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"Evil Enchantment" versus Platonic Vision: Dante, Lewis, and the Weight of Glory

Jason Baxter

C. S. Lewis devoted much of his life to trying to create a positive vision of ultimate goodness, one that inspired positive yearning. He was convinced that, in the modern world, goodness often strikes us as bland and diluted, a kind of spiritual neutral. What we need, especially in the modern world, he thought, is a positive vision of the good, a vision of beauties that "pierce like swords or burn like cold iron," as he once said of Tolkien's work.[1] We need a positive picture and we need to have positive desire, as opposed to thinking of goodness primarily in negative terms, as "not being bad." Lewis thought we need to have a sense of the gravity and heaviness and, even, viscosity , if I may, of goodness: in other words, we need to feel the "weight of glory," the title of his famous sermon. As I will argue in the remainder of this paper, no author taught him more about the gravity of goodness or the "weight of glory" than the medieval poet Dante Alighieri. Lewis probably derived the title of his sermon from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 4.17: "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." But, as I will show below,

[1] C. S. Lewis, "Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings,*" in *C. S. Lewis*: *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces,* ed. by Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 519. The review was first published in 1954 as "The Gods Return to Earth"in *Time and Tide*, 14 August 1954, 1082.

Lewis read Paul's "weight of glory" in light of Dante Alighieri's "troppo pondo."[2]

The Evil Enchantment of the Past One Hundred Years

Ironically, the vagueness of our feeling for goodness is a consequence of good theology. "[O]ur notion of Heaven," said Lewis in "Transposition," "involves perpetual negations; no food, no drink; no sex, no movement, no mirth, no events, no time, no art."[3] Although Christians do, of course, believe that seeing God will "outweigh" all earthly goods, Lewis worried that "our present notion" of the Beatific Vision cannot "outweigh our present notion" of the earthly goods we love:

> Thus, the negatives have, so to speak, an unfair advantage in every competition with the positive. What is worse, their presence—and most when we most resolutely try to suppress or ignore them—vitiates even such a faint and ghostlike notion of the positive as we might have had. The exclusion of the lower goods begins to seem the essential characteristic of the higher good. We feel, if we do not say, that the vision of God will come not to fulfill but to destroy our nature; this bleak fantasy often underlies our very use of such words as "holy" or "pure" or "spiritual."[4]

Although this undesired consequence of good theology could be a problem in any age, Lewis thought modern man was at a particular disadvantage. The Oxford don consistently used the metaphor of a bad spell, arguing that modernity had cast an "evil enchantment of wordliness" that makes the weight of goodness feel less substantial.[5] In fact, Lewis argued that there was a kind of historical chasm or gaping cultural canyon that separated modernity from anything that came before: what he called the

[2] *Paradiso* 25.39. For Dante's Italian text, see Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Commedia,* ed. by Anna Maria Chiavacci Leonardi, 3 vols. (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2000). For English translation, see Dante Alighieri, *Inferno,* trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), and Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso,* trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

[3] C. S. Lewis, "Transposition," in *Essay Collection,* 267-78 (274).

[4] Lewis, "Transposition," 275.

[5] C. S. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," in *Essay Collection,* 99.

"Great Divide."[6] The chasm is so great, Lewis speculated, that a pagan Roman (Virgil) and a medieval Christian (Gregory the Great) had more in common with one another than either does with a modern man.[7] This is, in part, because our image of the cosmos and our understanding of its operations are radically different from that of the pre-modern world. Our metaphors have changed: "The fundamental concept of modern science is, or was until very recently, that of natural 'laws.'. . . In medieval science the fundamental concept was that of certain sympathies, antipathies, and strivings inherent in matter itself."[8] Modern man speaks about how a falling rock obeys a law of nature; medieval man spoke of the rock as desiring or longing to return to its natural place, like a pigeon returning to its nest by a homing instinct. Pre-modern metaphors were animated; the cosmos seemed saturated with presence, soul, and being. In contrast, modern man prefers inorganic metaphors borrowed from the steady, unwavering movement of machines. Thus, when Lewis was writing about the Renaissance, he called it a period of "New Learning and New Ignorance," that is, the recovery of ancient documents overlapped with new scientific discoveries. However, such new learning put the old image of the cosmos to rest, bringing with it an insensitivity to the vitality of the world. Again, medieval man thought of the universe as an orchestra

> tingling with anthropomorphic life, dancing, ceremonial, a festival not a machine. It is very important to grasp this at the outset. If we do not, we shall constantly misread our poets by taking for highly conceited metaphor expressions which are still hardly metaphorical at all.[9]

For us, the term "mother earth" is a metaphor, but it is hardly a metaphor for the medieval mind: "[I]s she not a huge animal breathing out through the craters of mountains as if through mouth and nostrils?"[10]

[6] For more on this, see Dennis Danielson, "Intellectual Historian," in *Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis,* ed. by Robert McSwain and Michael Ward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43-58.

