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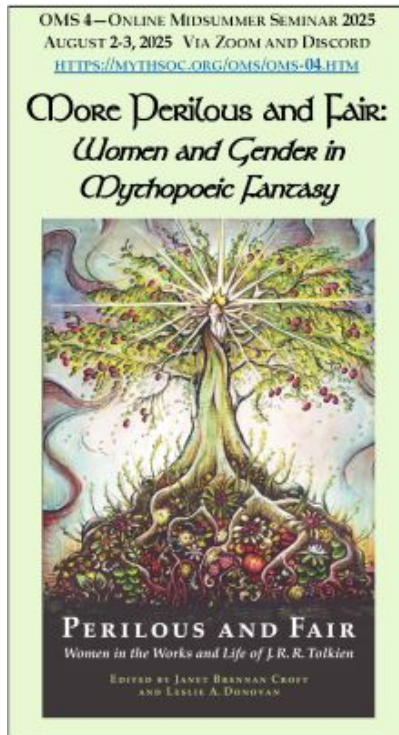
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Abstract

Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is a Romantic vision of evil energy that reaches to the heavens, a geographical representation of capacity and scope and perpetual cosmic change. On the other hand, Lewis's vision of hell in *The Great Divorce* is that of a land without substance: a conurbation of addiction to mental maladies, an endless mental substance abuse, an emptying of presence, and a banal stasis to the journey of the soul. Many of Lewis's sources and inspirations for *The Great Divorce*, similarly, portray hell as a land of paradoxical "seeming-largeness", while having ontological smallness. Throughout Lewis' narrative, one gets an increasing sense of the importance of understanding *place* correctly, as a matter of eternal consequence. Lewis often returns to the idea that places are important for the ways that they can convey glimpses of heaven, by displaying their ebullience of life, or spiritual presence, dramatized through the classical and medieval idea of the *genius loci*—the "spirit of a place"—showing how the divine presence can fill landscapes, but is emptied from others.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C. S.; Blake, William; Williams, Charles; Macdonald, George; *The Great Divorce*; *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*; Descent into Hell; hell; heaven; geography; symbolism; metaphor; landscape; genius loci;

Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce—Moral and religious aspects; Williams, Charles. Descent Into Hell; Lewis, C.S. The Great Divorce—Characters—George MacDonald; Good and evil in C.S. Lewis's works; Blake, William. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell; Hell in fantasy literature; Heaven in fantasy literature; Landscape in fantasy literature; Genius loci in fantasy literature

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SUBSTANCE ABUSE: THE SYMBOLIC
GEOGRAPHY OF HELL
IN *THE GREAT DIVORCE*

RICHARD ANGELO BERGEN

Whether this ['outer darkness'] means (horror of horror) being left to purely mental existence, left with nothing at all but one's own envy, prurience, resentment, loneliness & self conceit, or whether there is still some sort of environment, something you cd. call a world or a reality, I wd. never pretend to know. But I wouldn't put the question in the form 'do I believe in an *actual* Hell'. One's own mind is actual enough. If it doesn't seem fully actual *now* that is because you can always escape from it a bit into the physical world—look out of the window, smoke a cigarette, go to sleep. But when there is nothing for you *but* your own mind (no body to go to sleep, no books or landscape, no sounds, no drugs) it will be as actual as—as—well, as a coffin is actual to a man buried alive. (13 May 1946, C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greaves, *Collected Letters* 2.710)

IN *THE GREAT DIVORCE*, AN ARTIST SPIRIT reminds a fellow painter that his reason for making art was that he “caught glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of [his] painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too” (9.73). Lewis may have thought something similar of the purpose for his own representation of landscape in narrative art; in the anthology of George MacDonald's writings that Lewis edited close in time to his composition of *The Great Divorce* in the early 1940s, there is an entry stating that a criterion of a true vision entails the following: “instead of making common things look commonplace, as a false vision would have done, it had made common things disclose the wonderful that was in them” (126, #281). *The Great Divorce* show glimpses of heaven as well as hell, and the present essay offers a study of Lewis's thought on geography and landscape, especially in their symbolic function as purveyors and vehicles of spiritual presence and ideas. Landscapes should be regarded as having substance, but can be abused conceptually and linguistically in ways that strip them of substantial meaning and presence.¹ After throwing readers into lands that have radically different space-time continua, Lewis shows different vantages from which to consider the ways in which earthly existence is, in fact, prone to extreme distortions of perspective based on a

¹ Such is the peculiar way in which this paper is using the term “substance abuse.”

tendency toward pride and (hellish) narcissism. Lewis's sources—the authors that he is in most pertinacious conversation with, including William Blake, George MacDonald, John Milton, Dante Alighieri,² Julian of Norwich, and arguably Charles Williams³—all offer certain aesthetic and symbolic representations of hell, replete with theological and eschatological ideas, which Lewis considers and modulates, or rejects. Many of the conversations between spiritual and ghostly characters involve differently comprehended versions of words about spatial understanding, such as “there,” “progress,” “in,” “travel,” and “error.” These words pun and trade on interior and exterior matters, between the world of place and the metaphors we take from it; Lewis heavily invests his story with an urgency to understand landscapes not simply as the basis for abstract metaphor, but as vehicles of the Real, containers of a weight of glory; or otherwise stripped of their weight.⁴ The two settings of this story, hell and purgatory, are both represented as obtrusively unrealistic, but their differences from terrestrial landscapes represent opposite symbolic poles in their tendency toward substance and insubstantiality. Lewis also draws heavily on medieval traditions about the *genius loci*, and spirits filling places, to meditate

