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

**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*
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 society 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." Bentham and Condillac were only the beginning. By the early part of the twentieth century it had become 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 physiology.

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 controversialist 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 missle blocks of reinforced concrete, and the surrounding swamps are a little firmer now for being paved here and there with the trampling of St. Dunstan's feet. 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 anal-
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 to do with 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 of Sagittarian horseman. And there has been a growing tendency to ask whether it may not have been a way of knowing of a collective; a time when it was, 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, mythopoetic 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 Cole-optics 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.