[7] C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," in *Selected Literary Essays,* ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-15 (5).

[8] C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (1964; Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 92.

[9] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 4.

[10] Lewis, *English Literature,* 4.

When the animate picture of the cosmos and the organic metaphors used to describe it passed away, two other changes followed. The first is that we began to imagine the sources of deep meaning were located within, not without. As Charles Taylor has put it, we "conceive of ourselves as having inner depths. We might even say that the depths which were previously located in the cosmos, the enchanted world, are now more readily placed within."[11] Lewis wrote about this displacement of meaning in his impassioned critique of modern education, *The Abolition of Man*. The schoolboy is taught that to say "that waterfall is sublime" means really, "I have sublime feelings about that waterfall." Thus, the schoolboy is silently led to believe two propositions: "that all sentences containing a predicate of value are statements about the emotional state of the speaker, and, secondly, that all such statements are unimportant."[12] In place of "training of sentiments," the modern educator teaches facts, factuality, and critical thinking skills. When depth migrates from the cosmos to the interior, education turns from "inculcat[ing] just sentiment" to "debunking" myths and sifting through facts.[13]

The second effect that follows upon discarding the old animate, ceremonial, and orchestral image of the cosmos is that our language becomes littered with dead metaphors. When deep meaning has departed, words become like the dead, dry husks left behind by molting cicadas. Lewis not only wrote scholarly reflections on the semantics of the dead metaphor, but he also loved to represent in his fiction such modern linguistic deadness.[14] He created several comic, fictional characters who embody this coldness. For instance, there is Uncle Andrew, who, even while witnessing the making of Narnia, can only speculate on how profitable the land could be for an entrepreneur. There is also Governor Gumpas from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Caspian, the young, idealistic king, rebukes the tired bureaucratic administrator for allowing the slave trade to exist on his island, but Gumpas replies with a string of hollow words:

[11] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2007), 540.

[12] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1944; New York: Touchstone, 1996), 18.

[13] Lewis, *Abolition,* 26-7.

[14] For Lewis's academic thoughts on dead metaphors, see "Bluspels and Flanasferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays,* 251-66; and "Introduction," in *Studies in Words* (1960; Cambridge: University Press, 2013), 1-23.

> 'An essential part of the economic development of the islands, I assure you. Our present burst of prosperity depends on it . . . Your Majesty's tender years . . . hardly make it possible that you should understand the economic problem involved. I have statistics, I have graphs, I have . . .'

Caspian interrupts:

> 'Tender as my years may be . . . I understand the slave trade from within quite as well as your Sufficiency. And I do not see that it brings into the islands meat or bread or beer or wine or timber or cabbages or books or instruments of music or horses or armor or anything else worth having. But whether it does or not, it must be stopped.'
>
> 'But that would be putting the clock back,' gasped the governor. 'Have you no idea of progress, of development?'[15]

Gumpas's speech is littered with abstractions and tired metaphors. He feels some bizarre and vague loyalty to the diluted goods of "development" and "economic necessity." Such hazy, bureaucratic business-think seems full of imperative urgency, but has no power to evoke and create love for real, concrete things, like Caspian's litany of practical goods.

In sum, Lewis believed that the modern world—with its mechanical view of the cosmos, its belief that deep meaning lies within, and its complacent use of desiccated language—is an environment in which the good does not feel substantial, a world in which there is no positive desire and longing. As he wrote in *The Abolition of Man,* "we make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. . . . We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."[16] Similarly, Lewis's close friend, Dorothy Sayers, in her essay "The Other Six Deadly Sins," described modern civilization as a place of peculiar deadness and coldness:

> The sixth Deadly Sin is named by the Church Acedia or Sloth. . . . It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and

[15] C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1950; New York: Harper Trophy, 1980), 58-9.

[16] Lewis, *Abolition,* 36-7.

only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for.[17]

For Sayers, *acedia* has become a fundamental characteristic of the modern age. From such a point of view, the modern world is anti-Platonic: rather than opening up desire and positive yearning for ultimate goodness, it suffocates that desire or tries to prevent it from awakening. This is the "evil enchantment" of the modern age.