² Dante has received more treatment than any other source, and for good reason. Robert Boenig points to two of Lewis's letters, one of which notes *The Great Divorce's* modeling of the bus driver after the angel near Dis in *Inferno*, and the other noting a modulation of Lewis's representation of an encounter with the beloved (in Frank and Sarah), hearkening Dante's meeting with Beatrice at the end of *Purgatorio* (98). Boenig also explains Lewis's departures, adaptations, and appropriations of the medieval dream vision genre, including a note on the aesthetic darkness Lewis chooses to begin his story with, in line with Dante. Marsha Ann Daigle emphasizes that the inception, plan, and “central teaching” behind both works concerns how man “by his free will—chooses either Hell or Heaven as his eternal abode” (140). Joe R. Christopher and Patricia Erskine-Hill each note many of the thematic and structural analogies. Amber Dunai's article considers some of these, too, but focuses on some theological and imagistic/aesthetic similarities to *Pearl*, in terms of the dream vision genre. Dominic Manganiello argues that Lewis's text is partly a critique of the ways that William Blake subverts Dante's vision of reality and ethics. Steven Jensen and Andrzej Wicher each note that some of Lewis's diversions from Dante are on account of Romantic influences on *The Great Divorce*.

³ There are of course other authors that could be added to this list, including Jeremy Taylor, Aurelius Prudentius, Hans Andersen, and Emanuel Swedenborg. The present essay will suggest Williams as an inspiration and effect on *The Great Divorce*. Colin Duriez's *Bedeveled* asserts that *Descent into Hell* has shared assumptions with *Screwtape Letters* about small lies and seemingly insignificant decisions that lead people to hell (54).

⁴ In “Transposition,” Lewis writes, “It is the present life which is the diminution, the symbol, the etiolated, the (as it were) ‘vegetarian’ substitute. If flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom, that is not because they are too solid, too gross, too distinct, too ‘illustrious with being’. They are too flimsy, too transitory, too phantasmal” (111).

on questions of mystical presence and the quality of awareness that pilgrims have as they travel “from this world to that which is to come.”

While it is true that *The Great Divorce* implies, at times, a paraphrase of MacDonald’s thought and a rejection of Blake’s ideas, the text quoted perhaps most directly is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The Macdonald persona of *The Great Divorce* proposes in one context that Milton “was right”: “The choice of every lost soul can be expressed in the words ‘Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven’” (9.63). Lewis also probably adumbrated Milton’s representation of the ever-decreasing size and nobility of Satan and his followers, and the moment in Book I of *Paradise Lost* when the “incorporeal Spirits to smallest forms / Reduced their shapes immense” (1.789-90). In another context, the dreamer and Macdonald discuss the extent to which heaven and hell might be regarded as states of mind, which alludes to Satan’s speech about hell’s landscape:

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime? [...]
[.] Farewell, happy fields,
Where joy for ever dwells! Hail, horrors! hail,
Infernal world! and thou, profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor—one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven. (1.242, 249-55)

A deceptive infernal geography is at work here more than cartographic veracity. The question from Lewis’s dreamer, which echoes Milton, is: “Then those people are right who say that Heaven and Hell are only states of mind?” Macdonald’s response is that “Hell is a state of mind [...]. And every state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind—is, in the end, Hell. But Heaven is not a state of mind. Heaven is reality itself” (9.63). The axiom of *The Great Divorce* is that the fields of heaven cannot be reduced to a state of mind, although stubborn states of mind can reduce souls to shades. Milton’s Satan contends, “this empyreal substance, cannot fail” (I.117)—*The Great Divorce* suggests a departure on one interpretation of “substance,” at least from Milton’s Satan. Enough substance abuse can cause the empyreal substance to fail. Lewis reiterates many times the idea that this mental substance abuse comes from pride and a reduction of the universe to the standards and ontology of a solipsistic self.⁵ Another entry from

⁵ Milton’s idea comes in large part from the Augustinian idea of evil as *privatio boni*, an absence of good; Margaret Dana points out that Lewis offers metaphors “related to the Augustinian formulation of Evil as privation: darkness as opposed to substance, and diminution as opposed to expansion” (21). Daigle writes that Lewis’s main imagery is

the MacDonald anthology includes the dictum, "The one principle of hell is—'I am my own!'" (105, #203). The principle of hell is approached well through an analysis of symbolic geography. The Miltonic passages just quoted also pertain to geography, to fields, regions of infernal worlds, and the perception and plasticity of place and time.

Lewis constantly draws attention to the intersection of metaphors and geography in his books, noting that the basic framework for symbolism comes from Nature. In *Problem of Pain*, he notes, "To furnish symbols for spiritual experiences may be one of the functions of the mineral and vegetable worlds" (9.118). In *The Abolition of Man*, he characterizes Nature as that which "seems to be the spatial and temporal" (69). In "The Weight of Glory" he asserts that "Nature is only the image, the symbol; but it is the symbol Scripture invites me to use" (44), and adds that theological concepts always smuggle in pictures from Nature that involve "proximity in space" (35). In *The Four Loves*, Lewis writes that "[s]pace and time, in their own fashion, mirror [God's] greatness; all life, His fecundity; animal life, His activity" (13). In another section of the text, there is an extended discussion about how Nature and a sense of the "spirits" of place are the source of metaphors for "incarnating" theological ideas (29).⁶ In "Transposition," he explains that natural landscapes are a picture of spiritual reality, and that Real Landscapes from the spiritual world are the basis for earthly ones (112). In the epistolary conclusion of *Out of the Silent Planet*, Ransom states that the book will have achieved its goal if "we could even effect in one per cent of our readers a change-over from the conception of Space to the conception of Heaven" (22.153-54). His go-to example when talking about the things on earth that transmit *Sehnsucht*, is landscape or place, particularly in *Surprised by Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *The Pilgrim's Regress*. *Miracles* contains numerous discussions from start to finish about differences comprehending space and time between the naturalist who believes that space and time exist by themselves as *a priori* categories, while the supernaturalist believes "that one Thing exists on its own and has produced the framework of space and time and the procession of systematically connected events which fill them. This framework, and this filling, he calls Nature" (13). The spatiotemporal universe is created as a framework and a communicator of meaningful pictures, or

based on "solid and shadow" or "substantial and insubstantial," where lack of substance "is a characteristic of non-being and is associated with evil," ideas found in Thomist-Aristotelian writings on ontology, as well as Boethius (148-49).

