

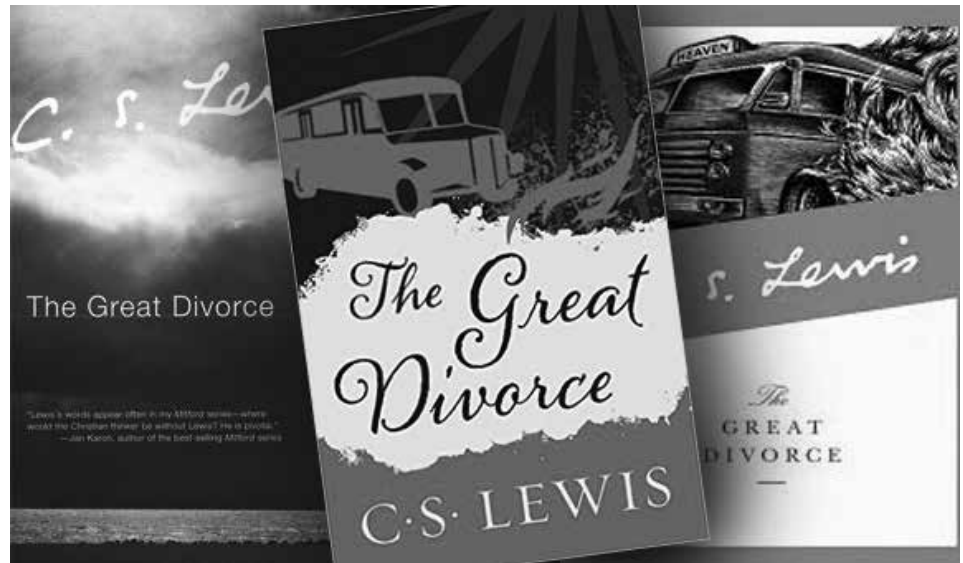


The Great Divorce: A Novel Answer to an Immodest Proposal

Well before Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* debuted in 1959, C. S. Lewis wrote a fantasy novel that crossed over "into another dimension" not only of sight, sound, and mind, but of *soul*. Published during the latter days of World War II as *The Great Divorce, A Dream*, Lewis tells the story of a fantastical flight from the twilight of an infernal nightfall to the daybreak of an eternal sunrise, dividing Hell and Heaven in perhaps the most profound "twilight zone" episode never produced.

Originally entitled, *Who Goes Home? Or The Grand Divorce*, Lewis remarks in his preface how he drafted his vision of the final separation between Heaven and Hell as a reaction to William Blake's nineteenth-century Menippean satire, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. While Lewis is greatly admired Blake's poetic artistry and genius, he objected to his proposed marriage of the demonic to the Divine as a "disastrous error"¹ of thought due to its presumption of an impossible union between good and evil—as if a plighted devotion to decadence could ever lead heavenward, or else its inverse, that walking the blessed path to holiness means that unholy habits need not be left wholly behind.

In contrast to King Solomon's exhortation from the Book of Proverbs that "The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord", Blake preaches in his "Proverbs of Hell" from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that "[t]he road of excess leads to palaces of wisdom".² Though Blake's infernal proverb may ring clever and even compelling in its irony, it proves poisonous as a pseudo-paradox by promoting the vice of excess as a pathway to the virtue of wisdom—a *seeming truth* that is *really a contradiction*. Like most persuasive and pervasive fallacies, Blake's maxim is mixed with partial truth, rendering it both attractive and misleading; for an excess of experience *may* lead to wisdom *only if* a wrong



road can be recognized and rejected for the right one, but the self-evident problem here is that excessive persistence down a wrong road without careful moral discernment over what is right more likely results in ruin rather than wisdom. Thus, moral discernment is crucial to gaining wisdom, which results not from indulging excess, but from *limiting* it, either by discerning the right road in the first place or getting back to it once the wrong road has been realized and rejected—a prominent theme in Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. Ironically, even King Solomon himself confirms Blake's folly, as his own self-destructive choice near the end of his life to abandon his "fear of the Lord" for idols of excess resulted not in "towers of wisdom", but wars, rebellion, and a broken kingdom.³

