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### C.S. Lewis's Debt to E.M. Forster's *"The Celestial Omnibus" and Other Stories*

#### Abstract

Demonstrates the debt C.S. Lewis owes to three short stories by E.M. Forster: "The Celestial Omnibus," "The Other Side of the Hedge," and "The Story of a Panic." Notes similarities in the character of Eustace Scrubb and other incidents and themes in Lewis's works.

#### Additional Keywords

Forster, E.M. "The Celestial Omnibus" and Other Stories—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Eustace Scrubb; Lewis, C.S.—Sources; Lewis, C.S.—Sources; Lewis, C.S.—Sources

# C.S. Lewis' Debt to G.M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus" and Other Stories

DOUGLAS LONEY

## Introduction:

In an article on C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* published in the Fall 1990 issue of *Mythlore*, I observed that by having his narrator conveyed from the Grey Town to the margins of heaven by a magical bus, Lewis was deliberately alluding to E.M. Forster's "The Celestial Omnibus."<sup>1</sup> In that brief fantasy, a boy travels by omnibus to a "heaven" where he meets Sir Thomas Browne, Dante and other great figures from literature before returning at dawn to his own world. Although the literary snob Mr. Bons is persuaded to accompany the boy on a second omnibus journey, the skeptical and fearful adult is unwilling or unable to perceive the celestial realities which surround him, and dies by falling to the earth as if from a great height while the boy is welcomed into the heavenlies.

Those readers familiar with Lewis' fiction will recognize even in this sketchy account of "The Celestial Omnibus" more literary debts than the acknowledged device of the omnibus itself. Certainly the notion that the things of the spirit are substantial, massy and real, but that these qualities can be perceived only by the humble in spirit, is a theme central to Lewis' own fantasies.

"The Celestial Omnibus" and *Other Stories* was published by Forster in 1911<sup>2</sup> and systematically raided by Lewis for images, ideas and themes which inform his own fantasies written from 1938 to 1956. In this present article, I propose to examine in turn three stories from Forster's little collection, "The Story of a Panic," "The Other Side of the Hedge" and "The Celestial Omnibus" itself, to discover their influences on Lewis' own fantasies.

## I. "The Story of a Panic"

In this tale Eustace Robinson, a spoiled brat brought to Italy by his aunts, comes under the sway of Pan during an outing in the woods near Ravello. The stuffy curate Mr. Sandbach attributes the group's extreme and irrational panic to Satanic influence and gives thanks that they seem to have suffered no lasting effects. But Eustace himself is certainly possessed (though not by Satan): he most uncharacteristically begins to run and jump and sing, laughing and raising hymns to Nature. A local peasant boy, Gennaro, is offered a bribe to recapture Eustace, even though Gennaro knows that to do so may well kill the patient. Recaptured and imprisoned in his room, Eustace does seem to be losing his hold on life, but at the last moment Gennaro repents his part in the capture, releases the boy and himself dies.

Forster's "Eustace" is introduced by the narrator Tytler in these unflattering terms:

Leyland was simply conceited and odious . . . But Eustace was something besides: he was indescribably repellent. . . I and my daughters offered to take him out. "No, walking was such a fag." Then I asked him to come and bathe. "No, he could not swim." . . . His features were pale, his chest contracted, and his muscles undeveloped. His aunts thought him delicate; what he really needed was discipline. (CS 9-10)

Laziness, self-conceit and sheer mullishness are this boy's principal qualities, given him by Forster so as to make the boy's eventual change of spirit the more dramatic in contrast.

It is very clear that Lewis had Forster's Eustace in mind when he created (as a foil for Edmund and Lucy Pevensie in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*) "a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb [who] almost deserved it. . . ."<sup>3</sup> Lewis's Eustace too is disinclined either to work or to exercise; he describes his own arms as "pretty mouldy" and as having "no muscle." (VDT 87) He makes his entrance into the world of Narnia by being fished out of the sea by Caspian's sailors, for Eustace Scrubb cannot swim. (VDT 12-14) As to his disposition, Edmund calls him, simply, a "record stinker." (VDT 8) In these details as in his name he resembles the "repellent" Eustace of "A Panic," who too is "afraid of the water." (CS 10) and has to be forced into taking that stroll into the woods of Ravello which ends so momentarily.

But it is not merely for the purpose of character-drawing that Lewis alludes in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* to Forster's "The Story of a Panic": the tales are linked in theme by their interest in the possibility of atonement and spiritual conversion. Before his encounter with Pan, Forster's Eustace merely shows in his own glaring character flaws the same failings owned by the English adults who have brought him to Italy. They too are pestilential bores, smug in their assumed cultural and religious superiority over the native Italians; Eustace only lacks their restraint. But while he becomes "converted," the adults remain what they were.

In Lewis' story, however, Eustace Scrubb begins differently in quality from his fellows in that he does not know Aslan, nor does he even believe in the existence of the great Lion. Eustace's story in *Dawn Treader* is a parable of salvation, for he must recognize for himself the authority of Narnia's high king, and must submit to the cleansing from his old nature which Aslan alone can perform for him.

