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Abstract

C S Lewis poem in *The Great Divorce* identified as a loose translation of Psalm 91.

Additional Keywords

Psalm 91; C S Lewis; mooreeffoc; T S Eliot

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OTES AND LETTERS

AN UNSOURCED POEM IN LEWIS'S *GREAT DIVORCE*

PIERRE H. BERUBE

IN *Mythlore* #133, AODBER DUNAI begins her article by quoting in full an untitled poem from *The Great Divorce* (Lewis 134). Dunai apparently accepts this poem as a genuine Lewis production. She describes the poem as "These eccentric lines [...] sung by the retinue of a twentieth-century Beatrice in her honor" (Dunai 5).

As noted by Dobbs and Logan, this poem is a partial paraphrase of the 91st Psalm. This can best be seen by placing the two poems in parallel columns, as I have done below. There are 16 verses in the original; I indicate the verse numbers.

This psalm is widely used in both Jewish and Christian liturgies. In the Vulgate, and in older editions of Catholic bibles, it is numbered Psalm 90.

Psalm 91		
	Lewis's paraphrase	King James original
1	The Happy Trinity is her home:	He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
2	nothing can trouble her joy.	I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.
3	She is the bird that evades every net; the wild deer that leaps every pitfall.	Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.

4	Like the mother bird to its chickens or a shield to the arm'd knight: so is the Lord to her mind, in His unchanging lucidity.	He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.
5	Bogies will not scare her in the dark: bullets will not frighten her in the day.	Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
	Falsehoods tricked out as truths assail her in vain: she sees through the lie as if it were glass.	[no equivalent]
6	The invisible germ will not harm her: nor yet the glittering sun-stroke.	Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
7	A thousand fail to solve the problem, ten thousand choose the wrong turning: but she passes safely through.	A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.
8	[omitted]	Only with thine eyes shalt thou behold and see the reward of the wicked.
9	[omitted]	Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation;
10	[omitted]	There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.
11	He details immortal gods to attend her: upon every road where she must travel.	For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.
12	They take her hand at hard places: she will not stub her toes in the dark.	They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.
13	She may walk among Lions and rattlesnakes: among dinosaurs and nurseries of lionets.	Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet.

14 [omitted]	Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name.
15 [omitted]	He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him, and honour him.
16 He fills her brim full with immensity of life: he leads her to see the world's desire.	With long life will I satisfy him, and shew him my salvation.

I call this a paraphrase, but it might well be a translation instead. Lewis may have been working from the Hebrew (Aramaic?) original, the Greek Septuagint, or the Latin Vulgate, instead of the English Bible. I am not familiar with the classical languages, so have not followed up this line of investigation.

Scores of poets, including our greatest, have translated all or part of the Psalms; among the best known, Burns, Coleridge, Donne, Herbert, Milton, Sidney, Smart, Surrey, Vaughan, and Wyatt (Wieder 311). Could not Lewis have been quoting someone else's work? I have not checked all published translations, but I consider this very unlikely. The style clearly indicates a twentieth-century origin, which excludes all the poets I have named. Besides, Lewis was scrupulous about giving credit—in the preface to this same book he credits a source whose name he can't even remember. If he had used another poet's translation, he would have credited him.¹

SOME NOTES ON LEWIS'S PARAPHRASE

- Each verse of the paraphrase falls into two halves, conveniently separated by a colon. The second half repeats the first, with some variation of wording or imagery. Most verses of the original also exhibit this parallelism (minus the colon).
- The masculine is changed to the feminine throughout.
- The second person is changed to the third person.
- Obsolete words (*shew*, *flieth*, *thou*) are modernized.
- Imagery also is modernized: *arrows* become *bullets*, *adders* become *rattlesnakes*, and *pestilence* becomes *germ*.
- In verse 1, Lewis treats the phrase "the secret place of the most High" as an adumbration of the Trinity. The inspired author probably did not have

¹ However, for a similar unattributed poem in Lewis's essay *The Funeral of a Great Myth*, refer to my 1979 letter in *Mythlore* (Berube).

this idea explicitly in mind, but it is not required of prophets that they understand their own prophecies.