⁶ In one especially revealing passage about landscape, he explains that "nature gave the word *glory* a meaning for me. I still do not know where else I could have found one. I do not see how the 'fear' of God could have ever meant to me anything but the lowest prudential efforts to be safe, if I had never seen certain ominous ravines and unapproachable crags" (*The Four Loves* 30).

spiritual presence. In other words, the symbolic geography of this world is *The Great Divorce's* Table of Time (ch. 14) on which journeys are taken and choices are made. The character of MacDonald suggests that the disorientation and strange spatiotemporal lens in the dream offers a clearer lens than much of what one can see on earth.

Now, *The Great Divorce* is all about the ways in which the comprehension of place is a matter of eternal consequence. The preface to the story proposes that readers should consider the kind of place they are in now, and the journey they intend to take through life, and beyond. Lewis muses that in the afterlife, "Earth [...] will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place" (Preface.8). Almost all the places visited in *The Great Divorce* are greatly modulated versions of terrestrial landscapes. Lewis offers a symbolic geography of hell and heaven, and he sets up the fundamental spatial framework to reject William Blake's basic scheme for *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. For Blake, the journey of the human self in relationship to good and evil involves a road of mutually overlapping concentric circles, or a river that inexorably leads to an overarching destination. Andrzej Wicher asserts that "Lewis's explicit rejection of the metaphor of a river as a representation of the human life may be read as a rejection of the notion of progress seen as something unavoidable and irreversible that has to go on at all cost, the notion which clearly obsessed Blake, and we find it in at least two of his 'Proverbs of Hell'" (86). For Lewis, the journey of the soul involves an either/or with respect to good and evil, a fork in the road, a divergence that leads to ever greater difference in the destination. The "disastrous error" that Lewis notes about Blake, concerns a dispute about which spatial scheme best describes moral and ontological categories. Lewis therefore incarnates the metaphor behind the word error, as wandering off the path, embodied several times in the story, as well as the biblical idea of "The Lost," who wander through a disorienting hell, and are lost.

Lewis attempts to show, in contrast to Blake, that hell is pathetic: that evil in its ultimate disposition is not the sublime, grand, epic, heroic, energetic, necessary force of strength and "progression" that Blake represents it to be. Blake sees sublimity in hell, and indeed, he finds this immense sublimity of hell in the landscape of Milton's book.⁷ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* offers itself as

⁷ In Blake's poem titled *Milton*, he offers an inspiring picture of Milton descending to hell, and joining in the selfhood of Satan, in the poetic effort to imagine the place of hell:

I will go down to the sepulcher to see if morning breaks!
I will go down to self annihilation and eternal death:
Lest the Last Judgment come & find me unannihilate
And I be seiz'd & giv'n into the hands of my own Selfhood.
The Lamb of God is seen thro' mists & shadows, hov'ring
Over the sepulchers in clouds of Jehovah & winds of Elohim,

a vision of the material universe, full of colour; Scott Hess characterizes Blake's representation as "vertiginously shifting landscapes [...] in which a constantly transforming environment generates an equally dynamic and unstable self" (30). For Blake, the religious perspective is the one that lacks the colour of life,⁸ being accused of becoming pitifully "passive", and maintaining a "pale religious / lechery [...] that wishes, / but acts not!" (27.18-20). Evil is the energy that moves things and develops people into more impressive, capable, and interesting versions of themselves: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction / and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and / Hate, are necessary to Human existence" (3.7-9). Blake's aesthetic and conceptual scope results in a spatially vast palimpsest of images throughout *The Marriage*. In one of the "Memorable Fancy" passages, Blake suggests this desire to see the vast universe in its infinity: "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern" (14.17-21). His visionary aspires to eternal mountaintops; in one vision, the human speaker flies through the planets:

I by force suddenly caught him in my arms, and flew westerly through the night, till we were elevated above the earth's shadow; then I flung myself with him directly into the body of the sun; here I clothed myself in white, and taking in my hand Swedenborg's volumes, sunk from the glorious clime, and passed all the planets till we came to Saturn. Here I stayed to rest, and then leaped into the void between Saturn and the fixed stars. (19.17-27)

The energetic surveyor of the cosmos in Blake's text considers pride and evil to be essential energies that make this voyager able to persuade angels to become devils, and account for the essential parts of human activity and infinite condition. Lewis sees pride and evil as achieving different effects in an extrapolated afterlife, spatially conceived: an infinite colourless, grey town that is flat and wretched as can be imagined, with people spread out over an abyss of flatness because they have no love for their neighbour.

Hell in *The Great Divorce* is an "infinite abyss" that can "fill the whole field of vision", and a grey city spread over "million[s] of square miles" (13.112,

A disk of blood, distant; & heav'ns & earth's roll dark between.
What do I here before the Judgment? without my Emanation?
With the daughters of memory, & not with the daughters of inspiration?
I in my Selfhood am that Satan. I am that Evil One!
He is my Spectre! in my obedience to loose him from my Hells,
To claim the Hells, my Furnaces, I go to Eternal Death. (1.14.21-32)

⁸ E.g., "Let the Priests of the Raven of Dawn, no longer in deadly black, with hoarse note curse the Sons of Joy" (*Marriage* 27.14-16).