As a fellow at Oxford University and a survivor of two world wars, C. S. Lewis was no stranger to such moral contradictions and their consequences. He witnessed first-hand how Blake's error of thought in conflating vice with virtue could easily be exploited to nightmarish ends by propagandists, statesmen, and intellectuals who rejected and even vilified the healthy limits of

sound intellectual and moral *discernment* that distinguishes truth from falsehood and good from evil. In direct defiance of careful moral discernment, such fruitless contradictions often loom from twisted branches of rootless philosophies in far too many hot-houses of higher education, feigning shade from the clear lights of objective knowledge and truth, only to obscure the way to wisdom by casting subjective shadows of intellectual confusion and amoral madness: the "knowledge" that knowledge itself is not knowable, the "truth" that there is no truth, the "reality" that nothing is real, and the "moral absolute" that there are no moral absolutes, just to list a few popular post-modern deconstructionist mantras. In assuming moral equivalency between the decadent and the Divine, relativist, materialist, and nihilist dread-mongers may flaunt Blake's "disastrous error" of thought by brandishing such startling contradictions as "progressive" paradoxes that reveal "revolutionary" truths, when they are nothing of the sort. Here's why:

Paradox vs. Pretense

Since the definition of a paradox is a

seeming contradiction that is *really true*, all paradoxes assert ironic and even surprising truths, highlighting *what actually happens* in contrast to what is usually *expected* to happen; for example, Hecato's adage, "If you wish to be loved, love",⁴ affirms the paradoxical truth that the way to *have* love is to *give* love. While this paradox defies the common expectation that "having" requires "taking" rather than "giving", experience testifies to the maxim's wondrous, self-evident, life-giving truthfulness, as anyone who has lived in love well knows and believes. *But while all paradoxes are ironic, not all ironies are paradoxes* for the simple reason that *not all ironies are true*. This is where confusion wreaks havoc.

To illustrate the perversion of a paradox by contrast, the pessimistic platitude, "The truth is that there is no truth", promotes a *seeming truth* that is really a self-destructive *contradiction*, instead of a *seeming contradiction* that is *really true*. This is also known as a fallacy, or, when knowingly propagated as such, *a lie* whose very plausibility—in addition to its insidiousness—*depends upon* an assumed, universal acceptance of "truth" as a *reality*, in order to assert that *there is no real truth!* Far from affirming that knowing the truth will make us free, this pseudo-paradox *uses* truth to *kill* truth! While this contradiction is certainly ironic, the adage fails as a paradox because it proves to be both false and disingenuous in the very act of declaring as an absolute truth that there is no absolute truth, allowing an unapologetic exception only for itself, thus exposing its hypocrisy at best and its duplicity at worst.

Any success of this self-negation also depends upon its hearers' failure to distinguish a true paradox from a fake, and for bemused minds clouded by such sayings, this is not enlightenment at all; this is the road to *insanity*. The proof of a paradox lay in its surprising self-evident *truthfulness* as well as its irony, but those who obscure truth by deliberately casting shadows of confusion upon naïve, wide-eyed novices by means of false paradoxes, such as "The truth is that there is no truth", peddle dire education rather than higher education, pretending to bestow knowledge while fomenting idiocy. Exactly nothing in this self-annihilating nihilism edifies or blesses anyone.

Thus, charting a reckless course of excess in blind pursuit of fetching yet false contradictions that conflate truth with untruth as well as vice with virtue leads not to

wisdom but to chaos, especially when such impossibilities are propagated as pretentious platitudes for normalizing, indulging, and even honoring the very falsehood, insanity, and vice they promote by attacking, discrediting, and ultimately abandoning honest moral discernment; abolish moral discernment, and there can be no moral judgement; abolish moral judgement, and there can be no guilt; abolish guilt, and there can be no shame; abolish shame, and there will be no need for correction, discipline, repentance, or even redemptive forgiveness, since almost anyone may do anything with impunity and without consequence.

