"FURTHER UP AND FURTHER IN!": C. S. LEWIS ON HEAVEN

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"[O]ur natural ways of sensing, feeling, and knowing will be 'flooded' and drawn into the higher life, raised up into the life of glory rather than canceled out, and all flesh shall see this together."

C. S. Lewis never set out to be a theologian. His explicitly theological writings are hedged with disclaimers: "I walk *in mirabilibus supra me* and submit all to the verdict of real theologians."[1] The "real theologians" would have been ordained members of the clergy and credentialed members of the academic guild. Lewis, in contrast, was a lay Anglican and a literary historian who played almost no part in Oxford's faculty of Divinity, aside from reading the occasional thesis and failing the occasional undergraduate on the compulsory "Divvers" exam (for which he incurred the resentment of the poet John Betjeman).[2] His religious writings,

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper, revised and expanded edition (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 71.

2. For Lewis's relations with academic theology at Oxford, see Alister Mc-

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moreover, were unsystematic and far from cutting edge; to many academic theologians, they seemed rather quaint and tossed off, the work of a "professor at play." But Lewis's star has risen, and though he defies classification as a theological specialist, he is recognized by vast numbers of Christians as offering something more immediately relevant to their spiritual concerns. In the *Pilgrim's Progress* of our age, Lewis's role is that of the Interpreter—he is the most successful modern translator of the doctrines and mysteries of Christianity. In this Interpreter's house, furnished with bright pictures and homely analogies, many lost souls have found their way back to the faith.

For that reason alone, it is worth exploring what Lewis has to say about heaven. Lewis has no new doctrine to offer, thankfully, but the pictures and analogies he puts forward can be wonderfully subtle and instructive.

Lewis's earliest mature writing about heaven is to be found in *The Allegory of Love*, a study of medieval love poetry, first published in 1936. He was a Christian by the time he completed it, but when he began writing *The Allegory of Love*, he was an unbeliever for whom the Gospel was little more than a glittering fairy tale. Heaven, for this scholar of medieval culture, was best understood as the projection of one's deepest desires—as in the case of the lover who says "'Here is my Heaven' in a moment of passionate abandonment" or the poet who adorns this conceit with the borrowed finery of religion: "If you go on to add to that lover's 'Heaven' its natural accessories, a god and saints and a list of commandments, and if you picture the lover praying, sinning, repenting, and finally admitted to bliss, you will find yourself in the precarious dream-world of medieval love poetry."[3]

That the inverse might also be true—that the precarious poetic dream-world might also be a sign pointing to a real heaven—is a possibility that Lewis was beginning to entertain as he wrote *The Allegory of Love*; for even before his conversion, he

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Grath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 170, and Daniel D. Inman, *The Making of Modern English Theology: God and the Academy at Oxford, 1833–1945* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 255–56.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1936), 21.

was attracted by the Platonic undertones of medieval poetry and romance. An admirer, like T. S. Eliot, of the idealist metaphysics of F. H. Bradley, he tended to read his medieval sources through a Bradleian idealist lens. Speaking of *The Romance of the Rose*, for example, Lewis writes that Jean de Meun was concerned with "that which lies beyond the 'sensuous curtain'" in relation to which "the world and all that is in it, and the visible Heaven, are but painted things—appearances on the outside of the wall whose inside no one has seen."[4] The "sensuous curtain" language is pure Bradley.

But Lewis gave too much credit to the "sensuous curtain" to be a consistent idealist. Painted things do not wholly deceive us, Lewis felt: "It is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms. What is good or happy has always been high like the Heavens and bright like the sun. . . . To ask how these married pairs of sensibles and insensibles first came together would be great folly; the real question is how they ever came apart. . . ."[5]