Tytler, Forster's narrator in "Panic," describes what he feels at the approach of the terrible god:

A fanciful feeling of foreboding came over me . . . It is not possible to describe coherently what happened next but I . . . became terribly frightened, more frightened than I ever wish to become again . . . I saw

nothing and heard nothing and felt nothing, since all the channels of sense and reason were blocked. It was not the spiritual fear that one had known at other times, but brutal, overmastering, physical fear, stopping up the ears, and dropping clouds before the eyes, and filling the mouth with foul tastes. (CS 14, 15)

Eustace Robinson alone of the party does not share this terror. After the panic flight of the adults, they return to the glade to find Eustace still there, apparently quite unmoved. Called to, he does not reply, but when his aunt touches him he opens his eyes and, in place of his habitual "peevish, discontented frown" he wears a new and curiously unmotivated smile. (CS 16-17)

Perhaps this smile on the face of Eustace would be evidence enough of spiritual change in the surly adolescent, but there are additional indications. As the party returns from the glade of the apotheosis, Eustace is described as behaving like "a wild Indian," "a dog," "a goat." (CS 20, 21) Later that evening the apparent shapeshifting continues: Tytler sees what seems to be "a great dog, now an enormous white bat, now a mass of quickly traveling cloud. It would bounce like a ball, or take short flights like a bird, or glide slowly like a wraith." (CS 24-25) At last the apparition reveals itself to be merely "Eustace Robinson, aged fourteen . . . standing in his nightshirt saluting, praising, and blessing the great forces and manifestations of Nature." (CS 26) These "metamorphoses," then, are only illusions, but in Forster's hands they are tokens of a real change in the boy, a change which cannot be caught by the physical senses.

Lewis makes a careful selection from these details in his account of the conversion of Eustace Scrubb on Dragon Island. Scrubb too undergoes shapeshifting, but it begins in him prior to his own conversion experience, when "sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he [becomes] a dragon himself." (VDT 73) But this metamorphosis is merely the outward token of Scrubb's real nature before he meets with Aslan: once Eustace recognizes that he has assumed the outward shape of a dragon, he begins to reflect on what his inward shape has been for some time. A fleeting thought about revenging his earlier "injuries" on Caspian and Edmund is displaced by the first healthy introspection Lewis shows us in this boy:

He realized he didn't want [revenge]. He wanted to be friends. He wanted to get back among humans and talk and laugh and share things. He realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race. An appalling loneliness came over him. He began to see that the others had not really been fiends at all. He began to wonder if he himself had been such a nice person as he had always supposed. (VDT 74)

It is the Lion who must effect another metamorphosis in Eustace, tearing the dragon's skin and dragonish nature together from the boy, baptizing him in a well of pure water upon his new birth and dressing him in new clothes. (VDT 84-87)

Why should Lewis so clearly echo the details of Forster's "The Story of a Panic" in his own account of Eustace Scrubb's meeting with Aslan? The answer to this lies in part with Forster's deliberate contrast of Christianity with the pagan worship of Pan. Indeed, some of the earliest reviews of Forster's collection of fantasies praised them for their "refreshing paganism," their "clean and wholesome paganism."<sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that Forster sets up his own "conversion" story in this conversation between the dim-witted parson Sandbach, and the effete sceptic, Leyland. (Leyland begins:)

"It is through us, and to our shame, that the Nereids have left the waters and the Oreads the mountains, that the woods no longer give shelter to Pan."

"Pan!" cried Mr Sandbach, his mellow voice filling the valley as if it have been a great green church, "Pan is dead. That is why the woods do not shelter him." And he began to tell the striking story of the mariners who were sailing near the coast at the time of the birth of Christ, and three times heard a loud voice saying: "The great God Pan is dead." (CS 13)

Sandbach's story is of course followed by the "panic" itself, rather heavily making Forster's point that this announcement of the death of Pan, made by a condescending Christian parson in the pagan god's own "great green church," has been somewhat premature. Sandbach's smug assumption of spiritual superiority is wryly shown to be baseless. That Eustace Robinson has been met by Pan incarnate is indicated immediately in the evidence of "goat's footmarks in the moist earth beneath the trees"; as they retreat from the wood, Eustace himself scurries "like a goat" before the others. (CS 18, 21)

Forster's satirical juxtaposition of a cold and lifeless Christianity with a vital, earthy paganism continues in the contrast between the young waiters at the tourists' hotel:

Gennaro was the stop-gap waiter, a clumsy, impertinent fisher-lad, who had been had up from Minor in the absence of the nice English-speaking Emmanuele. (CS 20)

Of course it is not the "nice English-speaking" boy with the determinedly Christian name who ultimately saves Eustace, but rather the "impertinent" Gennaro (whose name suggests the Italian for "generous"), who gives his own life in Eustace's place. Tytler describes the scene:

I reached the terrace just in time to see Eustace jumping over the parapet of the garden wall. This time I knew for certain he would be killed. But he alighted in an olive tree, looking like a great white moth, and from the tree he slid on to the earth. And as soon as his bare feet touched the clods of earth he uttered a strange loud cry, such as I should not have thought the human voice could have produced, and disappeared among the trees below. "He has understood and he is saved," cried Gennaro, who was still sitting on the asphalt path. "Now, instead of dying he will live!" . . . [But] something had gone wrong inside [Gennaro], and he was dead.

Signora Scafetti burst into screams at the sight of

the dead body, and, far down the valley towards the sea, there still resounded the shouts and the laughter of the escaping boy. (CS 33)

It is not immediately apparent to the reader of Forster's tale, even with the help of the full context, that "the dead body" is Gennaro, and "the escaping boy" Eustace. This deliberate melding of the fates of the two boys, one to new life and one to death, qualifies each, making the final disposition of both ambiguous. There is something very like this at the conclusion of Lewis' *The Silver Chair*, in which King Caspian is, in the joyous sight of Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole, resurrected to new life in Aslan's own country, while "far off in Narnia, King Rilian buried his father, Caspian the Navigator, Tenth of that name, and mourned for him."<sup>5</sup> It may well be Lewis' comment on the death of Gennaro, that it is (within Forster's intention) more apparent than real.

