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Imagining Heaven: Assessing Lewis's Romantic Revisions of Dante's Comedy

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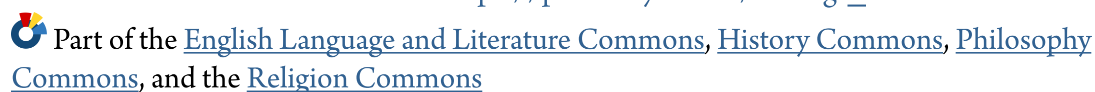
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Steven Jensen

After his purifying ascent up the mountain of Purgatory to the original earthly paradise of Adam and Eve, Dante the Pilgrim suddenly finds himself disoriented once again. His new guide Beatrice explains to him that "'thou art not on earth as thou thinkest, but lightning flying from its own place never ran so fast as thou returnest to thine'" (*Paradiso* 23). Thus liberated from earth, Dante will spend book three of *The Divine Comedy*, the *Paradiso*, soaring upwards through the planetary spheres until he arrives beyond time and space in the Empyrean, the final resting place of the saints. There, seated in spiritual hierarchy in a kind of giant floral amphitheater, the blessed spend their eternity in contemplation and adoration of the triune God.

C. S. Lewis's understanding of Heaven is doubly indebted to that of Dante. First, the *Divine Comedy* serves as a direct literary influence on Lewis, whose novel *The Great Divorce*, for instance, is really a self-conscious retelling of the *Comedy*. Second, and more indirectly, Lewis's imagination was consistently nourished by his grasp of the medieval cosmos, a cosmos he lucidly characterizes in his critical work *The Discarded Image*. For all the influences and similarities between the ways Dante and Lewis imagined Heaven, however, the differences between their visions are perhaps even more significant. And if Lewis often succeeds in rendering Heaven intelligible and attractive to modern sensibilities, his portrayals sometimes bump up against limitations of their own.

My own reactions to Lewis's literary Heaven have mirrored those of Joyce Little, who was grateful for Lewis "ending one of his Chronicles of Narnia with a picture of Heaven not as the annihilation of this universe but as its transformation—containing in their perfection all of the things of the world that we love" (101). Dante's more astronomical Heaven—at least in the short anthology excerpts in which I initially encountered it—seemed comparatively cold, static, and deficient in earthly beauty. Subsequent reading of Dante's work in its entirety has corrected many of my oversimplified responses to his rich and complex vision, but for the most part Lewis's revisions still render Heaven more attractive to my own sensibilities, and I suspect to those of most other moderns as well.

In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis confesses that the medieval model of the cosmos that he describes "delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors" (216). Nonetheless, he takes issue theologically or aesthetically with the model at several key points. For one, Lewis explains that Dante's passive characterization of God as "the love that moves the sun and the other stars" (485 *Paradiso*) derives primarily from Aristotle and is subtly "out of Harmony" (19) with a Christian conception of a God whose active grace seeks out the lost sheep. Dante himself bridges this disharmony by making his fallen main character the object of Beatrice's condescending grace, and she is obviously the prototype for the heavenly spirits in *The Great Divorce* who condescend to extend God's love and grace to the visiting ghosts from Hell. But Aslan in the Narnia Chronicles models a much more active and personal deity than is easily imaginable within the medieval model.

On an aesthetic level, 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?" (121). In Lewis's Heavens, by contrast, the redeemed do not have prior knowledge of what they will find when they move "further up and farther in," and their movement toward God takes on the feeling of an outdoor adventure. Dante's pilgrim takes only brief and passing notice of the natural beauty of earthly paradise at the summit of Purgatory, before departing Earth for heavenly pleasures more cerebral and serene, and little connected to the sensory beauty of earthly nature. In Lewis's post-Romantic Heaven, the sublimity of earthly nature is in every way intensified in Heaven, which proves to be the reality of which all such authentic beauty and longing is but a "shadow." And while Lewis elsewhere acknowledges that heaven is a "city" and a "society," (*Problem of Pain* 150), the heavens he imagines, including his Platonic conceptions of the "real" Narnia and England, are primarily experienced by the redeemed as natural landscapes rather than as redeemed societies.

Other adjustments in Lewis's heavens accommodate Romantic sensibilities as well. For instance, Dante's pilgrim, as he approaches the Empyrean, spends three full cantos being catechized concerning his intellectual grasp of the Christian doctrines of faith, hope, and love, as he models the purified intellect of the redeemed in the scholastic tradition. In *The Great Divorce*, the heavenly spirits argue with the visiting ghosts, not so much to indoctrinate them as to try to fan into flames the latent emotions and intuitions that might empower them to make the act of will necessary to overcome their sinful self-absorption and relinquish the self-consuming compensations of Hell for the self-transcending joys of Heaven. In *The Last Battle*, each creature called to judgment simply looks Aslan in the face and is judged by its visceral response. Thus the scholastic emphasis on intellect gives way to a more Romantic understanding of the locus of authentic faith.