The Premise

Though Lewis did not think himself "a fit an antagonist for so great a genius [as Blake]" or "feel at all sure that [he] knew what [Blake] meant" in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,⁵ he considered it fatal folly, despite Blake's professed Christian faith and brilliance as a poet, to engage in such life-defying moral acrobatics in rationalizing how "some way of embracing both alternatives [of Heaven and Hell] can always be found" as a result of progressive adjustments and refinements that "will somehow turn evil into good" without requiring a rejection of cherished remnants of sin that we "should wish to retain".⁶

Evil can be undone, but it cannot "develop" into good. Time does not heal it. The spell must be unwound bit by bit . . . —or else not. It is still "either-or". If we insist on keeping Hell (or even Earth), we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell.⁷

In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis illustrates how every step we take in thought or deed moves us either nearer to Heaven or further from it and that the romantic poet's misconceived marriage proposal between Hell and Heaven hangs upon the morally dualistic belief that "reality never presents us with an absolutely unavoidable 'either-or'"⁸ scenario. In other words, Blake cannot have his infernal wedding cake and eat it too, since the main problem with this belief is that it is not honestly believable. For instance, it is simply impossible to speak plain truth with lies, to bully with charity, to repent without remorse, to bless with curses, to keep the golden rule while hat-

ing thy neighbor, to love and serve God in willful defiance, to honor good with evil—to bring Hell into Heaven or Heaven into Hell. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis answers Blake's marriage proposal by playing out these self-contradictory impossibilities through the thoughts, words, and deeds of sojourning sinners aboard a miraculous bus on a last-chance holiday from the bleak dusk of Hell to the bright brink of Heaven.

The Passengers

The Great Divorce begins as an unnamed Narrator, who resembles its author, C. S. Lewis, attaches himself to a bus queue after wandering the dim, twilight streets of a nameless "grey town" just before nightfall. Though he cannot recall how he came there, its empty avenues lead him to a large assembly of unhappy souls waiting to board a bus that has not yet arrived. While the Narrator wonders if the restless travelers in line could fit into the bus, some of the expectant passengers grumble and bicker, while others jockey for position; one man strikes another, and some leave the queue altogether, until at last, a "wonderful vehicle, blazing with golden light" arrives. Once the remaining grumblers board the bus amid more jostling and violence, far from straining to fit inside, there is more than enough room, and an effusive, judgmental "tousle-headed youth" seats himself next to the Narrator, whom the boy judges to be an equally judgmental kindred soul based upon no more evidence than his unsettled countenance. Then suddenly, the bus flies!

During the abrupt ascent, the Tousle-Headed Boy reveals that he is a poet and gripes how no one really understands or appreciates his genius, since he has been victimized by sundry social, political, and economic oppressors, such as capitalism, communism, pacifism, the smugness of the Victorian epoch, and finally, a *girl*—"the last straw" which prompted him to throw himself under a train—It is at this instant when the Narrator realizes that everyone aboard the bus is *dead*, including *himself!*

The Precipice of Paradise

As the bus slips the grey town's gravity, it mounts the air along an interminable cliff until a vast, grassy ledge appears on the precipice, upon which the narrator soon discovers that the destination for this wonder-bus is the fringe of Heaven, where passengers will receive one final shot at eternal joy. Once the bus lands atop the cliff, the

passengers clamor to exit into the “light and coolness” of Heaven’s edge amid a cacophonous “filth” of “curses, taunts”, and “vituperation” which fail to complement the fresh brilliance of the bright landscape, while the disembarked Narrator feels at once a pure, precarious sense of vastness and freedom which “made the Solar System itself seem an indoor affair”.