Clearly, Gennaro's death atones for his own fault in having betrayed Eustace. But it also seems clear that the Italian fisher boy has, through dying, and in despite of the "Christian" Englishmen who would have prevented his saving Eustace at all, made his own escape. Such an interpretation is suggested by Forster's own remark that "Two people pulling each other into salvation is the only theme I find worthwhile."<sup>6</sup>

The significance of Lewis' allusion to the Forster tale is focused in this: there is no place in Lewis' theology for a "salvation" which begins and ends within humanity itself. Eustace Scrubb learns this when he attempts three times to effect his own change, to rid himself of his dragon's shape. Three times Eustace fails, and at last Aslan intervenes. Here Eustace is explaining to Edmund how it came about:

"I scratched away for the third time and got off a third skin, just like the two others, and stepped out of it. But as soon as I looked at myself in the water I knew it had been no good.

"Then the lion said . . . 'You will have to let me undress you.' I was afraid of his claws, I can tell you, but I was pretty nearly desperate now. So I just lay flat down on my back to let him do it.

"The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart . . ."

"[Aslan] peeled the beastly stuff right off just as I thought I'd done it myself the other three times. . . . And there I was as smooth and soft as a peeled switch and smaller than I had been. . . . I'd turned into a boy again." (VDT 86-87)

Edmund has to explain to Eustace who Aslan is, and how it is that the Lion has been able to do for Eustace what he could not do for himself. "I think you've seen Aslan . . . the great Lion, the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea, who saved me and saved Narnia." (VDT 87)

By having Edmund explain Aslan's intervention, Lewis recalls to his readers' minds the fact that salvation in Narnia, the saving of Edmund, and now of Eustace, and ultimately of Narnia itself, depends upon the Lion's atoning death and his resurrection: the story of Edmund's personal

ransom told in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Of all the elements of the Chronicles of Narnia resonating with biblical symbolism and alluding to specific tenets of the Christian faith, the story of Aslan's passion, death and resurrection is the nearest to traditional allegory, its correspondence to the story of Christ's death most precise.

In "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," Lewis explains that, though the Chronicles had not been conceived as Christian allegories, yet when their eventual form was present in his artist's mind, he discovered how they might be enlisted in the service of his Christian faith:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. . . . But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.

The Eustace of Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* certainly needs to be transformed, but not by Pan. And his atonement cannot be achieved through the sacrificial death of another mortal. Salvation in Lewis' fantasies comes, as it came to him in his own life, only by the intervention of a supernatural redeemer. In answer to the call of E.M. Forster's Eustace by Pan, and his salvation by the death of Gennaro, Lewis' Eustace Scrubb is called by, and saved by, the creator and redeemer of the Narnian world.

## II. "The Other Side of the Hedge"

In the second story in his collection, Forster develops as a metaphor for human life a kind of pun on the designation "the human race." For the unnamed protagonist, a traveler whose "pedometer" registers twenty five years already used up in an interminable cross-country footrace, his greatest fear is that he may drop out as his brother had done "a year or two round the corner." (CS 34) And before many words are used up, the young man does indeed decide to leave the road on "this side" of the great hedge which borders it (assuring himself that the detour will be only temporary), to worm his way through the hedge itself, thence to fall into a Stygian pool on the "other side." Forster is not much concerned here with veiling the allegory: although the traveler boasts, "we of the road . . . advance continually," (CS 36) it is very clear that the "losers" of this race, like the traveler's own brother who "had wasted his breath on singing and his strength on helping others" are its only real winners. (CS 34)

The gates in the hedge are the ivory gate of false dreams. "through this gate . . . humanity went out [from the "other side" of the hedge] countless ages ago, when it was first seized with the desire to walk" and the horn gate of true dreams. "through this gate humanity, all that is left

of it will come in to us." (CS 40) At the climax of the tale, the traveler, still determined, it seems, to return to "this" side of the hedge, takes by force some beer from a man of the "other side": but the beer acts on him like the waters of Lethe, and as he begins to forget his unregenerate former existence in the footrace, he discovers that the man whose beer he has taken is his own brother.

The traveler's reluctance to make the transition from "this" side of the hedge to the other, from the unreflective life of competition and naked self-interest to the life of spiritual value and wholeness, is suggested in his physical struggle to make a way through the hedge itself:

I had to use my arms as a shield, depending on my feet alone to push me forward. Half-way through I would have gone back, for in the passage all the things I was carrying were scraped off me, and my clothes were torn. But I was so wedged that return was impossible, and I had to wriggle blindly forward, expecting every moment that my strength would fail me and that I should perish in the undergrowth. (CS 35)

The traveler's passage through the hedge thus tests his resolve, at least until the "point of no return" when his possessions have been stripped away from him, and it is easier to press on than to go back. Of course he passes this test, and so makes his way to the hedge's "other side."<sup>8</sup>

In Lewis' very first fictional exploration of other worlds, he found Forster's hedge useful as an image of boundary, and of the struggle implicit in accommodating one's perspective to new realities: Ransom's journeys "out of the silent planet" to the "other worlds" of Maleldil begin when he burrows through the thick hedge surrounding "The Rise":

He knew that it would be possible, if one really wanted, to force a way through the hedge. He did not want to. . . . Yet it was perfectly clear that he would have to get in, and since one cannot crawl through a hedge with a pack on, he slipped his pack off and flung it over the gate. The moment he had done so, it seemed to him that he had not till now fully made up his mind now that he must break into the garden if only in order to recover the pack. . . . [He] got down on his hands and knees and began to worm his way into the hedge. . . .

The operation proved more difficult than he had expected and it was several minutes before he stood up in the wet darkness on the inner side of the hedge smarting from his contact with thorns and nettles.

