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Immortal Horrors and Everlasting Splendours: C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*

Abstract

Sees *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce* as constituting “something like a sub-genre within the Lewis canon.” Both have explicit religious intention, were written during WWII, and use a “rather informal, episodic structure.” Analyzes the different perspectives of each work, and their treatment of the themes of Body and Spirit, Time and Eternity, and Love.

Additional Keywords

Body in *The Great Divorce*; Body in *The Screwtape Letters*; Eternity in *The Great Divorce*; Eternity in *The Screwtape Letters*; Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*; Lewis, C.S. *The Screwtape Letters*; Love in *The Great Divorce*; Love in *The Screwtape Letters*; Spirit in *The Great Divorce*; Spirit in *The Screwtape Letters*; Time in *The Great Divorce*; Time in *The Screwtape Letters*

Immortal Horrors and Everlasting Splendours

C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*

Douglas Loney

I. Introduction

During the Second World War, between writing his Ransom trilogy and his Narnia tales for children, C.S. Lewis wrote the fantasies *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce*: both from explicitly apologetic intentions, one as if from deep within the "Lowerarchy" of Hell, and the other as if from the margins of Heaven. Undoubtedly helped along by the popularity of Lewis' "Broadcast Talks" on Christianity being given about the same time over the B.B.C., *Screwtape* was an immediate success with the public. Indeed, in an address given some two years after *Screwtape* appeared, Lewis wryly admitted that the association between himself and the Devil had, "in some quarters . . . already reached the level of confusion, if not of identification."¹ There was, however, no answering public approbation upon the release, only three years later, of *The Great Divorce*; in a letter written to his publisher Jocelyn Gibb in 1954, Lewis remarks wistfully that he is "always glad to hear of anyone's taking up that Cinderella."²

In spite of the differences perceived by the public, and reflected in the respective sales numbers of each, the two books have a very great deal in common, even making up something like a sub-genre within the Lewis canon, for although some religious or apologetic purpose may be divined in each of his fantasies, from the Ransom trilogy through the Narnia Chronicles to *Till We Have Faces*, in none of these other books of the imagination is the religious thematic intention so clearly explicit. *Screwtape* and *Great Divorce* are related too by the fact that both were made during the war; the usefulness of this historical setting to their author's purposes will be considered below. In each of these fantasies, moreover, Lewis makes use of a rather informal, episodic structure which clearly sets them apart from either the adult novels or the children's tales: the epistolary form of *Screwtape* is, in effect, that one half of a dialogue (between Screwtape and his nephew fiend Wormwood) which the reader is allowed to overhear, and the whole is drawn together by the *leit-motif* of competition between the two devils; *Great Divorce* is, similarly, ostensibly a collection of conversations overheard by the Dreamer, and lent unity by the "framing" dialogue and relationship between the Dreamer and "George MacDonald" (who functions as Lewis' Virgil on this tour of the heavenlies).

Lewis mentioned in a letter to Harry Blamires in 1954, and again in his foreword to *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, that

the diabolical colloquy of *Screwtape* should ideally have been balanced by advice from an archangel to the "patient"'s guardian angel; this intention was never brought to fruition in another *Screwtape* volume.³ But in very many ways the "balance" to *Screwtape* which Lewis intended in the archangelic advice, he achieves in fact in *The Great Divorce*. This undervalued little book is *Screwtape's* natural complement, and the two books considered together have much light to shed on their author's intentions and achievements in each. The infernal and paradisaical settings conceived for these fantasies afforded Lewis complementary perspectives from which to establish the pre-eminence of three orders of reality over their rival claimants: the spiritual over the corporeal, the eternal over the temporal, and divine love over its mortal counterfeits. And in order to set in appropriate philosophical context his case concerning the priorities I have named, Lewis uses the "otherworld" settings of his two fantasies to persuade the reader that a re-ordering of one's perspective may be the necessary preparation for the entrance of some kinds of truth, whether in this life or beyond it.

II. Perspective

Screwtape's fiendish inversion of traditional attitudes toward moral thought and action is surely the first and deepest impression taken by most readers of the book. And to identify one's own attitudes on such topics with any of *Screwtape's* is to recognize, uncomfortably, one's own capacity for self-deception and inconsistency of moral and spiritual perspective; in Austen Farrer's words, Lewis "makes to us a terrible disclosure of ourselves and more particularly of our current attitude to ourselves."⁴

The first rank of inversions is merely comical: *Screwtape* calls God "the Enemy," and the vast, unsmiling bureaucracy of Hell its "Lowerarchy"; remarks that the modern abhorrence of "Puritanism" (engineered in part by Hell's efficient Philological Branch) is responsible for the "rescue [of] thousands of humans from temperance, chastity, and sobriety of life"; claims that, but for the ceaseless labour of the demons, "the variety of usage within the English Church . . . might have become a positive *hotbed* of charity and humility."⁵ But when *Screwtape* goes on to describe the death of a Christian from the same point of view, Lewis' serious thematic purpose in the demonic inversion of perspective becomes more apparent:

Just think . . . what he felt at that moment; as if a scab had fallen from an old sore, as if he were emerging from a hideous, shell-like fetter, as if he shuffled off for good and

all a defiled, wet, clinging garment. What is blinding, suffocating fire to you, is now cool light to him, is clarity itself, and wears the form of a Man. (*Screwtape* 156-157, 159)

The prevailing modern view of human experience, to which death is merely the painful end of the life of a higher animal, is simply not sufficient if man is indeed, as *Screwtape* himself puts it (and *Screwtape's* author certainly endorses), an "amphibian . . . half spirit and half animal" (*Screwtape* 44). If one's perspective upon death is to be valid, it must keep in view both natures of man — and since Lewis' demons are pure spirit, their imagined perspective upon man's life and death supplies, from an unexpected supernatural direction, what is lacking in nature.

The Great Divorce merely continues the experiment in perspective from the opposite angle. Lewis acknowledges in the preface that to attempt some marriage between heaven and hell is a perennial human impulse, "based on the belief that reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable 'either-or.'"⁶ A reader's valid appreciation of Lewis' attempt to depict heaven's "great divorce" from hell may thus demand once again that shift within the moral perspective which had been burlesqued in *Screwtape*. The need for just such a re-vision is represented imaginatively in the Dreamer's own intimation that an ordinary mortal point of view such as he brings with him from the Grey Town is, on the margins of Heaven, ludicrously inadequate. Upon his arrival, he remarks of the enormous height of the heavenly mountains that his "waking sight could not have taken in such an object at all"; he soon recognizes that his perspective is in fact undergoing a supernatural translation: his senses "now receiving impressions which would normally exceed their capacity" (*Divorce* 29, 45). But the definitive accomplishment of *The Great Divorce* in establishing the insufficiency of ordinary, mortal sight is Lewis' symbolic depiction of the almost unendurable concreteness of spiritual reality, which, because it is normally unavailable to the five senses, is usually conceived of (if at all) as shadowy, indistinct: the words "spiritual" and "ghostly" are held to be synonymous. This assumption Lewis' myth simply turns on its head, in order to lead his reader toward agreement with his own understanding of the relative significance of corporeal and spiritual realities.

III. Body and Spirit

In his preface to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis acknowledges his debt to an otherwise forgotten work of science-fiction which had suggested "the unbendable and unbreakable quality" of Lewis' "heavenly matter." Whereas his source for the idea had used it to make a point about the past (a time-travelling hero "found raindrops that would pierce him like bullets . . . because, of course, nothing in the past can be altered" (*Divorce* 9); Lewis uses the image of diamantine heavenly "matter" to undermine the materialist concept of reality. Thus in his account of the Dreamer's introduction to the heavens it is Lewis' strategy

first to depict the mortal visitors who have made the bus trip to the margins of Heaven as mere "ghosts: man-shaped stains on the brightness of that air," which the Dreamer discovers he can "attend to . . . or ignore . . . at will as you do with the dirt on a window pane" (*Divorce* 27). But the book's more direct attack upon the assumptions of materialism comes in that radical shifting or re-focusing which takes place subsequently within the Dreamer's perspective:

Then . . . I saw the whole phenomenon the other way round. The men were as they had always been; as all the men I had known had been perhaps. It was the light, the grass, the trees that were different; made of some different substance, so much solidier than things in our country that men were ghosts by comparison. Moved by a sudden thought, I bent down and tried to pluck a daisy which was growing at my feet. . . . I tugged till the sweat stood out on my forehead and I had lost most of the skin off my hands. The little flower was hard, not like wood or even like iron, but like diamond. (*Divorce* 27)

The effectiveness of the passage in making Lewis' thematic point derives as much from its humor — the choice of a *daisy* for the Dreamer to struggle with has been indisputably well made — as from its pleasing reversal of the reader's expectations regarding sense experience of "spiritual" realities. And, lest the reader should ignore the thematic significance of the symbolism at first meeting, in a later episode of the book, Lewis has one of the redeemed spirits encourage a ghostly "visitor" from Hell to travel with him further into Heaven with this observation: "Will you come with me to the mountains? It will hurt at first, until your feet are hardened. Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows" (*Divorce* 40). Explicitly, the formidable substantiveness of Heaven is a token of the immutability of eternal reality, to which the "reality" of mortal experience is as a shadow.

The hyperbolically tangible and massy qualities of Lewis' transmortal landscape are complemented by the Dreamer's sense of being

in a larger space, perhaps even a larger *sort* of space, than [he] had ever known before: as if the sky were further off and the extent of the green plain wider than they could be on . . . earth. [He] had got 'out' in some sense which made the Solar System itself seem an indoor affair. (*Divorce* 26)

Readers of Lewis' Ransom trilogy will immediately recognize in this what is such an important aspect of the Silent Planet myth: the sudden broadening of physical perspective necessary to a traveller in the heavens has its complement in a broadening of the *spiritual* perspective, sufficient to allow the experience of hitherto unexpected spiritual realities. So it is, for example, that to his description of Ransom's early failure to "see" the alien landscape of Malacandra — "the very intensity of his desire to take in the new world at a glance defeated itself . . ." — Lewis adds that Ransom "knew nothing yet well enough to see it: you cannot see things till you know roughly what they are."⁷ In this editorial observation the author quite clearly seeks to link the concepts of spiritual and physical "sight,"

the same thought which is expressed unambiguously (as a tenet of Lewis' Christian apologetics) in "Undeceptions":