2.22). Here is an echo of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, in which a "Guide" tells John in *The Pilgrim's Regress* that evil is "fissiparous," and its darkness is based on a diffusive "vermicular will," which eternally fragments itself in a way that eats at its own substance (X.4.180). Such is the ghosts' experience of hell in *The Great Divorce*. Hell is paradoxically smaller than one single apple from heaven. The dreamer's *in medias res* entrance into this presence of absence is radically disorienting. Any kind of building can be thought of and constructed instantly by the mind, but the sinews and cornerstones are crafted out of the loosest abstractions and feelings, as the Intelligent Ghost discusses. Nothing can keep out the rain, and the degree of "presence" of any one thing is "nothing", while it might be a huge building in the "Empire style" (2.20). Everything seems curiously undifferentiated: "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" (1.13). The setting appears modern and industrial, with "dingy lodging houses, small tobacconists, hoardings from which posters hung in rags, windowless warehouses, goods stations without trains" (1.13), and the dreamer adds, "fields, rivers, or mountains I did not see" (2.19).⁹ This place is urbanism at its most insipid, like Claptrap in *Pilgrim's Regress*, the "magnificent city" that is really a "flat plain without any trees [and] a huge collection of corrugated iron huts, most of which seemed rather old and rusty" (II.1.22).

Later in *The Great Divorce*, we learn that many ghosts implore the blessed spirits to enact what might be called eco-spiritual destruction: "to dam the river, cut down the trees, kill the animals, build a mountain railway, smooth out the horrible grass and moss and heather with asphalt" (9.71). Inhabitants of hell suppose themselves powerful enough to destroy spiritual nature, but the nature here retains too much substance.¹⁰ In the bus ride, the passengers get over a towering cliff, and then they arrive in purgatory; but at the same time, this cliff is just a crack in the soil. The dreamer utters in disbelief: "Do you mean then that Hell—all that infinite empty town—is down in some little crack like this?" (13.112). Another inhabitant of hell muses that "time's sort of odd here" and that the passengers had taken centuries, "of our time," to get to a bus stop (2.19).

⁹ Barbara Kowalik discusses how *The Great Divorce* speaks to images of post-war desolation, and other poets who portray disagreeable metropolitan spaces of "stony rubbish," with "windowless and therefore empty warehouses and goods stations without trains seem to reflect suspended life as it may have looked like in many post-war towns" (80).

¹⁰ Joshua Richardson explains Lewis's vision of nature as that which should be engaged harmoniously and with acclimation rather than power and technological reshaping (88-93). Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara emphasize *The Great Divorce's* "Christian ecology" as a contrast to an "antinature" impulse of hell (144).

Someone in hell already took 15,000 “hell years” of travel to visit Napoleon in hell, even though he died little more than 120 years before Lewis wrote this narrative. Hell is a place of lost time, a place of choices already made, so they bear no weight, and do not need time or urgent will to transpire. Hell is a place of paradox, large from the inside; but meaningless, and therefore weightless and tiny in “spiritual terms.”

Curiously, within the context of *The Great Divorce*, the idea of “mapping hell” quantitatively, or pointing to a static geography, is shown to be absurd. It is on this point that Wicher rightly notes that Lewis diverges from Dante’s objective metaphysical structure of hell (96). Many ghosts arrive in Lewis’s purgatory to try and describe hell, not in terms of symbolic geography, but based on maps, charts, and notebooks: “All alike [...] were wholly unreliable, and all equally incurious about the country in which they had arrived” (9.70-71). According to the MacDonald character, the “curious wish to describe Hell turned out, however, to be only the mildest form of a desire very common among the Ghosts—the desire to *extend* Hell, to bring it bodily, if they could, into Heaven” (9.71). However, such ghosts merely reflect their own sad states because the mind cut off from the source of Nature can only abuse the substance of spatiotemporal reality. As the bus is ascending out of hell, the narrator observes hell from another perspective, and with the introduction of colour, hell is invisible, or at least just an abyss: “The greyness outside the windows turned from mud-colour to mother of pearl, then to faintest blue, then to a bright blueness that stung the eyes. We seemed to be floating in a pure vacancy. There were no lands, no sun, no stars in sight: only the radiant abyss” (2.24). In one breath, hell is an infinite land; but in the next, from a heavenly perspective, there are no lands to show; the symbols of colour and size here coalesce to show a contrast in substance between the dungeon-mind and reality, or hell and heaven.¹¹ When speaking of the smallness of hell, the MacDonald persona ponders what “the Lord” said to the medieval mystic, Lady Julian “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well” (13.113). Julian’s *Divine Showings* presents her asking for a sight of hell, but she is given nothing to see other than Christ’s passion (as in vision 33), whereas when she asks for revelations of heaven, she is given expansive vistas (as in vision 57)—one is spatially non-existent, and the other is spatially vast, in an aesthetic representation of spiritual substantiality. MacDonald, in the anthology mentioned earlier (and in the character of Lewis’s tale), proposes that “every

¹¹ Michael Raiger considers Lewis to have “transposed the spatial understanding of the modern conception of the universe into the spiritual dimensions of Hell in order to effect the sense of terror and evacuation of form that arises in the contemplation of the vast emptiness of space” (114).

state of mind, left to itself, every shutting up of the creature within the dungeon of its own mind—is, in the end, Hell” (*GD* 63, cf. *GM* 49). The human mind depends on nature, and is not itself the source of nature, so its spatiotemporal realities have a shoddy claim to upholding the pillars of materiality.