Here is of course the same hedge, the same reluctance (and yet the same resolve to go on), and the same "point of no return." Like Forster, Lewis was fond of opposing different perspectives upon reality: the view from "this side" of the "hedge" against the view from "the other" side. In the Ransom trilogy the opposition is between an existence of exile upon the "Silent Planet" to life among the *eldila* of Maleldil himself, beyond the boundary of earth's spiritual quarantine. In Narnia, the opposition is registered usually in terms not of space but of relationship: though the unregenerate Eustace does travel from our world to Narnia, it is his

coming to know Aslan which marks his subsequent life as different from that of the odious little boy he used to be. And in *The Great Divorce* Lewis depicts the same opposition in both spatial and relational terms: the ghosts who make the journey to heaven must forsake the world of shadows they have left behind for the substantial reality of the celestial realm, but they must also forsake their own former unregenerate selves, the phantoms they had been while in the Grey Town, to become real persons able to live in the new world of eternal reality, and in the presence of reality's Author.

Forster describes the drab monotony of unredeemed life on "this side" of the hedge as what motivates his traveler to seek a way through to the "other side": "it was only the monotony of the highway that oppressed me — dust under foot and brown crackling hedges on either side, ever since I could remember." (CS 34) Lewis recalls this detail in his description of the dreary sameness of all things in the Grey Town (which is both Hell and Purgatory) of his *Great Divorce*, which monotony moves his own narrator to join the queue for the bus which at last will bring him out of the Grey Town and into reality:

I had been wandering for hours in similar mean streets, always in the rain and always in evening twilight. . . . And just as the evening never advanced to night, so my walking had never brought me to the better parts of the 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 book-shops of the sort that sell the Works of Aristotle.<sup>10</sup>

The minds of those who make the journeys from "this side" to "the other" of Forster's "Hedge" and from the Grey Town to the Bright Country of *The Great Divorce* need to be weaned from their childish tastes for appearance rather than reality. Forster's traveler, once on the "other side," discovers that his former attitudes, even his manner of walking or of using the faculty of sight, need to be adjusted to his fundamentally new circumstances:

Even when the water was out of my eyes I was still dazed, for I had never been in so large a space, nor seen such grass and sunshine. . . . I found it difficult walking, for I was always trying to out-distance my companion, and there was no advantage in doing this if the place led nowhere. . . . "This is perfectly terrible. One cannot advance: one cannot progress. . . ." (CS 35-36)

Lewis' Dreamer makes a similar adjustment in perspective when first he glimpses the Bright Country: "I had the sense of being in a larger space, perhaps even a larger sort of space, than I had ever known before: as if the sky were further off and the extent of the green plain wider than they could be on this little ball of earth" (GD 26) and another of the ghosts (the apostate bishop) voices his mistrust of finality and an end to "progress" in terms which clearly recall those of Forster's traveler:

For me there is no such thing as a final answer. The free wind of inquiry must *always* continue to blow through the mind, must it not? 'Prove all things' . . .

to travel hopefully is better than to arrive. . . . you must feel yourself that there is something stifling about the idea of finality? Stagnation, my dear boy, what is more soul-destroying than stagnation?" (GD 40)

Lewis' characters echo Forster's because their authors' point is the same: there can be no progress from reality, only towards it. A race makes some kind of sense only if its course leads toward some real goal, though those who refuse to see this can be ingenious in justifying themselves. Here Forster's traveler attempts to explain away the fact that the beloved road of his former way of life, when viewed from the clear perspective afforded on "the other side," is shown to be no more than a labyrinth which leads precisely nowhere:

"the road sometimes doubles, to be sure, but that is part of our discipline. Who can doubt that its general tendency is onward? To what goal we know not, it may be to some mountain where we shall touch the sky, it may be over precipices into the sea. But that it goes forward, who can doubt that? . . ." (CS 38)

Again, Lewis' bishop echoes the self-delusion of Forster's traveler: in conversation with one of the Solid People of heaven he attempts to characterize the dreary Grey Town in positive terms — "You mean, that the grey town with its continual hope of morning (we must all live by hope, must we not?), with its field for indefinite progress, in, a sense, Heaven, if only we have eyes to see it?" but is profoundly shocked when his interlocutor replies briefly, "We call it Hell." (GD 36) No amount of mere wishful thinking will turn this phantom into a real person, or his hell into heaven.

The divide between "this side" and "the other" side of the hedge in Forster's story is every bit as great as the immense gulf by which Lewis divorces heaven from hell in his tale. Each author treats seriously the seductiveness and utter futility of the race run for its own sake, ending not in reality but in illusion. Thus Forster's story ends with his traveler's yielding at last to the healing available on the hedge's "other side": before his senses forsake him they "[seem] to expand . . . to [perceive] the magic song of nightingales, and the odour of invisible hay, and stars piercing the fading sky"; at last the traveler is lowered gently to sleep by his own brother. (CS 40) But for Lewis' Dreamer the vision of heaven must itself fade, since "the bitter drink of death is still before" him (GD 116); but before he awakes again in our own world he too hears "the full chorus" of birdsong which "pours from every branch" in the other world, and he has at the end of his dream an intimation of "the rim of the sunrise that shoots Time dead with golden arrows and puts to flight all phantasmal shapes." (GD 117)

### III. "The Celestial Omnibus"

The Forster story with the clearest connections to Lewis' fantasies is certainly "The Celestial Omnibus" itself. The device of the magical bus is adopted by Lewis in token of much more significant borrowings, for Lewis discovered in Forster's fantasy many elements could be reworked for his own purposes. There are links between "The Celestial Omnibus" and the Ransom trilogy, the

Narnian stories (in particular, *The Magician's Nephew* and *The Last Battle*, first and last of the series), and especially, once more, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis found in this story a focusing of many of the themes he wanted to deal with in his own fantasies.