Whatever experiences we may have, we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural. Any event which is claimed as a miracle is, in the last resort, an experience received from the senses; and the senses are not infallible. We can always say we have been the victims of an illusion; if we disbelieve in the supernatural this is what we always shall say. . . . Experience proves this, or that, or nothing, according to the pre-conceptions we bring to it.⁸

The "secondary world" devised by Lewis for *The Screwtape Letters* similarly demands that the reader should entertain the possibility that spiritual entities are, though intangible, nonetheless real. In his preface to the book's first edition, Lewis characterizes a refusal to acknowledge the existence of devils as a fundamental error; the clear inference is that *Screwtape* was conceived, at least in part, as a means of undermining such disbelief (*Screwtape* 9). But since he knew very well that to write in epistolary form as "from one devil to another" (*Screwtape*'s early provisional title) would be to strain any reader's credulity, Lewis met the obvious objection head-on in *Screwtape*'s advice to Wormwood on the matter of the devils' desire to keep their existence secret from their "patients":

I do not think you will have much difficulty in keeping the patient in the dark. The fact that 'devils' are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you. (*Screwtape* 40)

Of course it is of even greater importance to *Screwtape* and Wormwood that men should find the reality of God's existence hard to conceive of; it is on this account that Wormwood is advised to keep his "patient" from the influence of the pure sciences, since "they will positively encourage him to think about realities he can't touch and see" (*Screwtape* 14); *Screwtape* warns further that if the man should somehow "trust himself to the completely real, external, invisible Presence, there with him in the room and never knowable by him as he is by it — why then the incalculable may occur" (*Screwtape* 28).

IV. Time and Eternity

From establishing the pre-eminence of spiritual over corporeal reality, it is a logical step for Lewis to seek to undermine the assumption that temporal reality is absolute, and that eternal reality, if it exists at all, is simply imponderable. For the clear expression of this theme, the fact of both books' wartime composition was invaluable to him.⁹ Lewis makes explicit in each work the ironic relationship between its distinctive thematic concern with the things of eternity, and the understandable but misguided pre-occupation of besieged mortals with temporal matters. So it is, for example, that when Wormwood expresses great hopes for the multiplication of human suf-

fering as a result of bombing raids on England, he is scolded by *Screwtape* for forgetting that his purpose as a tempter, the "main point" of his work, is not merely to luxuriate in temporary human misery, but to secure the damnation of an eternal soul (*Screwtape* 141). And in *The Great Divorce*, the Dreamer's glimpses of Heaven are made more poignant, and his anguish at having the dream wrested from him the keener, in that he wakes from his vision of eternal felicity to the cold realities of an air raid in wartime England, to "a black and empty grate, the clock striking three, and the siren howling overhead" (*Divorce* 118). Donald Glover has suggested that *Screwtape*'s references to the war underline the "utilitarian purpose" of a book which makes no attempt "to stir the deeper imagination." But I believe that *Screwtape*'s utilitarian zeal — that "ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration upon self which is the mark of Hell"¹⁰ — has here been mistaken for Lewis' own; that in fact the fiction has, for one critic, succeeded too well in establishing verisimilitude.¹¹

The fact that he wrote both books during the war gave Lewis another thematic advantage; he could assume in most of his readers a vivid sense of the brevity of physical life, and a corresponding awakening of interest in the life of the spirit — that aspect of human reality which alone endures beyond physical death. *Screwtape* views a man or woman's earthly life solely as that scrap of time during which he or she may be vulnerable to temptation, and surmises (though from within the limitations of the demonic perspective, of course) that to God himself, physical life may be "important chiefly as the qualification for . . . death, and death solely as the gate to that other kind of life" (*Screwtape* 145). Of course the entire action of *The Great Divorce* takes place subsequent to the physical death of all but one of its characters; the exception is the Dreamer, and when he begins to suspect that he too has died, and so has come in the natural way of things to the borders of the heavenly country, MacDonald must disillusion him gently, with an ironic inversion of perspective, typical of Lewis: "No, Son," said he kindly, taking my hand in his. 'It is not so good as that. The bitter drink of death is still before you. Ye are only dreaming'" (*Divorce* 116). Readers of *The Chronicles of Narnia* will remember that the physical death of the child heroes of those tales was, as Aslan described it, merely their leave-taking from "the Shadowlands" and their entrance into the immutable, heavenly reality of the New Narnia: "The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."¹² The perilous wartime setting of *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce* underlines the same sense that the temporal, physical world is at best a "Shadowland."

