only firmness in that world) with missile blocks of reinforced concrete, and the surrounding swamps are a little firmer now for being paved here and there with the débris.

The reinforcing rods were his iron logic, a logic that is uncompromising because it is free from secret physical presuppositions, and thus a logic that is authentically analytical for almost the first time since the decline of Scholasticism. Thus it is that in *The Abolition of Man* both the absurdity and the peril of regarding psychology and ethics as an offshoot of physiology are hammered home with a force that is irresistible—"for the plain reason," as Cardinal Newman once put it, "that one idea is not another idea." And thus in *Screwtape*, so far from ethics figuring as the offspring of psychology, a highly subtle and penetrating psychology is itself the offspring of ethics. It is subtle and penetrating, and it is also atomic. Both there and in *Mere Christianity*, and indeed throughout his best-known work, Lewis saw the moral life of Everyman as consisting of a succession of momentary choices. And his theology followed from his ethics. The spiritual life of man too consists in just such a succession of choices—choices that admit of no compromise, alternatives that are mutually and absolutely exclusive. In no sense is the spiritual life ever to be thought of as a *flow*, or a development. It is a series of steps, and each separate step is either in the direction of heaven or it is in the direction of hell.

Indeed it is in *The Great Divorce*, which is a kind of myth of heaven and hell, that what I am stressing as the atomic quality of his thinking is most clearly evident. It appears already in the first paragraph of the Preface, challenging "the belief that reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable 'either-or'...that mere development or adjustment or refinement will somehow turn evil into good...," and it is latent throughout the argumentative part of the text, whence it even transpires that, from the point of view of heaven, reality *always* presents us with just that. "This moment contains all moments," says an angel to one of the visitants from hell. "The gradual process is of no use at all," says the same angel to the same visitant. And there is more throughout to the same effect. Moreover, it is in *The Great Divorce* that the integral union transpires between Lewis's atomic ethics and an atomic or "differential" notion of time itself. Time, says the spirit of George Macdonald, is a device for conferring freedom on humanity—"the gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of eternal reality." But that does not mean it is anything like Plato's "moving image of eternity." On the contrary, for Macdonald (that is, for Lewis's Macdonald in the story), it is an *atomic* image of eternity. Time itself is "a picture of moments following one another and yourself in each moment making some choice that might have been otherwise."

BUT ALL THIS is not the only reason why *The Great Divorce* is especially interesting. Lewis was not only a moralist and Christian apologist. He was also a distinguished literary critic, a writer of imaginative fiction, and a poet. And in all three of these capacities he evinced a strong and warm feeling for myth; one might better say a firm intuition of the substantial reality of myth. There were, in fact, two Lewises, and all I have been saying so far has referred only to one of them. There was the "bonny fighter" of the Socratic Club;[1] but there was also mythopoeic Lewis, the author of *Till We Have Faces*, the planetary novels, of the Narnia series and of many of the poems. *The Great Divorce* is, as I have said, itself a kind of myth and in that book, as perhaps not quite in any other, this ever diverse pair—atomically rational Lewis and mythopoeic Lewis—I will not say unite, but they do at least join hands. On the one hand it is full of argument on the lines I have mentioned; but on the other there are all the narrative and descriptive parts, these vividly imagined, *qualitatively* imagined landscapes of heaven and hell, along with memorable pictures like that of the Tragedian and the dwarf; or the procession of Sarah Smith in glory; or, best of all, the man with the lust-

[1] See Austin Farrer's essay in *Light on C.S. Lewis*.

lizard at his ear and his abrupt transformation into a kind of Sagittarian horseman.

"Vividly imagined...memorable pictures..."—the very words imply a different world from the one we best know. They draw us on, or back, into the world of myth. And what is the world of myth like? Whatever else it is, it is the opposite of atomic and the reverse of solid. No wonder Ovid chose "Metamorphoses" for the title of his general account of it. It is a world where, instead of cause-and-effect, we find a sequence of shapes and patterns gradually changing into each other. It is a world where everything *flows*. The very last word one would choose, if one were trying to convey a taste of its quality, is "solidity."

In that world, both during Lewis's life and since his death, there has been a steadily growing interest, a growing awareness of the fact that there was once a time when that kind of consciousness was collective; a time when it was, for mankind, the normal way of apprehending the world around him; when it was his "common sense"; when it was the ground beneath knowledge itself. And there has been a growing tendency to ask whether it may not have been a way of knowing things, including things about the spirit, which we no longer know—except in what we call "the unconscious." In this mythic, or symbolic type of consciousness, which was not finally extinguished until the time of the scientific revolution, Lewis, as he showed in *The Discarded Image* and elsewhere, was very much at home. With that kind of *question* about it he was not at home at all.