"Pure Northernness"

But, as he later speculated in *Surprised by Joy*, it was Lewis's encounter with "joy," a peculiarly Platonic experience of longing invoked by an encounter with beauty, that saved him from the malaise of modernity.[18] In particular, he seems to have loved Plato's *Phaedrus.* For instance, he alludes to the dialogue in a letter to his father, written in 1915.[19] In that year, Lewis was studying with his private tutor, Mr. Kirkpatrick, to prepare for entrance into Oxford. The young scholar spent most of his day reading Latin and Greek texts: "After breakfast and a short walk we start work on Thucydides—a desperately dull and tedious Greek historian . . . and on Homer whom I worship. . . . At 5, we do Plato."[20] Six years later at Oxford (1921), Lewis recalls that after tea he liked to relax in the garden of his college, reading "a little of the good Plato."[21] And years later, in a letter to Arthur Greeves (1931), he wrote: "My memories of the *Phaedrus* are vague—mainly of the beautiful scene in which the discussion takes place and of the procession of the gods round the sky."[22]

The reference to the "procession of the gods round the sky" is to the elaborate myth within the *Phaedrus* that describes the shockingly painful beginnings of philosophy. Our souls, before they were born, served in the

[17] Dorothy Sayers, "The Other Six Deadly Sins," in *Creed or Chaos* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 81.

[18] See Adam Barkman, "Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy,*" in *C. S. Lewis's List: The Ten Books that Influenced Him Most,* ed. by David Werther and Susan Werther (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 113-34.

[19] Letter of 18 June 1915, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis,* ed. Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 1:130.

[20] Letter of 12 October 1915, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:145.

[21] A serial letter to his brother, March to April 1921, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:533.

[22] Letter of 8 November 1931, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 2:12.

retinue of gods, and, once a year, they would partake in a great, jubilant procession to a land, beyond the heavens, where something so beautiful dwells that it cannot be described in positive language: "The place beyond heaven—none of our earthly poets has ever sung or ever will sing its praises enough! . . . What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge."[23] But Plato says that in the joyful bustle of the procession, it sometimes happens that a soul loses control of its horses, and its vision is distracted from that ineffably beautiful thing. Because he is worried about crashing into his neighbor, he might only catch a glimpse of the good out of the corner of his eye. When the soul fails to draw in through the eyes the nourishing vision of the ineffably beautiful, then it doesn't have the strength to continue the journey. The wings of the soul wither and fall out, and the soul falls from heaven into this world and becomes embodied, largely forgetting what its earlier life was like with just traces of the memory remaining. And so, Plato concludes, when we see something beautiful in this world it causes us to recollect, vaguely, in a kind of metaphysical déjà vu, what we had once, longingly, gazed upon. The beautiful object triggers an overwhelming response, and the soul becomes dazed and confused:

> Only a few remain whose memory is good enough; and they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is they are seeing.[24]

For Lewis, it was this very Platonic desire that saved him. Although he had committed himself to atheism by the age of fourteen, he was continually haunted by Platonic experiences of aching, which he later referred to as Joy, or, along with his friend Tolkien, "Northernness." In a duly famous passage in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis later described such an experience that came over him when he was reading a volume of Norse myths, illustrated by Arthur Rackham:

> Pure 'Northernness' engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer,

[23] As found in Plato, *Plato: Complete Works,* ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 506-56 (247d).

[24] Plato, *Complete Works,* 527 (250b).

> remoteness, severity . . . and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago. . . . And with that plunge back into my own past there arose at once, almost like heartbreak, the memory of Joy itself, the knowledge that I had once had what I had now lacked for years, that I was returning at last from exile and desert lands to my own country; and the distance of the Twilight of the Gods and the distance of my own past Joy, both unattainable, flowed together into a single, unendurable sense of desire and loss, which suddenly became one with the loss of the whole experience, which, as I now stared round that dusty schoolroom like a man recovering from unconsciousness, had already vanished, had eluded me. . . . And at once I knew (with fatal knowledge) that to 'have it again' was the supreme and only important object of desire.[25]

Thus, there existed a war within the young Lewis's heart between those haunting experiences of Platonic Joy and the modern world's attempt to smother that voice within. It was a struggle that, years later, Lewis illustrated in a fascinating passage from his 1953 Narnia tale, *The Silver Chair*. Immediately after Puddleglum and the children have awakened the prince from his enchantment, the witch realizes she has one last opportunity to try to enslave them all by casting another spell:

> [T]he witch said nothing at all, but moved gently across the room. . . . [S]he took out a musical instrument rather like a mandolin. She began to play it with her fingers—a steady, monotonous thrumming that you didn't notice after a few minutes. But the less you noticed it, the more it got into your brain and your blood. This also made it hard to think. . . . After she had thrummed for a time . . . she began speaking in a sweet, quiet voice.
>
> 'Narnia?' she said. 'Narnia? I have often heard your Lordship utter that name in your ravings. Dear Prince, you are very sick. There is no land called Narnia.'
>
> 'Yes there is, though, Ma'am,' said Puddleglum. 'You see, I happened to have lived there all my life.'
>
> 'Indeed,' said the Witch. 'Tell me . . . where that country is?'
>
> 'Up there,' said Puddleglum, stoutly, pointing overheard. 'I—I don't know exactly where.'

[25] C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), 73.

> 'How?' said the Queen, with a kind, soft, musical laugh. 'Is there a country up among the stones and mortar of the roof?'
>
> 'No,' said Puddleglum, struggling a little to get his breath. 'It's in Overworld.'
>
> 'And what, or where, pray is this . . . how do you call it . . . *Overworld*?'
>
> 'Oh, don't be silly,' said Scrubb, who was fighting hard against the enchantment. . . . 'It's up above, up where you can see the sky and the sun and the stars. . . .'
>
> 'Please it, your Grace,' said the Prince . . . 'You see that lamp. It is round and yellow and gives light to the whole room; and hangeth moreover from the room. Now that thing which we call the sun is like the lamp, only far greater and brighter. . . .'
>
> 'Hangest from what, my lord? . . . You see? When you try to think out clearly what this *sun* must be, you cannot tell me. You can only tell me it is like the lamp. Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story.'[26]

Although Lewis wrote this book for children, it is clearly related to the themes of Platonic aching and modernity's evil enchantment, the peculiar plague of adults in the modern world. Indeed, Lewis, like his friend Tolkien, thought that fairy tales had only become the property of children because modern adults had become incapable of appreciating them. It is interesting to note that the Witch's speech echoes a passage from "Transposition," wherein Lewis playfully imagines how difficult it would be for a creature from a two-dimensional world to understand our world of three dimensions:

> 'You keep on telling me of this other world and its unimaginable shapes which you call solid. But isn't it very suspicious that all the shapes which you offer me as images of reflections of the solid ones turn out on inspection to be simply the old two-dimensional shapes of my own world as I have always known it? Is it not obvious that your vaunted other world, so far from being the archetype, is a dream which borrows all its elements from this one?'[27]

[26] C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (1953; New York: Harper Trophy, 1981), 173-9.
[27] Lewis, "Transposition," 272.

Thus, it should not surprise us that, in *The Silver Chair*, Lewis, through the medium of fantasy literature, describes modern enchantment as the persistent attempt to suffocate the supernatural sentiments awakened by the "other world."

With all this in mind—the evil enchantment of the witch, the Platonic longings of the heart, and the difficulty of being modern—we can hear a peculiarly personal voice emerge from a passage of Lewis's great sermon, "The Weight of Glory," preached at the Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford and first published in 1941:

> In speaking of this desire for our own far off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. . . . The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; . . . they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years.[28]

Lewis here anticipates comments he would later expound upon in *The Abolition of Man*: "Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth."[29]

We see how Lewis's mind returned again and again to the theme of

[28] C. S. Lewis, "Weight of Glory," in *Essay Collection,* 98-9.
[29] Lewis, *Abolition,* 99.

enchantment, in particular, to how the modern world attempts to suffocate "the inner voice" or what I have called, Platonic longing. But note, as well, that in "The Weight of Glory," Lewis refers to "spells" that are "used to break enchantments as well as for inducing them." Counter-spells, in other words. Thus, in a peculiarly dead and desire-less world, in which strong interior impulses seem increasingly out of place, Lewis felt it was his peculiar duty to provide fellow Christians with a positive vision, a spell, to counter the negative, vague picture of heaven.