Since each of these wartime books is addressed to the reader as from its own extra-temporal perspective — from the eternal Hell of *Screwtape* and from the eternal Heaven of *Divorce* — they are ideally suited to explorations of one of Lewis' favorite theological topics: the question of free will and predestination. In *Screwtape*, Wormwood's questions concern his "patient's" petitionary prayers gives *Screwtape* the opportunity to discourse on man's habitual

confusion of thought concerning the nature of Time, and its relationship to eternal reality: *Screwtape* begins with the observation that, since he is a man, Wormwood's "patient"

takes Time for an ultimate reality. He supposes that the Enemy, like himself, sees some things as past, and anticipates others as future; or even if he believes that the Enemy does not see things that way . . . he doesn't really think (though he would say he did) that things as the Enemy sees them are things as they are! . . . Their kind of consciousness forces them to encounter the whole, self-consistent creative act as a series of successive events. Why that creative act leaves room for their free will is the problem of problems, the secret behind The Enemy's nonsense about "Love". (*Screwtape* 138-139)

Screwtape's perspective is portrayed as being limited neither by sense of duration nor by sense of sequence, as man understands them. In the Preface to *Screwtape*, Lewis had warned his readers, his tongue firmly in his cheek, that "the diabolical method of dating seems to bear no relation to terrestrial time" (*Screwtape* 10): in this passage concerning man's habitual misunderstanding of temporality, we discover the serious purpose behind the author's choice. The distinction between man's ordinary perspective upon Time, and that *extra-ordinary* perspective necessary to a consideration of the spiritual nature of man, could not be made with such clarity apart from adopting, for the sake of the "fiction," a point of view from the "unbounded Now" of eternity, the mode of perception Lewis imagines as normal for spiritual beings.

Again in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis chooses to disturb his reader's habitual perspective upon Time, first by the literary convention of a dream recalled, which already blurs the familiar waking distinctions of sequence and causality, and then by allowing the Dreamer a discrete "vision" within the overarching dream-vision, in which the relationships among immortal souls, Time and Eternity, are conveyed in the symbolic terms of giant

Masters playing at chess:

. . . And these chessmen are men and women as they appear to themselves and to one another in this world. And the silver table is Time. And those who stand and watch are the immortal souls of those same men and women. Then vertigo and terror seized me and . . . I said, "Is that the truth? Then is all that I have been seeing in this country false? These conversations between the Spirits and the Ghosts — were they only the mimicry of choices that had really been made long ago?"

"Or might ye not as well say, anticipations of a choice to be made at the end of all things? But ye'd do better to say neither. Ye saw the choices a bit more clearly than ye could see them on earth: the lens was clearer. But it was still seen through the lens. Do not ask of a vision in a dream more than a vision in a dream can give." (*Divorce* 116)

At first glance, this late "vision" offends against the unity of Lewis' dream vision; the entire book to this point has consisted of conversations between the Ghosts and their heavenly "hosts" come to the borders of Heaven to greet spirits whom they had known in mortal life, and hopeful

of influencing them to choose the eternal joy of God's reality over the mean selfishnesses and self-delusions of Hell. Perhaps it was because the choices made by the Ghosts so clearly demonstrate the significance of the human will in Time, that Lewis elected to append the vision of the chessboard, with its suggestion that Time is merely the plane upon which the timeless inclination of each human spirit is manifested: each vision corrects the excesses of the other.

Though both books take the extra-temporal point of view, both are concerned thematically with the *present* rather than the future, for the reasons raised here by *Screwtape*:

The humans live in time but our Enemy destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself, and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. (*Screwtape* 76)

Lewis saw it as a significant part of his work as an apologist to make apparent to those who read his books and heard his radio talks the eternal consequences of those choices being made, moment by moment, in each of their lives. In one of his wartime BBC addresses (later printed in *Mere Christianity*), his call to make the right choice of life is strident: "This moment is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it."¹³

So it is that the heaven of *The Great Divorce* is no mere wishful thinking vista of bliss deferred — "pie in the sky when you die." It is, rather, that eternal destination continually being chosen or rejected by men and women in those attitudes embraced and those actions performed, moment by moment, in Time. Thus when the Ghost with the red lizard temporizes, putting off the decision to choose between mortal lust and redeemed Desire, saying "There's time to discuss that later," the Angel responds: "There is no time . . . no other day. All days are present now" (*Divorce* 90-91). And, at the conclusion of his dream vision of eternity, the Dreamer is warned, "'Ye cannot know eternal reality by a definition. Time itself, and all acts and events that fill Time, are the definition, and it must be lived'" (*Divorce* 115).

Screwtape is even more clearly preoccupied with the significance of decisions made in the present; its format, one side of a correspondence chronicling Wormwood's attempts to lure a soul toward Hell, draws the reader's attention infallibly to the relationship between those (apparently trivial) moral choices made moment by moment, and to the ultimate destination to which (it is intended by the tempters) the succession of such choices, skillfully managed, inexorably are leading the "patient."