This question—whether it might be possible, for a twentieth-century thinker, to put sensibles and insensibles back together again—would occupy Lewis for the rest of his life. Idealism alone could not bring about such a marriage; in his medieval sources, Lewis would encounter, not only a form of idealism, but a sacramental worldview in which the marriage of sensibles and insensibles was a normal condition of thought. Even before he became a believer, Lewis delighted in this sacramental way of thinking, and in the capacity of the Christian imagination to assimilate the pagan gods and allow the "old marvellous" to flourish. After his conversion, he continued to believe that we have every right to exercise our picture-thinking, to heighten its power and range rather than suppress it. Only by a free play of the imagination—a freedom not only permitted but conferred by the Gospel—could one move beyond the "dull catalogues of jewellery and mass-singing" that dog conventional ideas of heaven.[6] A comparable imaginative freedom would govern Narnia,

4. Ibid., 152.

5. Ibid., 44.

6. Ibid., 153.

with its motley population of dryads, fauns, and talking mice, not to mention a leonine Christ, an exuberant Bacchus, and a festal Father Christmas.[7]

Nonetheless, during his early days as a believer, Lewis felt it was best to restrain his imagination where heaven was concerned. He explains why this was so in *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, a classic conversion account in which Lewis recounts his early intimations of "Joy"; his losses, gains, and apostasies along the way; his passage from childhood piety through various stages of aestheticism, occultism, atheism, idealism—and his surrender to God in the end.

Lewis had his first taste of Joy in early childhood, he tells us; he recalls standing beside a flowering currant bush and being visited by "a memory of a memory" of his brother Warnie showing him the tiny garden he had made on the lid of a biscuit tin. The flowering tree and the cultivated garden—nature and culture in miniature—filled his mind and body with a sensation he could only compare to "Milton's 'enormous bliss of Eden.'" Joy came again with the autumnal delights of Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkin*; and again when Lewis read the opening lines of Longfellow's "Tegnér's Drapa" and immediately found himself immersed in "Northernness." The triggers were many and various—the sound of a steamer's horn traveling on the winds from the Belfast Lough, the green Castlereagh Hills seen through the nursery window, the Arthur Rackham drawing on an ad for Wagner's *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*—but longing, *Sehnsucht*, was always an ingredient in this complex Edenic bliss. Reflecting on such experiences, he would often speak, in language at once Augustinian and Romantic, of a "dialectic" of desire, pointing beyond the images and shadows that elicit longing to the reality of the transcendent object of desire which alone can satisfy that longing; thus, in *Mere Christianity*:

> Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which

7. Ibid., 83.

> no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. . . . [8]

Idealism rescued Lewis from materialism, and Joy drew him toward theism, but neither his idealism nor his theism gave him a motive for dwelling upon the future life. Formerly as an idealist and now as a Christian, Lewis adopted the austere maxim that "it is more important that Heaven should exist than that any of us should reach it."[9] His conversion had nothing to do with the prospect of a future life; he considered it a great mercy that he had been brought "to know God and to attempt obedience without even raising that question."[10] In a paper Lewis read to the Oxford Socratic Club, arguing against the philosopher and psychical researcher H. H. Price, he made the point emphatically: "I cannot help thinking that any religion which begins with a thirst for immortality is damned."[11] It was a powerful statement, considering that many intellectuals in Lewis's day considered mediumistic phenomena to be the best evidence for spiritual realities, and immortality the payoff for faith.

Lewis knew from firsthand experience how tawdry a concern for personal immortality can be. A well-meaning school matron had weaned him away from his childhood faith by introducing him to "Higher Thought" and lower magic; he had

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8. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 136–37. See also Lewis's remarks in the preface to the third edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*: "It appeared to me that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience . . ." (*The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, preface to the 3rd ed. [London: HarperCollins, 1977], 15); and *Surprised by Joy*: "All images and sensations, if idolatrously mistaken for Joy itself, soon honestly confessed themselves inadequate. All said, in the last resort, 'It is not I. I am only a reminder. Look! Look! What do I remind you of?'" (*Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* [New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1955], 219–20).

9. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 210–11.