Then, off in the distance further inland appears what seems to be a moving mountain range or cloudbank so expansive that it is not wholly seeable, and from this distant range steps a phalanx of empyreal forms “as the earth [shakes] under their tread” to meet the passengers from the bus. From these celestial ranks, each soul from the grey town will meet either a redeemed Bright Solid Spirit who once lived upon Earth or an Angel, who offers to serve as a guide into deep heaven, that is, if the grey-town travelers consent freely, since no souls will be forced into heaven unwillingly. But herein lies the problem: all travelers—“faces . . . of impossibilities”, as Lewis calls them—“insist on keeping Hell” as they attempt to embrace “both alternatives”⁹ of the Sacred and the profane by retaining and indulging their personal sins and vices enroute to Heaven.

Lewis crams *The Great Divorce* with wondrous encounters between these heavenly colossi and the grey town’s ghostly, ghastly “faces of impossibilities” to highlight Blake’s error in presupposing an eternal union that aims in vain to bind vice to virtue and Hell to Heaven. For our purposes, several select meetings will suffice here in illustrating Lewis’ objection to Blake’s marriage proposal.

Penitent Murderer meets Big Man

Among the first “faces of impossibility” emerges a “Big Man” from the bus who meets a heavenly Bright Spirit and former employee named Len as his guide. Len just also happens to be a repentant murderer. While Big Man is incredulous that a criminal such as Len could ever entertain the slightest hope of heaven, Len explains and confesses to Big Man: “Murdering old Jack wasn’t the worst thing I did. That was the work of a moment, and I was half mad when I did it. But I murdered you in my heart, deliberately, for years. . . . That is why I have been sent to you now: to ask your forgiveness and to be your servant as long as you need one, and longer if it pleases you.”

Here, a doubly repentant Len offers Big

Man his apology and with it, a choice either to forgive him and accept his guidance heavenward or not; Big Man’s either-or choice here is crucial since his refusal to give mercy also foreshadows his refusal to receive mercy, his refusal to repent of his own cruelties, and ultimately, his refusal of redemption. Unheeded of the Lord’s Prayer, which affirms the justice inherent in Divine mercy, to “forgive our debts as we also forgive our debtors”—that is, the paradoxical “If you wish to be forgiven, forgive”—Big Man insists upon justice *without* mercy towards Len, tragically choosing the same for himself in pronouncing his own judgement that he would “rather be damned than go along with [Len]”. Illustrating how an ultimate union between condemnation and mercy is impossible, Big Man wanders back toward the bus grumbling and whimpering.

Parley with an Apostate

Shortly after this, there appears an Apostate Bishop from the bus who professes an impossible creed of answering perpetual questions only with more questions, until he finally concludes that there are no final conclusions, exposing a self-negating and absurd belief *without* beliefs. His creed can be summed up as “a journey without a destination” embodied in his cliché, “To travel hopefully is better than to arrive”, which essentially describes aimless wandering rather than progress, since he regards no destination or standard by which the success of his journey can be measured.

He meets a Bright Solid Spirit named Dick, an old friend whom the Apostate Bishop belittles as “narrow-minded” for “coming to believe in a literal Heaven and Hell” and for his late conversion before death to orthodox Christian faith, which conflicts with the Apostate Bishop’s daring “honest opinions” and “heroic” unanswerable questions which “risked ridicule” and “defied the spirit of the age”. Dick counters that the Bishop’s former heretical opinions—as well as his own—were neither honest nor heroic, especially his pseudo-paradoxical, self-annihilating conclusion that there is no such thing as a final conclusion, and that the Apostate Bishop merely rode the current of modern, fashionable, iconoclastic ideas that brought him fame, book sales, and status.

Having confused the grey town’s twilight and impending darkness for “continual hope of morning”, the Bishop is incredulous when Dick reveals to him that

the grey town is actually *Hell*. Though Dick offers the Bishop a true path to Heaven—an entrance to “a land not of questions but of answers” and of “Eternal Fact” as well as “forgiveness for having perverted [his talents]” with “sins of the intellect”—the Bishop wants neither answers nor forgiveness, as he values vain renown and reputation over humble repentance and righteousness as his heart’s true desires. Here, the Apostate Bishop confronts his own either-or scenario, since *hubris* allows no quarter to humility, until finally, he rejects his friend’s offer, remembering that he must run off to present a theological paper to an audience in Hell.