W.W. Robson made *The Screwtape Letters* his principal

target, when he condemned what he deemed to be

the general moral pettiness . . . common in Lewis' homiletic writings. 'Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves' may be a sound maxim in economics, but is it so in morals? At any rate, no argument on the lines of 'Ah, but one thing leads to another . . . ' will convince me that the old lady in *The Screwtape Letters*, who tells an overworked waitress 'That's *much* too much! take it away and bring me about a quarter of it' has any business in such a context. In the age which has produced Auschwitz, it is distasteful to have such slight topics associated with human damnation.¹⁴

The charge of "moral pettiness" is one which a critical reader of *Screwtape* and *The Great Divorce* must take seriously, since it is indisputable that in both books Lewis has chosen to concentrate almost exclusively on these "slight topics" — small sins and small sinners — and to give little account of the great atrocities of which mankind has in our own century shown itself to be capable. Indeed, perhaps the clearest response to the charge of moral pettiness comes from *Screwtape* himself, as he answers what seems to have been a similar complaint from Wormwood:

Doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But . . . it does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one — the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. . . (*Screwtape* 64-65)

It seems that what Robson has in mind is a sort of moral threshold, a divide on one side of which are "slight topics" (hardly "sins"); on the other, those actions which all would agree to be damnable ("Auschwitz"). It is not *Screwtape* only, but also *Screwtape's* creator, who rejects this point of view. Lewis was utterly consistent in maintaining that no unredeemed human impulse, no motive or act directed contrary to the will of God, could survive the passage from time into eternity. The preface to *The Great Divorce* gives Lewis' position categorically:

I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish, but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. . . . Evil can be undone, but it cannot "develop" into good. (*Divorce* 7-8)

And when the Dreamer thinks he observes the survival of lust even in the precincts of Heaven, he is sternly corrected by MacDonald: "Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is. Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial will not be raised again if it submits to death" (*Divorce* 95). Here is, emphatically, no "divide" between sins petty and grand, trivial and grave, venial and mortal. In both *Divorce* and *Screwtape*, the elementary distinction drawn again and again is simply between those acts and motions of the will which are in obedience to God, and those which are not: between Lewis' "right roads" and "wrong roads," or again, between the narrow way and the broad. Lewis' concern in both these books is not so much

for the evil effects which any moral or ethical choice may have upon others, as it is the evil direction such a choice may be training in the spiritual growth of the one who is choosing. Thus *Screwtape* and *Wormwood* confer over how best to achieve the damnation of a very ordinary mortal, whose very ordinary moral faults are, *because* of their admitted pettiness, the harder to be recognised, acknowledged, repented of and forsaken by the "patient."

Similarly in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis has chosen to depict no spectacular sinners among those who refuse the joy of heaven; the only famous "name" invoked is that of Napoleon, and the context wittily reinforces the author's contention that all sinners, even the most notorious, are by the standards of eternity, small beer:

Napoleon was there . . . walking up and down And muttering to himself all the time. "It was Soult's fault. It was Ney's fault. It was Josephine's fault. It was the fault of the Russians. It was the fault of the English." Like that all the time. Never stopped for a moment. A little, fat man and he looked kind of tired. But he didn't seem able to stop it. (*Divorce* 21)

W.H. Auden thought this depiction of an historical character in hell to have been a theological blunder; Clyde Kilby deemed it "less a theological than a creative error."¹⁵ But perhaps it was merely Lewis' observation that the English word "petty" has been borrowed from the French language, that influenced his choice of a French "hero" to illustrate the real magnitude of a sin at its heart.

Reinforcing this concept of sin's ultimate meanness is one Ghost's observation of a peculiarity of perspective in Hell: although Napoleon had "built himself a huge house all in the Empire style — rows of windows flaming with light," the mansion is discernible from the same Ghost's own house as but "a tiny pin prick of light and nothing else near it for millions of miles" (*Divorce* 20). Later in the tale, a more cynical Ghost complains to the Dreamer that he'd been led to expect "red fire and devils and all sorts of interesting people sizzling on grids" (*Divorce* 50), but it is no part of the author's thematic purpose to portray some sins, or some sinners, as intrinsically more grand than others. Again, the physical geography of Lewis' Heaven is brought to serve the same theme when MacDonald uses the tip of a blade of grass as a pointer to show to the Dreamer "a crack in the soil [of heaven] so small that [one] could not have identified it without this aid," while he explains that this tiny crack is the "immense chasm" seen by the Dreamer as he ascended from Hell to the heavens (*Divorce* 112). MacDonald then goes on to discuss explicitly the thematic point made by the relative magnitudes of Lewis' two eternal realms: "All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of *this* world, the Real World. . . . For a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself" (*Divorce* 114).

It is in this context that one must read *Screwtape's* diagnosis (to which Robson has taken exception) of the old woman guilty of the sin of "gluttony of delicacy":

She would be astonished — one day, I hope, *will* be — to learn that her whole life is enslaved to this kind of sensuality, which is quite concealed from her by the fact that the quantities involved are small. But what do quantities matter, provided we can use a human belly and palate to produce querulousness, impatience, uncharitableness, and self concern? (*Screwtape* 86-87)

It may well be that, against atrocities on the scale of the Holocaust, no single human choice could ever seem to have much magnitude. But Lewis' concentration is upon the direction of evil choosing, rather than upon the amplitude of the evil in any choice: from the perspective offered in *Screwtape* and *Divorce* there is no weight of evil dragging the damned from heaven to hell, but a multitude of slight topics, small choices, made simply in obedience to God's will, or in despite of it, which establishes the soul's ultimate destination.