In one of Lewis’s short stories, “The Shoddy Lands,” an unsuspecting narrator realizes he is trapped in a distorted mind, giving a bitter edge to his pun, “Where the hell?” (107). The unique twist of this tale is that one person is trapped in the mind-dungeon of another person; in this tale, the mind is that of an instrumental and vain girl, resulting in *shoddy lands*, but with “shops first-class” (108). The girl is only capable of seeing with high resolution those things pertaining to her interests and possession. The symbolism of this land, with its colourlessness, flatness, distorted distances, and ugliness is like the Grey Town of *The Great Divorce*:

I was not in darkness, nor even in twilight, but everything seemed curiously blurred. There was a sort of daylight, but when I looked up I didn’t see anything that I could very confidently call a sky. It might, just possibly, be the sky of a very featureless, dull, grey day, but it lacked any suggestion of distance. “Nondescript” was the word I would have used to describe it. Lower down and closer to me, there were upright shapes, vaguely green in colour, but of a very dingy green. (105)

The unsettling setting of this short story echoes *The Great Divorce*’s conviction that minds cut off from the creator of Nature lose their spatiotemporal presence and substance, and therefore their beauty, alterity, and reality to human perception. The extreme contrast of the heavens to the rest of reality is offered again in a similar manner when Ransom drops into Malacandra from the “fields of heaven” in *Out of the Silent Planet*: “Suddenly the lights of the Universe seemed to be turned down. As if some demon had rubbed the heaven’s face with a dirty sponge, the splendour in which they had lived for so long blenched to a pallid, cheerless and pitiable grey. [...] Nothing in all his adventures bit so deeply into Ransom’s mind as this” (6.39-40). The difference between heaven and earth is devastating in contrast, and even in *The Great Divorce*, the quotidian colourless realities are what meet the dreamer as he awakens from his dream of purgatory: “I awoke in a cold room, hunched on the floor beside a black and empty grate, the clock striking three, and the siren howling overhead” (14.118). Here, as in Lewis’s other stories, the contrast of heaven with the rest of reality pertains to a reduction of substance, presence, and colour.

Accordingly, the purgatory or Lower Heaven of *The Great Divorce* is contrasted with hell, especially in terms of spatial attributes:

I got out. The light and coolness that drenched me were like those of summer morning, early morning a minute or two before the sunrise, only that there was a certain difference. 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. I had got 'out' in some sense which made the Solar System itself seem an indoor affair. [...] [T]he solitude was so vast that I could hardly notice the knot of phantoms in the foreground. Greenness and light had almost swallowed them up. But very far away I could see what might be either a great bank of cloud or a range of mountains. Sometimes I could make out in it steep forests, far-withdrawing valleys, and even mountain cities perched on inaccessible summits. (3.26, 28-29)

Lower Heaven is not only a larger space, but a larger sort of space, and Lewis prepares the reader for many following discussions through the alterity and preternatural solidity of this symbolic landscape. In a particularly astute essay, Colin Manlove traces how Lewis's "belief that 'all is new' [...] explains this variety. For him, all images are only shadows of the truth. [...] [W]e find Lewis using a 'technique,' if so it may be called, of dislocation. By literally 'dis-locating' us" Lewis "keeps us moving perhaps 'farther up and farther in' through image after image" to evoke different shades of beauty and potential longing (276). This heavenly land is glorious, wider than imaginable, bathed in complex light, and so suffused with colour that it is not fully perceptible. As opposed to flatness, the mountains appear impossibly high.

Like hell, this land is incredibly unrealistic; Lewis stretches language very far before he resorts to a *topos* of inexpressibility. This is the land of the eternal present. Its place is different in proportion to the difference of its time quality *in aevo*. In the preface to *The Great Divorce*, Lewis notes the inspiration he received from a story about a man who went into the past, and found that raindrops could pierce you like bullets, because the past cannot be altered. In the same way, the "weight" of eternal decisions is an inescapable reality bearing down on all who dwell in purgatory. Divine presence exists in the present. As one angel says in the story, "All days are present now. [...] [T]his moment contains all moments" (11.91). "There is no meantime," as one Bright Spirit says of the new spatiotemporal context (5.39). The land exemplifies "the mimicry of choices made long ago" as well as "anticipations of a choice to be made in the future" (14.116). The MacDonald-guide asserts at the end of the book that the essence of temporality is freedom to choose, and this land is a lens that contains eternity (13.115). In hell, the self is the only guarantor of decision, and therefore, everything is weightless, thought bubbles and ghost whispers. Decisions in hell lack weight, and only remain on the plain of thought. Nature has already

relinquished the body of all human creatures. But the moment that one of the ghosts makes the decision to travel further in the direction of reality, they become more real, more solid, and more spiritual. The ghost rises to the occasion of the spiritual land, and becomes more real, undergoing a “thickening treatment” (11.83). On the other hand, the ghosts of hell “have sunk to the level of their surroundings” (1.16), as the Touse-Headed Poet explains.

Charles Williams’s *Descent into Hell* was published almost a decade before *The Great Divorce*, and much like the Grey Town, this narrative offers a representation of hell that highlights its smallness, banality, and diminishing colour. He proposes a paradox of a small hell, which still appears to be an infinite underworld from the inside: the hellish character Lily Sammille says that she could “live in a nutshell and count myself king of infinite space” (*Descent into Hell* [DIH] XI.206). An entrance to Battle Hill, which Lily looks into, is “dark inside and very long and narrow and deep. Its floor slid away, hundreds of yards downward. There was no end to that floor. [...] [T]he occupiers of the broken-up graves were with her. They were massed, mostly, about the doorway; in the narrow space there was room for infinities” (XI.206). *Descent* involves a few characters who have a downward and inward trajectory — to hell; they open the door and shut the gate on themselves: “where many go in who choose themselves, the gate of Gomorrah in the Plain, illusion and the end of illusion; the opposite of holy fact, and the contradiction of sacred love” (XI.203). Williams’s idea of holy, substantial fact is consonant with *The Great Divorce*’s representation of the land of heaven as the one of dispelled illusions, and the place of “Eternal fact, the Father of all other facthood” (*GD* 5.42). Lewis’s statement in his preface that earth, “if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself” (Preface.8), is exceedingly similar to Peter Stanhope’s statement that “[w]hen all’s said and done there’s only Zion or Gomorrah” (*DIH* IX.174-75). Lewis shares a similar representation of time as Williams, with the descending characters pausing for “centuries” without any perceptible change. Lillith, the *genius loci* of hell, senses that she is being “squeezed” out of time, “out of the pressure of the universal present” (V.89). The universal present is present at Battle Hill, at its most real, most heavenly, and the story relates a particular time when there is “an increase in luminous power; forms stood out more sharply, voices were heard more clearly. There seemed to be a heightening of capacity, within and without” (VIII.137). Williams treats Battle Hill as a place of incredible convergence and preternatural facticity, like Lewis’s Lower Heaven, where even the gentle hill is a presage of mountains leading to heaven in the vision of Margaret Anstruther: “The earth itself seemed to lie in each of those mountains, and on each there was at first a populous region towards the summit, but the summit itself rose

individual and solitary. Mountains or modes of consciousness, peaks or perceptions, they stood" (IV.71). The mountains in *Descent*, as in *The Great Divorce*, represent infinite possibility and higher vantages of complex insight, symbolically opposite from the darkness of perception in the abysses and ruined towns inhabited by floundering shades.