Medieval Counter Enchantments

Lewis felt peculiarly suited to using the spell of the counter enchantment, in part because he had immersed himself in the literature of enchantment, everything from fairy tales and children's books to Romantic poets, especially in the literature of the pre-modern world.[30] He used to joke that he had spent so much time immersed in the medieval world that he felt like he had become a naturalized citizen there.[31] Although he was an atheist for nearly two decades, he became the world's greatest scholar of medieval literature in that period, internalizing Dante, Chaucer, and Julian of Norwich, as well as the authors they read: Jean de Meun, Alan of Lille, Bernard Silvestris, Macrobius, Chalcidius, Dionysius, Plotinus, and Plato. In other words, Lewis's body lived in the modern age, but his heart breathed the air of the world of Dante.[32]

But it was really Dante, more than anyone else, who taught him about how to overcome the modern lack of desire and cast a good spell, one that makes goodness feel "weighty." Although every reader of Lewis's non-fiction knows how often bits and pieces of his extraordinary reading float up to the surface of his memory (quotations from Rudolf Otto, Samuel Johnson, and Chaucer are constantly cited, as well as Virgil, Boethius, and Homer), Lewis loved no author more than Dante (with the possible exception of Milton).[33] His admiration for Wordsworth, for example, was great,

[30] As he recalls in his chapter, "Check," from Lewis, *Surprised by Joy,* 165-81.

[31] Lewis, "De Descriptione," 14-15.

[32] The best introduction to Lewis's "medievalism," is Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[33] Although, strangely, Dante doesn't appear in Lewis's list of the authors who influenced his sense of vocation the most. See Werther and Werther, eds., *C. S. Lewis's List*.

but he outgrew his unqualified love for the Romantic poet.[34] This was not so with Dante. His admiration of the medieval poet only increased with time. And so, just as when Augustine wanted to talk about love or loss, and would reach deep into his mind to try to find language adequate to capture the power of the experience, and would inadvertently begin quoting passages from Virgil about the tears of Dido, Lewis would open his mouth to say something moving and personal and find himself quoting Dante.[35]

For instance, Lewis refers to Dante nearly seventy times in his three most important scholarly books (*The Allegory of Love, The Discarded Image*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*), even when he was writing about some English author, as if his mind constantly drifted back to the Italian poet as the paradigmatic example of the pre-modern world. In his apologetic works, like *The Problem of Pain,* he cites Dante's description of the god of love as an example of the numinous.[36] In his letters, Lewis first mentions reading Dante in 1917, when he took a seven-week crash course in Italian from Mr. Kirkpatrick. He reports proudly to his father, "on Sunday I read the first 200 lines of Dante with much success."[37] Having first read *Paradiso* when he was in the hospital, recovering from wounds he received in World War I, he returned to Dante a couple of years later, when he spent a happy vacation with his friend, Owen Barfield, going for walks and reading passages from Dante's *Paradiso* in the afternoon.[38] He later described what that reading experience was like:

> [*Paradiso*] has really opened a new world to me . . . it certainly seemed to me that I had never seen at all what Dante was like before. Unfortunately, the impression is one so unlike anything else that I can hardly describe it for your benefit—a sort of mixture of intense, even crabbed, complexity of language and thought with (what seems impossible) at the very same time a feeling of spacious gliding movement, like a slow dance, or like flying. It is like the stars—endless

[34] See Marry Ritter, "William Wordsworth," in *C. S. Lewis's List,* 93-113.

[35] For Virgilian intertexts in Augustine (which I have taken, in part, as a model for my own observations on Lewis and Dante), see Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[36] C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (1962; New York: Touchstone, 1996), 36.

[37] Letter of 8 February 1917, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:275.

[38] Jane Hippolito, "C. S. Lewis and Owen Barfield: Adversaries and Confidantes," in *C. S. Lewis: An Examined Life,* ed. by Bruce Edwards (Westport, Connecticutt: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 232.

> mathematical subtlety . . . yet at the same time the freedom and liquidity of empty space. . . . I should describe it as a feeling more important than any poetry I have ever read.[39]

Not content with his earlier explanation, Lewis, just a few months later, told Greeves about reading *Paradiso* with Barfield again:

> I think it reaches heights of poetry which you get nowhere else: an ether almost too fine to breathe. It is a pity that I can give you no notion what it is like. Can you imagine Shelley at his most ecstatic combined with Milton at his most solemn and rigid? It sounds impossible I know, but that is what Dante has done.[40]

In 1931, he read Dante every Thursday night with a fellow Oxford don. Later, Lewis became the friend of Dorothy Sayers and critiqued her translations of the *Comedy* as she produced them, one canticle at a time. In the *Great Divorce,* Lewis based his bus driver on Dante's angel from *Inferno* 9, and he modeled the guidance he receives from George MacDonald on Dante's Virgil. He admitted to a friend that he modeled his Green Lady, in *Perelandra,* on Dante's Matelda.[41] But perhaps most tellingly, he turned to Dante for help in dealing with grief. He advised his friend Sheldon Vanauken to read *Paradiso* to cope with the loss of Davy: he reminds him how Beatrice turned her eyes away from Dante "to the eternal fountain."[42] Little did he know that just a few years later, when he was trying to describe the nauseating grief that choked him once he had lost his own wife, he would open his mouth and find himself quoting the same words in reference to his own pain: she turned "to the eternal fountain."[43] In sum, there wasn't a moment in Lewis's life in which Dante was not close at hand and vividly present in his thoughts.