Lewis had practically no use for theories about myth and very definite ideas about its relations to anything that could be called belief or knowledge. He held, in short, that there was no relation at all, or certainly no discoverable one. He criticized the "demythologisers" in theology, but his own determination to keep the two separate was absolute. Knowledge, or belief about matters of fact, was one thing; myth and all it stands for another. He always went out of his way to insist that his own works of fiction *were* fiction, without relation to fact. And it is so, he tells us in the Preface, that we are to take the narrative and descriptive parts of *The Great Divorce*. Knowledge and belief were the province not of mythopoeic but of atomic Lewis, and their only sure basis (always excepting Divine Revelation) was the post-Cartesian reality principle, the great divorce between matter and spirit. However it might be in heaven, for man on earth to search for any link between myth and fact was for him a crucial error. Worse: it was a kind of rape, since it deflowered imagination herself of her supreme quality: the virginal purity of detachment—of being an end in herself and not a means to some other end. Worse still: it was the first downward step in a journey that could only end in another mishmash—not the sort that comes of crude materialism, but one which he was equally inclined, and equally equipped, to combat: namely, that mis-taking of the symbol itself for the symbolised, of mere matter in some outlandish guise for "spirit," which was what the word "occultism" denoted in his vocabulary. And here too I am inclined to think his hostile vigilance was not unneeded. There are a good many signs today to bear it out. And if in the last analysis he was mistaken, and the way of flowing images *is* a way of knowledge as well as the atomic or rational way, then its proper pursuit calls for intellectual vertebrates, with a backbone enough stiffened by atomic thinking to enable them to discern the gentleness that is imagination from the softness that is ruin.

There was then something like a great divorce between the two Lewises themselves. And paradoxically it is in the book for which he chose that title that they came as near as they ever did come to remarriage. How then was the reconciliation brought about? In a very remarkable way, and one which is at the same time the most distinctive stroke in the book. Almost indeed by a kind of conjuring-trick. In all imagery and symbolism, and perhaps especially in myth, the movements and the changing shapes and patterns of the solid material world are made to reveal, or at all events to suggest, the immaterial world of spirit which that world normally veils from us. Lewis does just that with them, but he also strides a long step beyond it. In *The Great Divorce* mythopoeic Lewis, with a touch of violence that is itself perhaps more characteristic of atomic Lewis, employs not only material shapes but *materiality itself* to symbolise immateriality. All the description concentrates on heaven as a *solid* place. Heaven itself almost *is* solidity, and its inhabitants are regularly referred to as "the Solid People" by contrast with the wraith-like visitants from hell. In other words, mythopoeic Lewis, the builder, filches from atomic Lewis the concrete reality principle, which he had always kept so fastidiously at arm's length, and inserts it as the keystone of his supporting arch!

This to my mind is the outstandingly original touch in the book; and it is insisted on throughout. Some have no doubt seen it as a cunningly didactic invention—to take the reality principle itself of twentieth century men (including Lewis himself as knower) and use it as a means of pointing them to a greater reality. But I have reason to believe that was not the way it came about. It was begotten genuinely of his own inner life. It arose quite naturally out of an intercourse—call it struggle, if you prefer—between the two Lewises that had been going on in there for a long time. And thus it was that between them they were able to create a violent indeed, but also novel, and perhaps important symbol. If you want a *philosophy* of imagination, you must look into the universal law of polarity, of which Coleridge speaks, and then into all that follows from it. But if you are content with a *symbol* of imagination's relation to truth, a symbol of myth, a symbol of symbolism itself, you may find it in *The Great Divorce*.

Dorothy L. Sayers & the Inklings

by Joe R. Christopher

LET ME BEGIN WITH the fact that Dorothy L. Sayers was *not* an Inkling. This needs saying because several authors, including Janet Hitchman, have said she was. Hitchman, in her *Such a Strange Lady: An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957)*, published in London by the New English Library, writes: "Charles Williams and C. S. Lewis were the most popular writers on religious questions in the thirties. [Surely a decade early.] Dorothy corresponded with both of them...and they formed themselves into a kind of loosely knit club, referring to themselves as the 'Inklings' because they thought they each had a glimpse of the meaning of God" (p. 177). This is going to be typical of popular writing on Sayers and the Inklings, I'm afraid—because, after all, she does share a community of interest with Williams and Lewis.

Even to call Sayers an "Oxford Christian"—a name some have used for the Inklings—is misleading to a degree. She was born in Oxford (her father was then headmaster of Christchurch Cathedral Choir School, but four years later he