- Verses 1 and 2 do not break into parallel halves, so Lewis conflates them into a single verse.
- In verse 3, *pestilence* has unaccountably become a wild deer.
- Lewis obtrudes an extra verse between 5 & 6.
 - At first I thought he was translating from memory and had inadvertently incorporated a verse from some other Psalm. Lying is frequently mentioned (unfavorably) throughout the Psalter. However, I can find no verse that promises “lies will not deceive you,” nor one that associates falsehood with glass.
 - The image of glass cannot be contemporary with the psalmist. Glassmaking is prehistoric, but *transparent* glass was not discovered in Syria until the 9th century B.C. (Wikipedia). As late as St Paul’s day, one saw through glass “darkly” (1 Cor 13:12). Transparency as a metaphor for honesty may be a commonplace of President Trump’s tweets, but in the Old Testament it is an anachronism.
 - Clearly, Lewis wanted us to realize that the saintliness of his Beatrice comported with shrewdness, not with naivety. No holy fool she. Finding no verse in the Psalter to convey this message, he boldly made one up (Rev 22:18).
- Lewis omits verse 8, perhaps because it lacks the expected parallelism. Note however that this verse may be glossed as “the saints in Heaven shall gloat over the damned in Hell” —not at all the point Lewis wants to make.
- Verses 9 and 10 are also omitted, perhaps because they do not break into two parallel halves.
 - This may be an artifact of the numeration. The verse numbers are not part of the original text, having been introduced in early modern times for convenience of reference.
 - These two verses could readily be combined into a single verse exhibiting the required parallelism, as Lewis has already done with verses 1 and 2. The KJV treats them as a single sentence, though not a single verse: note the semicolon at the end of verse 9 (instead of the usual period).
 - The question could probably be settled on metrical grounds, but my Hebrew is not up to the task.
- In verse 11, *angels* become *immortal gods* (like Tolkien’s Ainur). “Details” is good.
- Verses 14 and 15 are omitted, though they *do* break into two halves. Perhaps Lewis judged that by now the psalm was beginning to repeat

itself. It is well to remember that psalms are *songs*, and we don't possess the melody. When listening to music the ear delights in repetitions. These can become tedious when merely reading the libretto—in translation, yet.

- The (pre-Vatican II) Catholic liturgy for the First Sunday of Lent (Juergens 160) makes use of this psalm, with some of the same omissions as Lewis. Verses 8 and 9-10 are left out, but not 14-15. The 1928 Anglican Book of Common Prayer includes all 16 verses.

CONCLUSION

Allowing for these exceptions, each half of every verse exhibits a close correspondence of sense and imagery with the original, though the wording is startlingly different—"eccentric," as Dunai puts it. So eccentric that I suspect a deliberate case of *mooreffoc*: commonplace things are seen afresh when they are suddenly viewed from a new angle (Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" 74, quoting Chesterton, who was quoting Dickens).

It is even possible that Lewis intended this poem, at least in part, as a parody of T.S. Eliot. Dinosaurs, forsooth! As grotesque as etherized patients (Eliot). Lewis was jealous of Eliot. In the 1920's he tried (with little success) to enlist his friends to plant mock-Eliotic poems in the highbrow poetry magazines, just to embarrass Eliot (Musacchio 47).

This paraphrase was written to produce a specific effect in a particular work of fiction. It is *not* the version that Lewis would have produced had he been invited to revise the Psalter (as he later was). In his *Reflections on the Psalms* (102), Lewis makes only a single passing reference to Psalm 91. The official C.S. Lewis website offers the text of all Lewis's poems, but does not include this psalm. I can find no other instance of Lewis's publishing a translated psalm under his own name.

However, from 1958 until his death in 1963, he collaborated with several other poets and scholars to produce a Revised Psalter. This was published in 1964 (Archbishops' Commission). I have not seen this work. It would tell us little about Lewis, since the translations were done communally. No individual psalm can be attributed to any individual translator. We do know that Lewis devoted much effort to the work. The commission included Lewis's old adversary T.S. Eliot, and they surprised themselves by working well together. So far as accuracy allowed, both wished to preserve the old language of Coverdale, Eliot being even more conservative than Lewis. Despite their best efforts, "the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23:4) dwindled to "the darkest valley." This tells us all we need to know about the commercial and critical failure of this enterprise (Dickinson; Musacchio).

You and I and Ms. Dunai would all have been better off if Lewis had cited his source, but that would have spoiled the joke. Lewis *wanted* us to do a double-take at these “eccentric lines.”

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