10. Ibid., 231.

11. C. S. Lewis, "Religion without Dogma?" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 131.

idolized Yeats only to discover, when they met in person, that the genius was a humbug; he had despaired to see close friends caught up in ersatz forms of mysticism; he had known an Anglo-Irish priest who, having lost his faith in Christ, became obsessed with finding evidence for survival of death. Most alarming of all, he had been present for the full-blown psychotic breakdown of the brother to his companion Mrs. Moore, a breakdown Lewis attributed to occult preoccupations. Lewis could only conclude from these experiences that our moral and mental health depended on restraining speculative curiosity about other worlds. Thus had God ordained for the people of Israel, too; first Sinai and the command to love God for his own sake; only much later would God reveal through the Spirit what he has prepared for those who love him: "My training was like that of the Jews, to whom He revealed Himself centuries before there was a whisper of anything better (or worse) beyond the grave than shadowy and featureless Sheol. And I did not dream even of that."[12]

But Lewis did not keep his imagination under embargo for long. He would have reason to deploy it fully during the Second World War, when his chief war work (since he was too old to serve as a combatant) consisted in becoming the public voice of Christian sanity and reassurance, through BBC radio broadcasts (eventually published as *Mere Christianity*), talks to servicemen at RAF bases, debates with atheists at the Oxford Socratic Club, and lay sermons in the churches and chapels of Oxford. He was uneasy in the role of a Christian apologist (as he told a group of Anglican junior clergy, "No doctrine of that Faith seems to me so spectral, so unreal as one that I have just successfully defended . . ."[13]), but he understood that it was his special gift, and therefore obligation, to offer a positive, persuasive, entertaining, and imaginatively rich defense of Christianity. To that end, a marriage of sensibles and insensibles must be attempted, despite the risk.

When Lewis had occasion to speak of the Christian hope for heaven during these war years, it was always with the marriage of sensibles and insensibles in view. We should expect

12. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 231.

13. Lewis, "Christian Apologetics," in *God in the Dock*, 103.

heaven to be *more* concrete, one might almost say more sensuous, than our wildest dreams. We should not be embarrassed, Lewis tells us, by the wealth of imagery Scripture gives us for heaven (wedding feasts, pearly gates, astral splendor, and so on). These images are never arbitrary, are not improved upon by finer abstractions, and in their variety satisfy our all-too-human need to be rescued from monotony—proof against the cliché that the Christian heaven would be boring.

Our desire for heaven does not need to be restrained, Lewis says—far from it. Thus in "The Weight of Glory," a sermon he preached in June 1941 during Solemn Evensong at Oxford's Church of St. Mary the Virgin: "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak."[14] We are promised something called "glory" as an eschatological reward; if our desires were strong enough, we would wish for this glory with all our might, as the good that is more real than the makeshifts we have accepted in its place.

The Hebrew word *kabod*, englished as *glory*, has the root meaning of *weight*—hence Lewis's title—and it carries the curious dual meaning of fame (or importance) and divine radiance. If our desires were strong enough, we would wish for this fame, not because we are full of ourselves, but because we are meek enough to take pleasure—"the humblest, the most childlike, the most creaturely of pleasures"—in God's approval. And if our desires were strong enough, we would not shrink from wishing for a share in the divine radiance (Jn 17:22, Rom 5:2); for this is what we are made for, and long for, as our "inconsolable secret."

Perhaps there is something self-interested, even mercenary, in the desire for heavenly glory. That may be how God draws us to him, until we are fit for a more adequate appreciation of his gift to us. Thus Lewis says:

> The Christian, in relation to Heaven, is in much the same position as this schoolboy. Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God doubtless know very

14. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 3.

> well that it is no mere bribe, but the very consummation of their earthly discipleship; but we who have not yet attained it cannot know this in the same way, and cannot even begin to know it at all except by continuing to obey and finding the first reward of our obedience in our increasing power to desire the ultimate reward.[15]

As our power to desire the ultimate reward increases, so will our capacity to see others in the light of divine glory, and to discover that "there are no *ordinary* people."[16] A liberal theologian would have ended on this note, directing our gaze to the social horizon; but Lewis concludes with a *Pange Lingua*: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour, he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ *vere latitat*—the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden."[17]

"The Weight of Glory" is so well loved that Oxford tour guides have been known to point out St. Mary the Virgin as the place where Lewis delivered this sermon—not mentioning that Cranmer, Wesley, Keble, and Newman preached here as well, and to more powerful effect. But there is another Lewis sermon, rather more difficult and subtle, where we find the key to his understanding of heaven, and much else besides: "Transposition," preached on Pentecost 1944 at the Congregationalist chapel of Mansfield College, and published in an expanded version in 1961.