As one surveys the conversations throughout Lewis's story, one gets an increasing sense of the importance of understanding that *place* has a certain kind of reality and divine presence, an idea that might be of eternal importance. To take the spiritual substance out of place is to destroy one's own soul. There is one ghost, a bishop no less, who does not realize he is in hell, and mocks his friend for "believing in a literal heaven and hell" (GD 5.36). Hell is not a place of torment, but a place of narcissism and confirmation bias, which this ghost enjoys so much, he calls it heaven. He is so disoriented that he does not understand where he stands. He utterly refuses to travel anywhere, and will only engage questions of the mind because he believes that truth is abstract, the kingdom of God is "broad and far," and even hell is a "field for indefinite progress" (V.43, 36). He believes that spiritual beliefs can be summarized as "speculative questions", and a desire for "real" things is a "hankering after matter" (V.41, 24). When he states that he would like to come to an "atmosphere of inquiry" (V.40), he does not mean that he is willing to travel to a new place with a new, real atmosphere, of a world that is the answer to inquiry. The ghost understands his phrases only as metaphors, as he understands "spiritual reality" only as a series of metaphors for psychological states. The conversation in this chapter involves differently understood versions of words, such as "exist," "there," "progress," "in," "travel," "spiritual city," "atmosphere," "supreme," "heaven," "retrogressive," "finality," "end," "error," and "repent". All these words have a more candid spatial meaning in addition to their metaphorical usage. In each case, the ghost means the word one way, as a metaphor, and Dick, the Bright Spirit, notes that the word is also spatial, and substantially so. God *is* "there"; there *is* finality in a journey and an *end* that must substantially be trodden by the will in a land that is real, beyond the nature of abstraction: "I will bring you to the land not of questions but of answers" (V.40). The ghost says that to travel hopefully is better to arrive, and he means the phrase in the metaphorical sense as pertaining to interesting thought; but the bright spirit repeats several times that spiritual travel is necessary, in the physical sense. At one point of the conversation, the Episcopal ghost says, "[r]eligious and speculative questions are surely on a different level." "We know nothing of religion here [...]: We know nothing of speculation. Come and see" (V.42). Of course, *level* is a spatial metaphor, and the Latin word *speculum* pertains to the object of the looking glass or telescope, which facilitates bodily

sight; hence, the ghost is invited to *come*, and *see*. However, the Episcopal ghost insists on being locked in the dungeon of his own mind.

Another conversation in the story relates to the question of whether it is worth paying attention to what could be in new places, and whether there might be anything genuinely new, beautiful, good, or of value. The conversation is between the dreamer and a Hard-Bitten Ghost who distinguishes himself based on his wide travels. He even extends his credibility by noting that he has come to Purgatory only to see what all the fuss was about. As the dreamer asks about the stereotypically cultured, magnificent places that the man has been to, he assesses them with an unenthusiastic “[n]othing to it. Just one darn wall inside another. Just a trap for tourists. I’ve been pretty well everywhere. Niagara Falls, the Pyramids, Salt Lake City, the Taj Mahal [...]” (7.51). The dreamer remains curious about the places, but the Hard-Bitten Ghost’s mind has led him to lose interest. He declares that atlases and maps do not point out meaningful differences between places because they are prepared by the powerful with questionable motives. In other words, according to this man, no beneficent or even happy spiritual presence fills any places in the world. This ghost’s bitterness makes him doubt everyone’s intentions, and makes him negate concepts like love, hope, and perseverance in the face of suffering. In the previous chapter, desire leads the dreamer and another ghost to make some progress across the landscape, even though they are checked by the physical pain and danger; for the Hard-Bitten Ghost there is no point in going on a pilgrimage because nothing good is in the destination. An assumption he holds deeply is that people are out to get him, and they have no love for him, and his being used and taken advantage of in life continues into the afterlife. The mental abuse he has suffered renders him unable to see substantive difference between places. He has seen a pattern of malign powers, a nameless powerful “they” who rule not only the world, but the whole universe: “‘But who are They? This might be run by someone different?’ ‘Entirely new management, eh? Don’t you believe it! It’s never a new management. You’ll always find the same old Ring’” (7.51). The “inner ring” that rules the world is not good, according to the ghost. There is no reason to travel anywhere, because there are no loving or joyful presences. The dreamer concludes, “There doesn’t seem to be much point in going anywhere on your showing” (7.52).