"The Weight of Glory" and Dante's "Admirable Solidity"

As a professional scholar of literature, Lewis spent much of his ca-

[39] Letter of 13 January 1930, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:857.

[40] Letter of 8 July 1930, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 1:915.

[41] Letter of 29 October 1944, in C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C. S. Lewis: Revised and Enlarged Edition,* ed. Walter Hooper (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, 1988), 375.

[42] Letter of 6 May 1955, in Lewis, *Collected Letters*, 3:616.

[43] C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 60.

reer trying to find an explanation for this enchanting literary experience, the experience of Dante's poetry as one of density and floating at the same time. And throughout his scholarly career, he found better and better ways to articulate the exact nature of the experience. What slowly came into focus for Lewis is that Dante's greatness was due to his ability to create a positive vision of ultimate goodness, to create a sense of "weight" and yearning for heavenly glory. He had a peculiar ability to think incarnationally: to give ideas flesh, blood, taste, and smell. Dante raises dead metaphors from the grave, breathing new life into them. And then he comes up with new metaphors that are often shocking in their carnality: an "almost sensuous intensity about things not sensuous."[44] In short, Dante gave a dense, tangible vision of glory, so needed by modern men who live in a universe drained of desire: "a curious intensity of sensibility in directions where modern sensibility is, I believe, much weaker."[45]

Lewis thought that Dante's success as a poet was in part due to the fact that he lived in the pre-modern world, where there was less of a gap between poetic use of language and the scientific understanding of the world, a theme I have already discussed. In contrast to a modern poet, whose similes we admire because they strike us as very "inventive," discovering a likeness we would not have otherwise perceived, Dante is often, Lewis contests, actually not inventive at all. He was only giving voice to medieval "science." In other words, Dante's cosmos itself is more poetic: there is less of a gap between metaphor and reality. Thus, Dante's poetry, the scholar tells us, presents a "baffling paradox":

> I think Dante's poetry, on the whole, the greatest of all the poetry I have read: yet when it is at its highest pitch of excellence, I hardly feel that Dante has very much to do. There is a curious feeling that the great poem is writing itself, or at most, that the tiny figure of the poet is merely giving the gentlest guiding touch, here and there, to energies which, for the most part, spontaneously group themselves and perform the delicate evolutions which make up the *Comedy*.[46]

[44] C. S. Lewis "Imagery in the Last Eleven Cantos of Dante's *Comedy,*" in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (1959; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78-93 (93).

[45] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy*," 92.

[46] C. S. Lewis, "Dante's Similes," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature,* 64-77 (76).

His world was saturated with poetry; a mere "realistic" description of the cosmos was inherently poetic because the spiritual and moral domains were mapped onto the physical space of the cosmos.

This is the first reason Lewis found Dante's poetry so enchanting: Dante, living in the pre-modern world, was writing on the other side of the "Great Divide." The second reason takes us back to the idea of "transposition" or "metaphor." As we have seen, Lewis commented on Dante's imagery, its "curiousness, the almost sensuous intensity about things not sensuous." Other poets, he continues, when they begin to describe the highest reaches of heaven become fatuous, providing "dull catalogues of jewelry and mass-singing,"[47] but Dante's language becomes more concrete and sensuous the closer his pilgrim gets to God. In the very last canto, we find images of

> Dante in the garden, and Dante in the streets, his feeling for the silent growing life, and his cheerful, spontaneous interest in the state and courtesies, the trades and skills, of men. It is, perhaps, this continual reference both to the quiet, moistened earth and to the resonant pavements, workshops, and floors, which support and make convincing his invention of a heaven which, in the obvious sense, makes very few concessions to the natural man.[48]

To illustrate the surprising sensuousness of *Paradiso,* Lewis counted all of the metaphors and similes in the last eleven canti of the *Paradiso*—all of its imagery—and divided it up into different categories. The results were surprising. According to Lewis's reckoning, there are three images of smell, only two images of the sea, and two metaphors borrowed from the life of the student. There are four images that allude to sleep or waking to describe how Dante reacted to some heavenly phenomenon. There are five images of children, mainly of infants nursing. When we remember that Dante was a love poet, it comes as a surprise that there are only seven metaphors that refer to marriage or erotic love.[49]