Lewis begins "Transposition" with a feature of traditional Christianity that is particularly troubling to modern religious sensibilities: *glossolalia*, the Pentecost experience to which charismatic worshippers aspire. As with other ecstatic religious states, naturalistic explanations (mass suggestion, hysteria, the shutdown of the brain's control centers, etc.) often seem *prima facie* more likely; the Church recognizes this and exercises due caution whenever extraordinary claims are made. What concerns Lewis, however, is a larger set of questions: Why is it that our supernatural life is so bound up with our natural life, our higher with our lower desires?

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15. Ibid., 5.

16. Ibid., 19.

17. Ibid.

> If we have really been visited by a revelation from beyond nature, is it not very strange that an apocalypse can furnish heaven with nothing more than selections from terrestrial experience (crowns, thrones, and music), that devotion can find no language but that of human lovers, and that the rite whereby Christians enact a mystical union should turn out to be only the old, familiar act of eating and drinking?[18]

From a diary entry by Samuel Pepys (no stranger to lower desires), Lewis teases out a rough theory. We have a limited repertoire of sensations, Lewis notes, with which to register an almost unlimited range of affective states; for example, a "flutter in the diaphragm" may accompany seasickness, fear, aesthetic rapture, or falling in love. In each case, the flutter in the diaphragm does not interpret itself, but receives its meaning from the emotion it registers. The higher state interprets the lower, the richer vocabulary of emotion interprets the poorer vocabulary of sensation, and the full experience can be understood from the higher vantage point alone. Moreover, the emotion "descends" into the sensation and "transubstantiates" it, "so that the same thrill along the nerves *is* delight or *is* agony."[19]

Up to this point Lewis's argument is similar to Thomas Nagel's famous discussion of *qualia*; it makes quick work of physicalist reductionism. But Lewis does not stop here—his subject is the supernatural life, for which the hierarchical, but wholly natural, relationship between sensation and emotion provides an analogy. Our present, natural life will prove to have been "the diminution, the symbol, the etiolated, the (as it were) 'vegetarian' substitute"[20] for the real banquet. Flatlanders here below, we will find ourselves in a world of true solids in heaven. Having lived on tofu here below, we will enjoy real meat in heaven. But our natural ways of sensing, feeling, and knowing will be "flooded" and drawn into the higher life, raised up into the life of glory rather than canceled out, and all flesh shall see this together.

Once one picks up on this theme in Lewis's writings, one sees it everywhere.

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18. Lewis, "Transposition," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 56.

19. Ibid., 63.

20. Ibid., 69.

In *The Great Divorce*, the souls of the dead cannot walk without being lacerated by the all-too-real blades of grass—until they submit to being purified, sanctified, and made solid. In *Perelandra*, when Ransom returns from Venus, he speaks of having seen the Form of Life itself, a rapture that cannot be put into words because it is "too definite for language"; this experience leads him to picture the resurrected life as one in which our human powers and desires will be "engulfed" rather than abolished.

Nothing seems wanting, then, from Lewis's portrait of the desirability of heaven. Yet the mystery remains—and on this topic Lewis is in complete agreement with John Henry Newman—that it is possible to quench the desire for heaven, to live so disordered a life that the society of heaven is repugnant, the landscape of heaven insipid, and an eternity of heaven very hell.[21] Such is the message of *The Great Divorce*, in which hell is "locked on the inside," and in that theological fantasy Lewis proves himself a faithful interpreter of the great tradition concerning heaven, hell, and purgatory. In eschatology, as in other aspects of Christian doctrine, Lewis has nothing new to say to us, but a wonderfully innovative way to say it. □

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21. See, for example, John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, vol. 1, Sermon 1, "Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness" (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 5–9.