There is a medieval belief about presence that Lewis discusses in parts of *The Discarded Image*. The heavens are not empty; they are full of God’s presence and creations. This conviction, for Lewis and his medieval predecessors, impacts what kind of place it is.¹² The heavens are more solid than

¹² Steven Jensen highlights another passage of *The Discarded Image*, which provides an extremely salutary angle on how Lewis is not wholly medieval, and shares some aesthetic

humans; humans are too soft and insubstantial to be able to fly through or traverse the empyrean, which is made of divine substance. Similarly, in *The Great Divorce*, the land of Lower Heaven is full of life, to the extent that human presences are “man-shaped stains on the brightness of that air,” whereas “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” (3.27). This passage exemplifies and commends the idea of Genius and the *genius loci*. One of Lewis’s lesser-known essays is entitled “The Empty Universe,” and it enthusiastically presents the idea of the *genius loci* as a counterpoint to the lifeless, hellish conception of the universe, as Lewis sees it. A highly applicable, longer, excerpt is quoted here:

At the outset the universe appears packed with will, intelligence, life and positive qualities; every tree is a nymph and every planet a god. Man himself is akin to the gods. The advance of knowledge gradually empties this rich and genial universe: first of its gods, then of its colours, smells, sounds and tastes, finally of solidity itself as solidity was originally imagined. As these items are taken from the world, they are transferred to the subjective side of the account: classified as our sensations, thoughts, images or emotions. The Subject becomes gorged, inflated, at the expense of the Object. But the matter does not rest there. The same method which has emptied the world now proceeds to empty ourselves. [...] We, who have personified all other things, turn out to be ourselves mere personifications. Man is indeed akin to the gods: that is, he is no less phantasmal than they. Just as the Dryad is a “ghost”, an abbreviated symbol for all the facts we know about the tree foolishly mistaken for a mysterious entity over and above the facts, so the man’s “mind” or “consciousness” is an abbreviated symbol for certain verifiable facts about his behaviour: a symbol mistaken for a thing. (103-4)

This passage has such an unsubtle salience to *The Great Divorce*: a narrative with a hell that has lost its colours, smells, sound, taste, and solidity, a dream filled with humans who have become personifications, subjects who cannot come towards real objects, and a story with phantasmal “ghosts” who have committed substance abuse to symbolic geography. A renewed appreciation and attention to genius is, if not feasible to effect in the modern mind, at least a window into understanding Lewis’s sources and narratives.

predilections with nineteenth-century Romanticism: “Lewis suggests that the medieval model is, ‘for those of us who have known Romanticism, a shade too ordered. For all its vast spaces it might in the end afflict us with a kind of claustrophobia. Is there nowhere any vagueness? No undiscovered byways? No twilight? Can we never really get out of doors?’” (16).

The genius *generates* reality, intimately connected to the filling of place with substance and presence. In *Miracles*, Lewis proposes Genius as

only another mask for the God of Israel, for it was He who at the beginning commanded all species 'to be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth'. And now, that day, at the feeding of the thousands, incarnate God does the same: does close and small, under His human hands, a workman's hands, what He has always been doing in the seas, the lakes and the little brooks. (141)

Local genii are dependent on the overall process of generation that God is up to at large in the world, filling the world with presence and substance of, first, a spiritual nature, and consequently, a physical nature as well. The topic of the *genius loci* is of some importance to Lewis throughout his writings,¹³ and crucial to understanding the full implications and context of chapter six and eleven of *The Great Divorce*. "Genius" can refer to the god of generation, or the "tutelary spirit, or 'external soul', of an individual man," or the spirit of a place, as Lewis notes in an essay on the subject in *The Allegory of Love* (361).

Genius is a word with roots in pagan Rome, referring to spirits who express personhood; they also occupy certain places, and in some way, give places their feel and their power. Christians did not fully discard this idea, and in the Middle Ages, the *genii loci* were sometimes thought of as angels, sometimes as souls given by God, or they were seen as metaphors for the kinds of ideas associated with certain places.¹⁴ Lewis's enthusiasm for the idea reappears in the final chapter of *The Discarded Image*, a book concerning what has been lost from the Medieval paradigm:

¹³ In addition to the sources mentioned in the main discussion here, one should consider *The Four Loves*, where Lewis highlights that the "love of nature" pertains to "'moods of time and season', the 'spirit' of the place. [...] It is the 'moods' or the 'spirit' that matter" (30). In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, different character temperaments and associations from different eras of the past are found clustered in associated places. The main "Interpreter" character of the story (History) explains that he can orient John the pilgrim because he understands the nature of *genii loci*: "'I know all parts of this country,' said the hermit, 'and the genius of places'" (VIII.7.143).

¹⁴ Jane Chance's *The Genius Figure in Antiquity and The Middle Ages* is a classic study that explores these transformations at length. D.T. Starnes' "Figure of the Genius in the Renaissance" explains transformations to the concept for understanding Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, which Lewis also wrote about. Hess, quoted earlier in this essay, has excellent discussions of the *genius loci* concept for Romantic writers like William Wordsworth. St. Augustine's *City of God* has the most important *locus classicus* of the Christian interrogation of the concept, which received an important commentary in the Renaissance from J.L. Vives.

In this great change something has been won and something lost. I take it to be part and parcel of the same great process of Internalisation which has turned genius from an attendant *daemon* into a quality of the mind. Always, century by century, item after item is transferred from the object's side of the account to the subject's. And now, in some extreme forms of Behaviourism, the subject himself is discounted as merely subjective; we only think that we think. Having eaten up everything else, he eats himself up too. And where we 'go from that' is a dark question. (214-5)

As dark as hell, it would seem. The mind and the subject, by itself, grows dimmer and dimmer, so that the person becomes a personification, like the grumbler becomes a grumble in *The Great Divorce*, and in an analogous manner to the genius eventually becoming a personification rather than a presence in the worldview of pre-Enlightenment Europe.

The relevance of this topic for understanding *The Great Divorce* should be highlighted all the more because Blake's *Marriage* castigates the religions of men for deceiving themselves by putting genii into places, when all along the spirits were just their own hearts. For Blake, man is already an infinity, and his genius is within, in the more modern sense of the word.¹⁵ For Blake, the process is the reverse from Lewis's: men always knew that the genius was simply in their own hearts, but ordained worship of the genius until "the vulgar" were "enslaved" and "men forgot that all deities reside in the human breast" (11.1-17). Blake writes that gods were infused into sensible objects and locations like "woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations" and "particularly they studied the Genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity" (11.3-4, 6-7). For Blake, people are diminished in their subjectivity for externalizing their gods into *genii loci*; but Lewis believes that people are diminished in their subjectivity for internalizing their gods and genii.