V. Love

The host of choices great and small facing Screwtape's "patient" and the Ghosts of *The Great Divorce* come at last to a single, fundamental choice: between the everlasting Love of God and something — anything — else. This divine Love, with those counterfeits which offer themselves in its place, are Lewis' central thematic concern in both books. It is in fact for the purpose of making clear the terms of this ultimate choice and establishing the pre-eminence of divine Love over any rival that Lewis has advanced the arguments considered already for the priorities of spiritual and eternal realities over corporeal and temporal; for the temptations to reject the love of God which Lewis examines are directed especially to man's preoccupation with the material world in time.

Screwtape's comments regarding love demonstrate that Hell's first principle is in fact a *lovelessness* which at once rejects genuine heavenly love, and (ironically) denies the very existence of that love so rejected. When Wormwood's "patient" falls in love with a young Christian woman, Screwtape first reproves him for his bungling, and then goes on to consider "the impenetrable mystery" which permeates the girl's very home:

We are certain (it is a matter of first principles) that each member of the family must in some way be making capital of the others — but we can't find out how. They guard as jealously as the Enemy Himself the secret of what really lies behind this pretence of disinterested love. (*Screwtape* 113)

Screwtape's conviction that each member of this Christian home must somehow be "making capital" of the others reflects what he elsewhere terms the "Realism" of Hell, the "rejection . . . of all silly nonsense and claptrap" — by which, of course, Screwtape means the "inexplicable" love of God for his creatures, and that love for one another with which He infuses them (*Screwtape* 160). It is significant that Hell's "realistic" perspective is founded on that fatal choice implicit in Screwtape's word, "rejection."

Yet the love of God is not *altogether* mysterious to Screwtape; it only *appears* to be so, and that only in the last

few letters. In fact, early in their correspondence, Screwtape warns Wormwood that "all the talk about His love for men . . . is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth" (*Screwtape* 45). This acknowledgement of the reality of God's love assumes particular significance in that it is made so grudgingly. And Lewis neatly undermines the demonic point of view here by providing that Screwtape's observations on God's love apparently provoke Wormwood into reporting his uncle to Hell's Secret Police on a charge of "heresy": the implicit contrast between that genuine, selfless love which flows from God, and what passes between the dutiful Wormwood and his "affectionate uncle" Screwtape, is nicely drawn. When at last Wormwood's "patient" dies in a state of grace and so is "lost" to his tempters forever, Screwtape descants on "the realism of Hell," that fiendish inversion of divine Love which has from the beginning been his motivation:

How mistakenly now that all is lost you come whimpering to ask me whether the terms of affection in which I address you meant nothing from the beginning. Rest assured, my love for you and your love for me are as like as two peas. I have always desired you, as you (pitiful fool) desired me. The difference is that I am the stronger. I think they will give you to me now; or a bit of you. Love you? Why yes. As dainty a morsel as ever I grew fat on. (*Screwtape* 156)

This final letter to his "dear Wormwood" is signed "Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle Screwtape" (*Screwtape* 160).

In regard to this central theme of divine Love and its counterfeits, *The Great Divorce* is *Screwtape's* precise complement. The explicitly hellish inversion whereby love as "desire" becomes the passion actually to *consume* the "beloved object" is not reiterated in the later book: indeed, it is hard to imagine what more Lewis could have said on the subject which would not merely have reiterated some aspect of his characterization of "his Abysmal Sublimity, Under Secretary Screwtape" (*Screwtape* 115). But more subtle twistings of, and parasitic growths upon Love *The Great Divorce* has in plenty, among those who elect the eternal selfishness of Hell over the eternal joy of Heaven. In particular, of the ten conversations between ghosts and angels or Solid Persons overheard by the Dreamer, the final four concern explicitly the grave choice to be made, either for Love itself or for one of its pretenders.

Joe Christopher, whose essays collectively entitled "Considering *The Great Divorce*" form the most detailed and articulate body of criticism of the book available, complains that he can discover no pattern to the book's conversations.¹⁶ Similarly, Evan Gibson, in spite of his acknowledging that Lewis has arranged the book's ten conversations symmetrically, with the introduction of MacDonald forming the central chapter, writes that although "we have a temporary interest in each of these phantoms . . . these incidents do not lead to a climax and final weaving together of the various strands of the plot."¹⁷ But with Lewis' intention in view, in both *Screwtape* and

The Great Divorce, to demonstrate the ultimate priority of divine Love, the pattern at least in these final conversations is quite clearly discernible: four earthly "loves" — conjugal affection, maternal care, undisguised sexual lust, and self-pity masquerading as tragic passion — are held against an image of human love redeemed and transfigured by divine Love, in the person of Sarah Smith.