On the other hand, it is surprising that there are seven images of "weighing" or "weight": "I have always felt that no poetry—least of all,

[47] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 155.
[48] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 93.
[49] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 84.

any poet whose theme is so unearthly as Dante's—has such an admirable solidity."[50] This class is particularly exemplary because Lewis's favorite Dantean image belongs to it. When Dante is being examined by James on the Virtue of Hope in *Paradiso* 25, there is a moment where the pilgrim, like a student taking a very difficult oral exam, looks up in search of comfort and encouragement from his professor. And when the pilgrim looks up, the poet describes his experience like looking up at mountains. He doesn't just see them towering over him, but rather conducts an "imaginative transference whereby a mountain mass seems to crush us with its weight." We notice "how immensely venerable the Apostles have become first by the mountain image and then by the image of weight. . . . No direct praise of their wisdom or sanctity could have made us respect them half so much."[51] Looking up at the saintly figures, Dante feels their ponderous holiness, as massive mountains. Thus, heaven's glory has all the density and crushing weight pushing in and down on you, as if you were at the bottom of an ocean, or carrying heavy stone. When we think about the pale and sickly metaphors Dante could have used, we recognize to what extent he was adverse to using stale language for religious experience. It is my contention that Lewis also had this canto in mind when he used the metaphor for his sermon's title, "weight of glory." In other words, he read St. Paul's 2 Corinthians 4.17 ("For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding *and* eternal weight of glory") in light of Dante Alighieri's "troppo pondo."[52]

In his essay Lewis also cites Dante's astronomical and military references, as well as nine images of clothing, and not just the "white robes and golden crowns" you might expect. Rather, we hear of how joy "wraps" Adam up like a blanket or a bandage, or how the river of light is veiled and swaddled in refulgence: "[Dante's] mind . . . is apparently very sensitive to the experience of putting on, being enfolded, swathed, enveloped."[53] There are also nine metaphors that refer to tying up or binding with rope. There are images of smiling, laughter, wounds, and even references to how "love" bites with many teeth. Lewis goes on to say that there are twelve metaphors

[50] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 84.
[51] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 80.
[52] Dante, *Paradiso*, 25.39.
[53] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 85.

for opening and closing of things, sixteen zoological metaphors (especially birds), twenty-four for weather (such as dawns and dew, sunrises and plentiful rain); there are twenty-four more metaphors for civic functions (likening the saints to barons or the communion of saints to a city); twenty-five images of light and heat, and twenty-five images of plants and vegetation ("The poetry of *Paradiso* is as full of roots and leaves and growth as it is of lights").[54] And finally, the set of images that occurs more than any other: those which pertain to trades and crafts:

> the arts, crafts, manufacturers, and skilled occupations of men: from painting, musical instruments, seals and sealing-wax, clocks, thread, money in a purse, hammer and anvil, rowing, riddling with a sieve, archery at the butts, the cares of the artist, the jeweller, the geometrician and the astronomer observing an eclipse, and finally (on the very eve of the ineffable vision) a prudent remainder that a good tailor cuts his coat according to his cloth.[55]

Lewis's criticism can help us appreciate how tactile and tangible the poetry of Dante was, but more importantly "Dante's Similes" and "Imagery in the Last Eleven Cantos" can tell us a great amount, not just about why Lewis admired Dante so much, but about one of the tasks most important to him: creating a positive image of our invisible end. Lewis draws attention to how concrete and how humble Dante's language is for that distant country of heaven. In other words, Lewis admired Dante because he made his heaven envelop, penetrate, invade, burn, and restlessly seek to come within. In *Paradiso,* souls rush down and sweep around the pilgrim. The "weight" of glory is thick and viscous: we long for it like the infant sucks at the breast, "we are muffled and wrapped up in it, we feel it pulling with ropes and biting with teeth."[56] In light of Lewis's praise of Dante, we can come with fresh admiration to the final chapter of *Miracles,* as well as the magnificent "Further Up and Further In," or the glorious and quiet end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.*

I would like to conclude by referencing one particular passage from the *Comedy* to illustrate how Dante stacks up image upon image, creating a

[54] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy*," 90.
[55] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy*," 92.
[56] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy,*" 92.