The adventures of the boy protagonist of "The Celestial Omnibus" begin with a longing within him for something that he cannot articulate even to himself:

Small birds twittered, and the breadwinners' train shrieked musically down through the cutting that wonderful cutting which had drawn to itself the whole beauty out of Surbiton, and clad itself, like any Alpine valley, with the glory of the fir and the silver birch and the primrose. It was this cutting that had first stirred desires within the boy, desires for something just a little different, he knew not what, desires that would return whenever things were sunlit, as they were this evening, running up and down inside him, up and down, up and down, till he would feel quite unusual all over, and as likely as not would want to cry." (CS 42)

But when the boy later meets with Sir Thomas Browne in the omnibus, the famous doctor reveals to the boy that this condition of longing is not unique to himself:

"As a healer of bodies I had scant success . . . But as a healer of the spirit I have succeeded beyond my hopes and my deserts. For though my draughts were not subtler than those of other men, yet, by reason of the cunning goblets wherein I offered them, the queasy soul was oftentimes tempted to sip and be refreshed."

"The queasy soul, he murmured; "if the sun sets with trees in front of it, and you suddenly come strange all over, is that a queasy soul?"

"Have you felt that?"

"Why yes."

S 47-48)

Any reader of C.S. Lewis will recognize this condition of the soul as what Lewis calls *Sehnsucht* or joy. Lewis found evidence of it in the diary of Samuel Pepys:

With my wife to the King's House to see *The Virgin Martyr*, and it is mighty pleasant. . . . But that which did please me beyond anything in the whole world was the wind music when the angel comes down, which is so sweet that it ravished me and, indeed, in a word, did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick, just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife . . . (Feb. 27, 1668.)<sup>11</sup>

in language that strongly suggests the "queasy soul" of Sir Thomas and the boy of Forster's story. And of course in *Surprised by Joy* Lewis ascribes to this same quiver within the spirit that which urged him on in his own spiritual pilgrimage toward Christ himself:

Once in those very early days my brother brought into the nursery the lid of a biscuit tin which he had covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers so as to make it a toy garden or a toy forest. That was the first beauty I ever knew. . . . As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden. And every day there were

what we called "the Green Hills"; that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing. *Sehnsucht* . . .

As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. It is difficult to find words strong enough for the sensation which came over me; Milton's "enormous bliss" of Eden (giving the full, ancient meaning to the word "enormous") comes somewhere near it.<sup>12</sup>

Lewis found in the young protagonist of "Celestial Omnibus" another of those who knew the secret of joy: that special longing for the real, the essential, that which is not bound by time or space, and that which, Lewis believed, must ultimately be satisfied by communion with the living God, or not at all. Lewis himself found it in his brother's toy garden and the flowering currant, found it again in myths both classical and Norse, found it latterly in fairy tales and fantasies, some of which he wrote himself.

But Lewis' own path from the first intimations of "joy" to its divine Source had many turnings and some blind ends. For some years he abandoned faith for doubt, and joy for sceptical enquiry, until George MacDonald's *Phantasies* reawakened his sense of longing. And again the likeness of Lewis' experience and that of the protagonist of "The Celestial Omnibus" is apparent: in the following passage, having searched for the Celestial Omnibus and not found it at once, the boy has a moment of wavering faith:

He peered at the ground through the gathering dusk, and there he saw what might or might not be the marks of wheels. Yet nothing had come out of the alley. And he had never seen an omnibus at any time in the Buckingham Park Road. No: it must be a hoax, like the sign-posts, like the fairy tales, like the dreams upon which he would wake suddenly in the night. . . . It was a hoax, yet through his dreams it grew more and more real, and the streets of Surbiton, through which he saw it driving, seemed instead to become hoaxes and shadows. And very early in the morning he woke with a cry, for he had had a glimpse of its destination." (CS 44)

The vision of the dream convinces the boy that the signs, the fairy tales and the dreams themselves are tokens of a reality deeper, more solid and substantial, than the flat plain of factuality which most of us take for reality itself. But once he has made his journey on the omnibus and has seen, felt and heard that greater reality which people like his father and Mr. Bons take to be mere myth and moonshine, the boy's faith in and love for these things cannot be shaken.

As a punishment for telling "lies" about the omnibus, the boy is made to recite from Keats to Mr. Bons, but he

breaks off in the middle of his recitation:

"To visit dolphin coral in deep seas," said the boy, and burst into tears.

"Come, come! why do you cry?"

"Because, because all these words that only rhymed before, now that I've come back they're me. . . . 'Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light, and precipices show untrodden green.' It is so, sir. All these things are true." (CS 51)

Lewis talks about the capacity of myth and symbol to convey reality in many of his works, both fiction and non-fiction. In *Mere Christianity* he says of God that

He sent the human race what I call good dreams: I mean those queer stories scattered all through the heathen religions about a god who dies and comes to life again and, by his death, has somehow given new life to men.<sup>13</sup>

Following his first voyage beyond the boundaries of our world, Lewis' protagonist Elwin Ransom begins to wonder whether "the distinction between history and mythology might be itself meaningless outside the Earth" (OSP 164), and Lewis takes up the same theme in *Perelandra*, where the "myth" of Eden is but one of many which the space-traveler Ransom finds enacted around him in prosaic fact:

At Ransom's waking something happened to him which perhaps never happens to a man until he is out of his own world: he saw reality, and thought it was a dream. He opened his eyes and saw a strange heraldically coloured tree loaded with yellow fruits and silver leaves. Round the base of the indigo stem was coiled a small dragon covered with scales of red gold. He recognised the garden of the Hesperides at once. . . . Were all the things which appeared as mythology on Earth scattered through other worlds as realities? (OSP 39)

At the same story's conclusion, Ransom's guess is confirmed when he is present at the coronation of the King and Queen of Perelandra:

With deep wonder he thought to himself, "My eyes have seen Mars and Venus. I have seen Ares and Aphrodite." . . . Our mythology is based on a solid reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base. . . . Ransom at last understood why mythology was what it was, gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility.<sup>14</sup>

After having abandoned the atheism of his youth and before having written his own fantasies, C.S. Lewis came to believe that such joyful longing as Forster gives the boy of "The Celestial Omnibus" could not be an end in itself: that, on the contrary, "all the value lay in that of which Joy was the desiring,"<sup>15</sup> which was neither state of mind nor indifferent spiritual force, but a Person "who has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God with a determinate character."<sup>16</sup> To stop at the sensation of "joy," then, however that sensation might be



aroused, or to mistake the circumstances through which joy came to him for its personal Source and end, would for Lewis have been idolatry. In Forster's tale, the sensation of joy is aroused not by an intimation of the presence of God but by mighty works of literature; he gives to Mr. Bons the delusion of an idolater, and impishly has Dante himself paraphrase scripture in an effort to cure Bons of his spiritual sickness: "I am the means and not the end. I am the food and not the life. . . . I cannot save you. For poetry is a spirit; and they that would worship it must worship it in spirit and in truth." (CS 58) By this ironic echo of Jesus' words about himself ("I am the way, the truth and the life," Jn 14:6) and about God the Father ("God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and truth," Jn 4:24) Forster suggests, however ironically, that the works of Dante and others like him are in some way capable of "saving" such as will receive them with humility and understanding; he suggests even that poetry is worthy of the kind of adulation usually reserved for God himself. Bons, it is implied, is an idolater not because he gives to literature that devotion which is the due of God, but because he gives to Dante the man that devotion which is the due of literature.

Perhaps it was this in Forster's early fantasies which Lewis felt could not be allowed to stand without challenge, for he had come to believe that the joy to be had from poetry is not autonomous: that it is given by God to whet the spiritual appetite, to lead the wanderer at last to Himself. The same point is made in yet another of Lewis' adaptations of a detail from the Forster story: when the priggish Mr. Bons exclaims "Good heavens! . . . Good gracious heavens!" Forster has Dante, the driver of the omnibus, "[turn] round at the mention of goodness and of heaven. . . ." (CS 53) It is a good joke, which makes its point by contrasting the emptiness of the oath to the fullness of that transcendent reality unconsciously invoked by it. Lewis shares the joke with Forster, but adapts it to focus attention not merely on goodness and heaven, but on their Author, the personal Center of reality, its source and its purpose:

"God!" said the Ghost, glancing round the landscape.  
 "God what?" asked the Spirit.  
 "What do you mean, 'God what'?" asked the Ghost.  
 "In our grammar, God is a noun." (GD 73)

The point of Forster's story lies in the contrast between the innocent boy narrator and the cultured Mr. Bons, his confidante and companion on the journey by omnibus. Mr. Bons is the President of the Literary Society, a cultivated man and apparently a lover of great literature; in reality, he merely values the reputation of culture and sophistication which poetry lends him, and not its own essential wisdom and beauty. In Dante's own presence he can only call attention to the vellum-bound shrine to Dante's memory which he keeps on his bookshelf: he has nothing to say of the genuine Paradise to which the omnibus is conveying them even as they speak: "Mr Bons became flustered. He had not intended to be kidnapped. He

could not find the door-handle nor push up the blinds. The omnibus was quite dark. . . ." (CS 53) The boy, in contrast, is painfully conscious of his own ignorance, but he genuinely loves Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Harris, Tom Jones and Achilles, when he meets them. He sees, from the window of the omnibus, "the summit of a moonlit hill . . . the chasm, and . . . the old precipices, dreaming, with their feet in the everlasting river. He [exclaims], 'The mountain! Listen to the new tune in the water! Look at the camp-fires in the ravines,'" but Mr. Bons has not learned to see such things at all, and, "after a hasty glance, [retorts], 'Water? Camp-fires? Ridiculous rubbish. Hold your tongue. There is nothing at all.'" (CS 55-6) This contrast between the boy's joyful perception of these celestial realities and Mr. Bons' utter failure to perceive them continues to the very climax of Forster's story: summoned by Achilles, the boy leaps up onto his shield and implores Mr Bons to follow. But Mr. Bons' failure to perceive what is real causes him to act stupidly: he falls through the same rock which supports both Achilles and the boy (as well as the horses which pull the omnibus), and falls to his death in our own prosaic world.