Lewis also reacts against the medieval elevation of the contemplative over the active life, and his responses illuminate points of difficulty both in Dante's vision and in Lewis's. For both of them, it is of theological importance that the redeemed maintain their individual earthly identities in heaven. As Chesterton says, "No other philosophy makes God actually rejoice in the separation of the universe into living souls. But according to orthodox Christianity the separation between God and man is sacred, because this is eternal" (13). True, Dante's vigorous characters do retain their earthly identities in Heaven. Separation, however, can be a relative concept. What really remains of God's primary act of creative separation for characters whose existence culminates in a timeless eternity of static contemplation? We are assured that Dante's redeemed are never bored in their eternal rapture, but it is easy to imagine, say, Aslan becoming bored with creatures who manifest so little of the original unpredictability and exuberance of their original creative separation. At least from a human perspective, the queen of Perelandra or the first talking animals of Narnia are more interesting than the souls of Dante's Empyrean, who seem to have sublimated many aspects of their earthly humanity in their eternal contemplation.

As M. H. Abrams has pointed out, "in Romantic as well as Neoplatonic thought, division, separateness, externality,

isolation are equated with evil" (181), and life's journey tends to be imagined as a circuitous one back toward a lost primal unity with God, or at least with nature. Lewis resists this ideal of unity, in part, undoubtedly, because of his Christian orthodoxy, but also, I believe, because of the particular shape of his own Platonism. Lewis believed that "the pleasures on Earth are reflections of those in Heaven" (Honda 9), that "the hills and valleys of Heaven will be to those you now experience not as a copy is to an original, nor as a substitute is to the genuine article, but as the flower to the root, or the diamond to the coal" (*Letters* 123). This belief that genuine earthly beauty and pleasure are intimations of heavenly reality led Lewis to create a much more earthly Heaven than Dante, and to include pleasures of an active as well as contemplative nature. As Lewis points out in *Miracles*, "these small and perishable bodies we now have were given to us a ponies are given to schoolboys," and imagines our glorified heavenly bodies as valuable for "a gallop with the King" (169). And indeed, Heaven in *The Last Battle* is mostly experienced side by side rather than face to face with Aslan, who serves less as an object of contemplation than as guide to God's country, a place where the redeemed enjoy not primarily the presence of God so much as the joyful flexing of their own glorified humanity.

The activity of Lewis's Heaven raises another, related issue. Erich Auerbach celebrates Dante for focusing attention on the particularities of earthly existence, on "the narrow cleft of earthly human history, the span of a man's life on earth, in which the great and dramatic decision must fall," since in Dante's heaven "everything that happens below the Earth or in the heavens above relates to the human drama in this world" (132). In a Heaven without events, all that remains to characters is memory and desire—memory of earthly history and desire for God. The human story is completed and there will be no new stories to tell.

By contrast, Lewis ends his Chronicles of Narnia with the rousing assertion that all his characters' "life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story . . . which goes on forever" (184). The counter-example of Lewis's heaven does raise the question for Dante of whether we can really imagine a glorified human existence, or a perfected human community, beyond event and story, featuring love without acts of love or justice without acts of justice. Set alongside Lewis's heaven, Dante's sometimes bears uncomfortable resemblance to the purposeless underworld of his classical models, where Achilles complains about "the exhausted dead."

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine how Lewis's Heaven can sustain its own promise of endless narrative, as his characters continue "further up and farther in." Tellingly, while Dante takes his readers into the very heart of Heaven, Lewis never attempts to portray more than the first foothills. But will his characters ever reach a destination? Does their active life ever draw to a final rest? Can narrative really be sustained without evil, or danger, or adversity? On Malacandra Lewis had Maleldil create the *hnakra*, presumably to furnish his creatures with narrative interest. In the Narnia Chronicles, even the wasps are excluded from Heaven. It is hard to see how Lewis's Heaven could sustain anything like the kind of narrative interest that drives the previous adventures in Narnia.

The usual Romantic approach to theodicy is to posit a symbiotic relationship between good and evil. That approach

Lewis explicitly rejects, most directly in *Perelandra* and in *The Great Divorce*. But while Lewis is able to articulate the idea of an attractive and interesting narrative without evil or danger within his fiction, he never sustains such a narrative for long, and the difficulty of doing so may explain why his narratives of Heaven, unlike Dante's, always end at the foothills.

In many ways it is both easier and less satisfying to articulate a doctrine of Heaven than it is to create a picture that renders Heaven accessible to the imagination. Like Dante, Lewis is always cautious about his visions, warning readers of the inherent limitations and impossibilities of his task. Comparing his heaven with Dante's great vision surely confirms the difficulty of imagining human existence beyond time, beyond evil and danger, in a way that does not reduce either Heaven or Earth to a mere shadow of its intended glory, and that can somehow satisfy the longings and sensibilities of people as different as what separates us from Dante's medieval world.

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