turning and twisting poetry. That passage comes at the end of *Paradiso* 30 and at the beginning of *Paradiso* 31. There, the great poet uses a series of images to try to capture the extraordinary splendor of the heavenly community of saints. It is here that he sees them, for the first time, gathered in one great assembly. The poet was so struck by their beauty that he grows dazed and confused, desperately seeking for a likeness, a metaphor that does justice to the spiritual radioactivity of their glory. Dante describes them first as a collection of flowers in a meadow, but soon after as a single rose. He drops that metaphor and calls them a city, and then says they were marching in rank and file, like soldiers in an army, before likening the saints again to so many petals on a white rose. Soon, we hear of a river that shoots sparks forth, and those sparks leap out and fall on flowers, which are likened to "rubies inscribed in gold". The "living sparks", as though inebriated by the odors of the flowers, then plunge back into the river. Beatrice calls them topazes and says that the "grassy places" are smiling. Dante later likens this whole vision to a hill reflected in a body of water at its base, as if it were studying itself in a mirror.[57]

The reality to which Dante gestures is ineffable; it eludes words, and thus, this intensely shifting and undulating imagery is appropriate. The shifting use of metaphor gives his poetry a dreamlike intensity, as if the poet were looking through a kaleidoscope. And yet, Beatrice says, "the river, the topazes / [. . .] the laughter of the meadows / *are shadowy prefaces of their truth.*"[58]. Thus, the language is vibrant, as if a higher mode of being were irrupting in a lower language, and as if, under high pressure, the lower language were melting down. Dante's vision of goodness is not stale or vague, but intense. It is enchanting, so much so that, for a brief moment, we might find ourselves longing for that which previously seemed so very far away.

Reading Dante, then, is partly an antidote and partly a model for what Lewis saw as the "evil enchantment" of modernity. Frequently in his writings, Lewis frets about the "bleak fantasy" that "often underlies our very use of such words as 'holy' or 'pure' or 'spiritual.'" He worries that although an "infinite good" will "outweigh" all earthly goods, indeed although the Bea-

[57] Citations in order are: *Par.* 30.65, *Par.* 30.66, *Par.* 30.64, *Par.* 30.67, *Par.* 30.77, and *Par.* 30.110-11.

[58] *Par.* 30.76-8, my italics.

tific Vision "would infinitely outweigh" all that is sacrificed, nevertheless, "the negatives have . . . an unfair advantage."[59] Lewis admitted that this was his own problem, too. He admits that "the natural appeal of [the] authoritative imagery [of Scripture] is to me, at first, very small. At first sight it chills, rather than awakes, my desire."[60] In Scripture, "salvation is constantly associated with palms, crowns, white robes, thrones, and splendour like the sun and stars. All this makes no immediate appeal to me at all, and in that respect I fancy I am a typical modern."[61] And yet, we can get a glimpse of that "weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain."[62] What we need is to be faithful to the traditional images but also to store up a treasure of new imagery: "lest we should imagine the joy of His presence too exclusively in terms of our present poor experience of personal love with all its narrowness and strain and monotony, a dozen changing images correcting and relieving each other are supplied."[63]

Thus, just as "the load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory [in addition to my own] should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken,"[64] so too does Dante's poetry give us a vision of our future "neighbors" (the saints) that "weighs upon the soul" and is "equated with an actual weight which bends the bearer double," and that reminds us, in contrast, of the "proud doubled beneath their loads on the first terrace of Purgatory."[65] In short, Lewis seems to have had Dante in mind with "The Weight of Glory" because he felt the medieval poet's verses to be so "weighty." I conclude with Lewis's own assessment of the *Comedy*'s weightiness:

> We still have to consider . . . seven images of Weight. If seven seemed a small number of erotic images, seven seems a large number of ponderosities in a poem where we are steadily moving away from the Earth to the rim of the universe. And none of them can strictly be called traditional. . . . [They] suggest weight in more or less painful aspects. His subject itself is "il ponderoso tema" (XXIII, 64) and

[59] Lewis, "Transposition," 274-5.
[60] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 100.
[61] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 101.
[62] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 102.
[63] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 101.
[64] Lewis, "Weight of Glory," 105.
[65] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy*," 80.

> weighs on his "omero mortal": the mountainous Apostles, as we have seen, bow him with their imagined weight; because of his *mortal pondo* he must, having seen Heaven, return to Earth (XXVII, 64). . . . I have always felt that no poet—least of all, any poet whose theme is so unearthly as Dante's—has such admirable solidity.[66]

[66] Lewis, "Imagery in Dante's *Comedy*," 80