This motif, that one's spiritual perspective may dictate one's experience of reality, becomes a favorite of C.S. Lewis when he writes his own fantasies. When Elwin Ransom makes his first journey beyond the Earth, he finds that his senses need to be re-educated, when

the very intensity of his desire to take in the new world at a glance defeated itself. He saw nothing but colours\_colours that refused to form themselves into things. Moreover, he knew nothing yet well enough to see it: you cannot see things till you know roughly what they are. (OSP 46)

Learning to appreciate a foreign landscape is one thing; it is quite another when Ransom is required also to come to terms with extraterrestrial beings which share both reason and spirit with mankind, but do not share our outward shape. In the following passage, Ransom reconsiders his prejudice against that *hross* whom eventually he will learn to know as Hyoï:

When the rationality of the *hross* tempted you to think of it as a man . . . it became abominable, a man seven feet high, with a snakey body, covered, face and all, with thick black animal hair, and whiskered like a cat. But starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have [and], as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason. Nothing could be more disgusting than the one impression; nothing more delightful than the other. It all depended on the point of view. (OSP 65)

Point of view or perspective thus dictates Ransom's experience of the reality available to him on Malacandra. But Lewis' purpose in *Out of the Silent Planet* is not merely to speculate on what frame of experience the senses require in order accurately to process sensations derived from physical reality: his concern is what adjustments to one's *spiritual* perspective may be necessary if one is to perceive, and having perceived to make ordinate response to, the

spiritual realities of God, his angels and their demonic adversaries, of heaven and of hell. Thus in Ransom's interview with the Oyarsa of Malacandra, he learns that his former terror of the *seroni* and of Oyarsa himself had been founded on misapprehensions of their real identity: he need have no fear of them because all are "copies of Maleldil"; in biblical terms, they have all been "made in the image of God" (OSP 135; Gen 1:27). Without the correction of his spiritual point of view, Ransom cannot receive with his physical sight accurate information concerning the *hnuu* of Malacandra.

This motif of the interdependence of physical and spiritual perception is carried on from the Ransom trilogy to the Chronicles of Narnia. For example, in *The Magician's Nephew*, the responses of the children to Aslan's song differ materially from the response of Uncle Andrew Ketterley, just as their humility and candor before the great Lion differ from Andrew's arrogant pride and wickedness. Whereas Digory and Polly hear "with open mouths and shining eyes" the creation song which calls Narnia into existence, Andrew does not want to hear it. "If he could have got away from it by creeping into a rat's hole, he would have done so."<sup>17</sup> In fact, Andrew's blindness and deafness to truth are progressive: whereas he begins by willing himself not to hear the Voice, at last he cannot hear it as a voice at all:

the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. . . . And when the Beasts spoke in answer, he hear only barkings, growlings, bayings, and howlings. (MN 116-17)

The notion that one's personal relationship to the source of reality (in Narnia, Aslan himself) dictates one's experience of reality, is made again in *Prince Caspian* when Lucy, nearest in spirit to Aslan, is able to see him long before the others in the party can do so.<sup>18</sup> And the motif is concluded in the Narnia series when, in *The Last Battle*, those dwarfs who refuse to believe in the beneficence of the Lion cannot perceive the beauties of the celestial "New Narnia," nor the goodness of the food and drink Aslan gives them: instead, they sit in a tight circle on the grass, seeing nothing but the darkness of the filthy stable they believe themselves to be in, tasting nothing but the rotten cabbage and filthy water they would expect to find in such a place.<sup>19</sup> It is a graphic illustration of a spiritual blindness very like that of Forster's Mr. Bons:

"Sir, why do you delay? Here is only the great Achilles, whom you knew."

Mr. Bons screamed, "I see no one. I see nothing. I want to go back." (CS 57)

### Conclusion:

I can discover only one mention of E.M. Forster in C.S. Lewis' writings. It appears in "Christianity and Culture,"

written in part as a counterblast to an essay in *Scrutiny* which seemed to Lewis likely to promote the mistaken idea "that 'sensitivity' or good taste were among the notes of the true Church, or that coarse, unimaginative people were less likely to be saved than refined and poetic people."<sup>20</sup> The essayist to whose work Lewis is responding in "Christianity and Culture" mentions "Lawrence, Joyce and Mr E.M. Forster" with approbation. In his response, Lewis observes that since "Plato will tolerate no culture that does not directly or indirectly conduce either to the intellectual vision of the good or the military efficiency of the commonwealth . . . Joyce and D.H. Lawrence would have fared ill in the Republic."<sup>21</sup> While it is perilous to argue much from Lewis' silence alone, it is at least interesting that Forster's name is excluded from the original list when Lewis picks it up to use it as a weapon against its original author.

What then could C.S. Lewis have discovered in the early stories of E.M. Forster so congenial to his own work and thought? The first answer is the obvious one: like Lewis, Forster was very much interested in fantasy, especially in his early tales: he writes concerning Butler's *Erewhon* (admired also by Lewis), "I like that idea of fantasy, of muddling up the actual and the impossible until the reader isn't sure which is which, and I have sometimes tried to do it when writing myself."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Denis Godfrey observes, "the unseen, fantastic or otherwise, [is] the common basic factor in all the stories" written in Forster's early career.<sup>23</sup> Neither was Forster antipathetic to a religious conception of reality: in "Art for Art's Sake," he recognizes that although religious experience "lies outside [his own] terms of reference," essential order might be attainable within it:

the divine order, the mystic harmony . . . according to all religions is available for those who can contemplate it. We must admit its possibility, on the evidence of the adepts. . . . The existence of a divine order, though it cannot be tested, has never been disproved." (TC 91)

Thus in the early fantasies, in what one reviewer calls Forster's search "for some poetic and elemental reality," he explores religious (albeit pagan) experience for clues as to what the ultimate nature of such reality might be.<sup>24</sup> Wilfred Stone shows that Forster's search yielded a conviction concerning the fundamental opposition of two systems of value, an opposition which Forster often expressed in terms borrowed from the New Testament, and particularly from Jesus' words in the gospel of Matthew:

The division between earthly and spiritual coin, earthly and spiritual possessions, becomes virtually Forster's basic metaphor . . . . Any reader of Forster is aware of those numberless formulations \_ the seen v. the unseen, the public v. the private, the conscious v. the unconscious \_ with which he worked in trying to negotiate the divide between the everyday world and an ideal world of value. . . . Forster is the inveterate seeker for ideal value, always tugging the material towards the spiritual and never the other way.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps it is from this last observation that we can begin to see clearly what divides our two authors, as well as what unites them. In Forster's fantasies we do not, indeed, observe him "tugging the spiritual toward the material": that is, we do not see in his tales any hint of Lewis' Christian conception of the necessity of divine intervention in human affairs, including the affairs of the human spirit. Forster had a profound faith in the native goodness of Man apart from God, what he terms (in "The Challenge of Our Time") a "mystic faith in the individual. He seems to me a divine achievement, and I mistrust any view which belittles him." (TC 57) Among such individuals, what matters most to Forster are the qualities of "tolerance, good temper and sympathy," for in them he saw mankind's best chance for constructive harmony and cooperation. (TC 67)

The corollary for Forster of this high view of humanity was to invalidate the Christian conception of the necessity of salvation, of reconciliation between ourselves and God. Harold Bloom draws the distinction most clearly in his comments on Forster's *A Passage to India*: "Forster's own faithless faith [is] a religion of love between equals, as opposed to Christianity, a religion of love between the incommensurate Jehovah and his creatures."<sup>26</sup> At times, indeed, Forster seems to equate spiritual and psychological laws, as in his comments (in "English Prose Between 1918 and 1939") on Toynbee's *A Study of History*...

Professor Toynbee comes to the conclusion that [civilizations] rise and fall in accord with a religious law, and that except the Lord build the house their labour is but lost that build it; or, if you prefer the language of Freud to that of the Old Testament, that the conscious must be satisfactorily based on the subconscious." 276

...which seems to equate the person of God himself with but one facet of the human psyche. (TC 278)

This goes some way toward explaining that quality of Forster's early fantasies observed by Denis Godfrey in *E.M. Forster's Other Kingdom*:

In the most typical of them, fantasy, usually an occurrence of a supernatural kind, is made to erupt in the midst of, and in defiance of everyday reality, and the characters in accordance with the degree of their spiritual sensitivity react to it. . . .

It cannot be said in any of these fantasies that the nature of man's after-death experience is being at all seriously postulated; at the most, humorously or allegorically, some aspects of what that experience may turn out to be are being speculated upon.<sup>27</sup>

It is not then the potential reality of the supernatural which interests Forster, but the human response to the intimation of the supernatural.

C.S. Lewis had come to see the person of God as the author and center of reality itself, "the reality with which no treaty can be made," the heart of reality, "basic Fact or Actuality, the source of all other facthood . . . the most

concrete thing there is . . . too definite for the unavoidable vagueness of language." (SJ 182, 189; *Miracles* 95). While he might admire Forster's deft use of fantasy, myth and symbol in "The Celestial Omnibus," "The Other Side of the Hedge" and "The Story of a Panic," Lewis answered them with his own fantasies, in which at the heart of reality there is always a Person.

## Notes

1. "Immortal Horrors and Everlasting Splendours": C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*, *Mythlore* 63 (Autumn 1990), 28-37.
2. Reprinted in E.M. Forster, *Collected Short Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976). Hereafter, quotations from the Forster stories will be taken from this volume, and identified in the text of the essay with the abbreviation "CS" and page numbers, in parentheses.
3. C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1980), 7. (Hereafter cited in the text as "VDT.")
4. "A Book of Phantasies," *Daily Mail* (London) 19 May 1911, 10; "Celestial Omnibus," *New York Times Book Review*, 5 Aug. 1923, 17. Both reviews are reprinted in E.M. Forster, *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Gardner (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 170.
5. C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1980), 187-90.
6. E.M. Forster, *Commonplace Book* (London: Scolar Press, 1978), 55.
7. C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 37.
8. There is something in this of the camel's difficulty in passing through the eye of a needle without first having shed its load; Forster was fond of the image from Matthew 19:24, using it to witly effect in his essay "My Wood" and elsewhere. Wilfred Stone observes Forster's use of this and three other allusions to the gospel of Matthew in "Forster on Profit and Loss," E.M. Forster: A Human Exploration, (London: Macmillan, 1979), 69.
9. C.S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: Pan, 1958), 8-9. (Hereafter cited in the text as "OSP.")
10. C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (London: Bles, 1945), 10. (Hereafter cited in the text as "GD.")
11. Quoted in "Transpositions," in *The Weight of Glory" and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 24.
12. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Glasgow: Collins, 1959) 12, 18-19. (Hereafter cited in the text as "SJ.")
13. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 54.
14. C.S. Lewis, *Peregrinations* (London: Pan, 1953), 186-7.
15. Quoted by Clyde Kilby, *The Christian World of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 19.
16. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Glasgow: Collins, 1963), 85. (Hereafter cited in the text.)
17. C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 95. (Hereafter cited in the text as "MN.")
18. C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 110-13.
19. C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Glasgow: Collins, 1980), 135-39.
20. *Christian Reflections* (Glasgow: Collins, 1981), 28.
21. *Ibid.*, 31.
22. E.M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 222. (Hereafter cited in the text as "TC.")
23. Denis Godfrey, *E.M. Forster's Other Kingdom* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), 19.
24. "Celestial Omnibus," *New York Times Book Review*, 5 Aug. 1923, 17. Reprinted in E.M. Forster: *The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Gardner (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 170.
25. Wilfred Stone, "Forster on Profit and Loss," in E.M. Forster: *A Human Exploration* 69-70.
26. Introduction to E.M. Forster: *Modern Critical Views* (New Haven: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), 9.
27. Denis Godfrey, *E.M. Forster's Other Kingdom* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1968), 9, 14.