The poisonous core of the first Ghost's "love" for her husband is soon laid open in her feverish monologue; the "mother-love" of the second is revealed to her in its greedy insufficiency, and she is left with the choice to remain clinging to it in hell, or to abandon it forever for the Source of everlasting Love in heaven; the Dark Ghost with the little red lizard of lust himself becomes a Solid Person when his sickly mortal passions submit to redemption, and Frank Smith succumbs to his own histrionic portrayal of the tragic lover, rather than embrace the eternal realities of love, joy and peace as they are manifested in the blessed Sarah. In each of these final four conversations some human affection analogous to divine Love threatens idolatrously to be held in its place.

Although neither "Robert's wife" nor "Michael's mother" explicitly rejects the Love of God, each of these women has put a lesser love in its place, and so implicitly has rejected God. The hellish greed to dominate, ultimately to consume her husband has quite clearly damned Robert's wife; the cloying desire to possess her son puts Pam's soul in similar jeopardy. The choice faced by each is the essential one: either to cling to the tainted, counterfeit "love" which has for so long been mistaken for the genuine article — and ultimately to be drawn by that stubborn clinging back to Hell — or to allow the insufficient mortal love to be displaced by an altogether sufficient, heavenly Love.

Lewis depicts these two false loves with especial care because by them he prepares for what is certainly the most intense and satisfying episode in the book. The Dark Ghost with the little red lizard of Lust on his shoulder forms the third panel in Lewis' triptych of Love's counterfeits; here the choice is immediate, and startlingly unambiguous:

"Would you like to make him quiet?" said the flaming Spirit . . . "Of course I would," said the Ghost. "Then I will kill him," said the Angel, taking a step forward. (*Divorce* 90)

The Ghost's brief procrastinations (as he searches for *any* solution to the problem of lust less radical than what amounts to amputation), come ultimately to nothing. When at last the Ghost yields, at first blustering but at last merely "whimpering, 'God help me. God help me,'" Lewis introduces a magnificent symbol of redemption:

Next moment the Ghost gave a scream of agony such as I never heard on Earth. The Burning One closed his grip on the reptile: twisted it, while it bit and writhed, and then flung it, broken backed, on the turf. . . . Then I saw, between me and the nearest bush, unmistakably solid but growing every moment solidier, the upper arm and the shoulder of a man. Then, brighter still and stronger,

the legs and hands. The neck and golden head materialised while I watched, and if my attention had not wavered I should have seen the actual completing of a man . . .

At the same moment something seemed to be happening to the Lizard . . . Suddenly I started back, rubbing my eyes. What stood before me was the greatest stallion I have ever seen, silvery white but with mane and tail of gold. . . . I saw them winding up, scaling what seemed impossible steepes, and quicker every moment, till near the dim brow of the landscape, so high that I must strain my neck to see them, they vanished, bright themselves, into the rose-brightness of that everlasting morning. (*Divorce* 93-94)

Chad Walsh has remarked concerning the translation of lizard and man to horse and rider that its "great power"

lies partly in the paradox (so it appears to the merely moral) that carnal sins are less mortal than spiritual ones, such as pride. Mainly, however, the episode towers among less intense ones by the vivid accuracy of its specific symbolism — the lizard as a kind of Iago, whispering unlawful thoughts, the tormented Ghost forever dominated (unless he consents to be rescued) by his natural impulses perverted to base ends . . .¹⁸

But Walsh's observations are, I think, founded on two misunderstandings: that lust (for so MacDonald explicitly identifies the red lizard; *Divorce* 95) is for Lewis not a *spiritual* sin, and that the Dark Ghost's position *before* his translation is somehow more favorable than that of either "Pam" or "Robert's wife." When the Dark Ghost's conversation with the Angel is considered in its context, as the third portrait of a false love, its real significance is clear: this Ghost alone of the final four explicitly chooses to embrace divine Love and to be freed from the unregenerate whisperings of his mortal lust. It is not in Lewis' view that lust is a "natural impulse perverted to base ends," unless one understands "perverted" to indicate merely the common condition of human faculties apart from God. In the conversation between MacDonald and the Dreamer which follows the episode of horse and rider, Lewis makes the distinction as clear as it can be made:

Nothing, not even the best and noblest, can go on as it now is. Nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial, will not be raised again if it submits to death. . . . What is a lizard compared with a stallion? Lust is a poor, weak, whimpering, whispering thing compared with that richness of energy and desire which will arise when lust has been killed. (*Divorce* 95)

The paradox of the horse and rider is certainly not that lust is "less mortal" than the other perversions and counterfeits of Love considered in the concluding pages of *The Great Divorce*. The real paradox of the episode is that in it, as in the gospel account of the repentant thief, Lewis has shown an obvious corruption submitting to a cure where more subtle diseases continue to fester.

Last of the four portraits of false loves is that of the Dwarf Ghost, Frank Smith, whose pretensions to Love are so far removed from reality that Lewis represents them in a Tragedian puppet "like a seedy actor of the old school"

whom the Dwarf leads on a chain to declaim for him. The falseness of this posturing, and the grim danger of damnation into which it has put the Dwarf, are rendered more terrible by the Ghost's immediate contrast with Sarah Smith, the Solid Person come to meet him, who on the earth had been his wife but is now "one of the Great Ones" in heaven. Of her joy, MacDonald says there is enough "to waken all the dead things of the universe into life"; of her love, the Dreamer records that it "shone not from her face only, but from all her limbs, as if it were some liquid in which she had just been bathing" (*Divorce* 99, 100).