There are several *genii loci* in *The Great Divorce*,¹⁶ with extended representations in chapters six and eleven; these expressions of divine place serve as powerful counterpoints to the hellish urban landscape, and are especially hard on the ghosts with which they come in agentic contact. The dreamer encounters a waterfall cascading with so much ebullience, heaviness, and plenitude that the experience "would normally exceed [his senses'] capacity. On earth, such a waterfall could not have been perceived at all as a

¹⁵ In *Studies in Words*, Lewis offers a brief discussion of the word *wit/ingenium* morphing into their more recent appropriations of "genius" (89-96).

¹⁶ Sarah Smith is first perceived by the dreamer to be a river (12.96-97). The story ends with a slightly terrifying beatific vision of "ten thousand tongues of men and woodland angels and the wood itself" singing (12.117).

whole; it was too big. Its sound would have been a terror in the woods for twenty miles" (6.45). The sound is numinous, strange, and preternaturally communicative. Ultimately, it articulates itself in English with "a thunderous yet liquid voice. With an appalling certainty I knew that the waterfall itself was speaking; and I saw now (though it did not cease to look like a waterfall) that it was also a bright angel who stood, like one crucified, against the rocks and poured himself perpetually down towards the forest with loud joy" (6.48). The waterfall is natural, real, a little like an enormous angel, and a little like the crucified Christ; this *genius loci* highlights the difference in spatial destiny at play: "There is not room for [the apple] in Hell" (6.48). The water communicates spiritual joy, and offers nourishment to the surrounding trees, even as it is a bombastic and fulsome terror. Nature, here, has a voice, and has more personality and wisdom than the Ghost in the Bowler Hat; it/he/she is tasked with instructing the insubstantial creature: "The very leaves and the blades of grass in the wood will delight to teach you" (6.48). The amalgamated divine-natural waterfall is endowed with communicative and redemptive properties. This scene is a rather full Christianization of the idea of *genius loci*; the place is natural, and geographically expressed; but it gives the feel of an angel, and finally it is transmuted to Christ Himself. This place reveals the omnipresence of God, spiritually, in the land, which literally and locally speaks, here.

In chapter 11, the spirit of the land becomes a horse for a transforming ghost to ride into the mountains, or higher stages of heaven. If the geography of hell causes ghosts to "sink to the level of their surroundings," the geography of "the High Countries" asks persons to "rise to the occasion"; in the context of *The Great Divorce*, these phrases are not idle metaphors, but substantial symbols. The genius of the place where the sensualist becomes a full person cooperates with his will, enabling him to travel across the land, in a cooperation of intent of celebration with "the voice of that earth, those woods and those waters": "The Nature or Arch-nature of that land rejoiced to have been once more ridden, and therefore consummated, in the person of the horse" (11.94). The land here cooperates with, is both obstacle and teacher for the ghost who must overcome his lusts to have a deeper kind of desire; the whole framework of the land changes as he becomes able to traverse it: "At each stamp the land shook and the trees dwindled," and "impossible steeps" are climbed, ultimately (11.93-94). The journey out of the self, and into reality, involves the lessons and the inspiration, and, frankly, the suffering that natural landscapes can induce. Lewis states that the peculiar Nature (or Arch-nature) of this land (i.e., its spatiotemporal framework) sings: "From beyond all place and time, out of the very Place, authority will be given you: the strengths that once opposed your will shall be obedient fire in your blood and heavenly thunder in your voice" (11.94-95). The capitalization of "Place" alludes to the omnipresence of God that comes from a

preceding and super-natural land—is substantially *more* spatial in some mystery—than the spatial realities of lower earth. These spatial realities need not only be “natural” landscapes and gardens, as Lewis also seems worried about people emptying spiritual interest from historical and cultural expressions that fill the Taj Mahal, Peking, and The Pyramids, as evidenced in the conversation with the Hard-Bitten Ghost. The Place of the Genius endows a spiritual presence in all (lower case p) places with their individual genii.

For Lewis, the cooperation of heaven comes in the form of such a horse-genius, whereas when “[h]ell offer[s] her cooperation,” it involves despoliation of the landscape and its presences, with a reduction in colour and moral effort required to travel (9.71). Planning Ghosts “implored [the inhabitants of heaven] to dam the river, cut down the trees, kill the animals, build a mountain railway, smooth out the horrible grass and moss and heather with asphalt” (9.71). Accordingly, the proposed extension of hell into Lower Heaven involves a destruction of presence and a removal of substance, a “tear[ing] down [of the] mountains” (9.71), a flattening of the symbolic geography, a replacement of complexity and danger with a grey monotony. Lewis offers a blatant aesthetic judgment on modern cities by having hell expressed by urban features at their worst; cities are full of people and are full of human subjectivity (and substance abuse, incidentally), but not the wild landscapes created by direct ordinance. Overall, *The Great Divorce* presents landscapes that provide glimpses of heaven or hell based on two opposite understandings of “realistic”: the quotidian, boring, dull, and cold realism,¹⁷ and the overwhelming, glorious, hyper-sensory, Realism. The conversation events throughout the text reveal two opposing theories about landscape: one theory is that the landscapes representing heaven and hell are strictly metaphors, and all places are substantially alike, while the other theory implies that all landscapes are replete with peculiar spiritual presence and truth, and are suffused with divine intention. A number of Lewis’s stories speak to the issue of the mind reducing the substance of the landscape to hell, to avoid being trapped in “the dungeon of self [...] instead of issuing to the fair sunlight of God” (Macdonald 50, #49).



¹⁷ This option is rather like the “realism” advocated by Wormwood in entries #1 and #30 of *The Screwtape Letters*.

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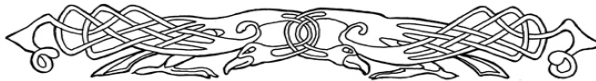
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