The Preacher and the Narrator: Thy Will Be Done

Though Presbyterian minister and author George MacDonald deserves far more ink than space permits here, suffice it to say, he is the Bright Spirit who pleasantly surprises the Narrator as his own Empyrean guide. Here, the Narrator most resembles C. S. Lewis since Lewis claimed that MacDonald’s fantasy novel *Phantastes* had “baptized [his] imagination”¹⁰ when Lewis was a hard-bitten atheist, beginning his own ascent heavenward. When the narrator asks MacDonald if souls can really choose to remain in Heaven of their own volition, MacDonald boils his affirmation of free will down to a single choice: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done’, and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done’. All that are in Hell choose it. Without self-choice, there would be no Hell.” In support of this distinction, and in contrast to William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, MacDonald asserts that salvation and damnation hang upon a clear either-or choice that honors God’s will or not: “There is but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to Him and bad when it turns from Him.” Just ask King Solomon.

Penitent Profligate

To illustrate Lewis’ point that the path of discernment in deference to Divine will leads not only to wisdom but to redemption, MacDonald moves deeper into Heaven with the Narrator until they spy a Dark Oily Ghost contending with a Red Lizard flickering upon the ghost’s shoulder and whispering into his ear. Simply put, the Red Lizard embodies the ghost’s lustful desires, which the ghost does not want to

give up, even though his body can no longer fulfill them. Exercising conscience and discernment enough to know that he cannot bring the lizard with him into Heaven, he cannot convince himself on his own power to let go of his vice, which causes him shame and embarrassment. Choosing his fruitless desires of the flesh over the hope for Heaven, the Dark Oily Ghost begins his return to Hell with the lizard until an Angel arrives and offers to kill the lizard, and along with it, the ghost's lusts. After listing multiple excuses for resisting the Angel's offer and fearing that destroying the lizard will destroy himself as well, the ghost finally breaks down, confessing that it would be better to suffer another death "than to live with this creature" and consents to the Angel's offer with anguished cries of "God help me", whereupon the Angel kills the lizard. To the Narrator's astonishment, the Dark Oily Ghost suddenly transforms into a great solid man, and the lizard is resurrected upon its death into a silver and gold stallion—the embodiment of what the man's corporeal desires were originally intended to become before they were perverted by lust. The "new-made man" rides into heaven upon his redeemed desire, escaping the looming twilight of the grey-town's infernal nightfall to "the rose-brightness of that everlasting morning".

The Point

Thus, the mind, in concert with the soul, is an instrument not for descending into rife

confusion, but for arising to right conclusions, and Lewis concludes in *The Great Divorce* that personal sins must be recognized, rejected, repented, and rent asunder before the originally intended Good can be recovered, reborn, and resurrected into what it ought to have been in the first place, according to Divine intention. Such a transfiguration as experienced by the Dark Oily Ghost may seem difficult to believe until we have actually witnessed or experienced the miracle of mercy truly sought, offered, and received, but how many of us sincerely seek the breaking light of Divine truth and grace that beckons to be followed, cherished, and reflected as inspiration for others to do the same? On the other hand, how many of us mirror phantastic "faces of impossibilities", chasing after false fleeting light amid encroaching twilight, without considering the darkness, blindness, and chaos that always follow? Twilight zone indeed. . .

Because wisdom does not compromise truth, the road to wisdom is paved with discernment rather than excess, since truth must be known before it can be confessed and championed. Such enlightenment only proves possible through careful discernment between true vs. false, right vs. wrong, and Divine will vs. self-will, as opposed to muddling good with evil and Heaven with Hell as moral equivalents for the purpose of indulging excess while abolishing both judgement and consequence. If we wrongly accept the "disastrous error" of

Blake's Marriage proposal and its plighted union between decadence and Divinity as true, we risk discovering too late the true wisdom and catastrophic reality of another profound paradox, that even a "morality" without morality has its consequences.

William Randall Lancaster is a musician and English Department Chair at Father Ryan High School in Nashville, Tennessee.

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6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. vi.
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