The progression from the first to this fourth example of Love's counterfeits is now perfect: first the false love of Robert's wife was shown to have consumed her, as it had once long ago consumed whatever there may have been of true love in her; next "Pam" was led to recognize the distinction between her sickly doting upon her son and that vital Love offered her in its fullness; then the Dark Ghost explicitly renounced his corrupt "love," upon which it was at once transformed into incorruptible Desire; at last the perfection of redeemed human love confronts love's unregenerate phantom: the Dwarf Ghost's choice is thus the clearest of all, and the finality of his victory in the "struggle against joy" most terrible. The alternatives in the four portraits have thus been drawn ever more closely together, until at last an eternal hell of self-imposed misery and an eternal heaven of divine Love meet face to face:

"You do not love me," said the Tragedian in a thin bat-like voice; and he was now very difficult to see. "I cannot love a lie," said the Lady. "I cannot love the thing which is not. . . ." There was no answer. The Tragedian had vanished. (*Divorce* 109)

VII. Conclusion

Heaven's aim, as Lewis depicts it in *The Great Divorce* and in *Screwtape*, is by pervading with divine Love to fulfil what is submitted to it, as the Dark Ghost's deepest desires come to be fulfilled, as Wormwood's "patient" at last recovers "that central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory" (*Screwtape* 159). Hell's aim, in both books, is to consume, as Wormwood comes to be food for Screwtape, as Frank would extend his own gnawing hatred into Sarah, were it permitted. Screwtape summarizes the distinctions here with a characteristic grisly economy of phrase:

To us [in Hell] a human is primarily food; our aim is the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of selfhood at its expense. But the obedience the Enemy demands of men is quite a different thing. . . . We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons. We want to suck in, He wants to give out. (*Screwtape* 45-46)

The image of Hell's rapacity so convincingly projected in *Screwtape* needed the answering image of Heaven's fullness, substance and bounty which *The Great Divorce* supplies: the diabolical perspective of the first is answered in the beatific vision of the second. For the priorities established in both books — of spiritual reality over corporeal,

eternal reality over temporal, and supremely of God's love over all — are fulfilled ultimately in the priority of Heaven over Hell itself. The extra-temporal settings of *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* permit their author uniquely to exhibit that singular dimension of human life which so awed him, and which he so eloquently describes in "The Weight of Glory":

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. . . . There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit — immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.¹⁹

NOTES

1. 'Transposition' and Other Addresses (London: Bles, 1949), 56.
2. Letters of C.S. Lewis (London: Bles, 1966), 259.
3. Blamires letter (Bodleian Library c/220/2 #120) cited by Donald E. Glover, C. S. Lewis: *The Art of Enchantment* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 123-124; "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" and Other Pieces (Glasgow: Collins, 1965, 1977), 9.
4. "The Christian Apologist," in *Light on C.S. Lewis* (London: Bles, 1965), 37.
5. *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York: Macmillan, 1961) 12, 102, 55, 85 (emphasis added); hereafter identified in the text as "Screwtape," in parentheses following quotations. Evan Gibson discusses some of these inversions in his C.S. Lewis: *Spinner of Tales* (Washington: Christian College Consortium, 1980), 103-104.
6. *The Great Divorce* (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), 7; hereafter referred to in the text as "Divorce," in parentheses following quotations.
7. *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 40.
8. "Undeceptions": *Essays on Theology and Ethics* (London: Bles, 1971), 5-6.
9. *The Screwtape Letters* was serialised in *The Guardian* from 2 May to 28 Nov. 1941; *The Great Divorce* was being read at the weekly gatherings of the Inklings from April of 1944, and serialised 10 Nov. 1944 to 13 April 1945. See Carpenter, *The Inklings*, 174, 19; J.R. Christopher, "Considering *The Great Divorce*," in *Mythcon II Proceedings*, 12; and Walter Hooper, "A Bibliography of The Writings of C.S. Lewis," in *Light on C.S. Lewis*, 128.
10. Preface to the second (Macmillan) edition of *The Screwtape Letters and Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, fifth page.
11. Glover, *Art of Enchantment*, 124, 125.
12. *The Last Battle* (London: Bodley Head, 1956), 183.
13. *Mere Christianity*, 52.
14. "C.S. Lewis," in *Cambridge Quarterly*, Summer 1966, 253.
15. W.H. Auden, "Red Lizards and White Stallions," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, 29:22 (13 April, 1946), 22; paraphrased by Kilby, *The Christian World of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 51.
16. *Mythcon I Proceedings*, 40-48; *Mythcon II Proceedings*, 12-21 (see esp. 14).
17. *Spinner of Tales*, 111-112.
18. *The Literary Legacy of C.S. Lewis*, 77.
19. "The Weight of Glory," in "Screwtape Proposes a Toast" and Other Pieces, 109.



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