

Shadows that Fall: The Immanence of Heaven in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald

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Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will.
(Novalis)

*Solids whose shadow lay
Across time, here
(All subterfuge dispelled)
Show hard and clear.
(C.S. Lewis, "Emendation for the End of Goethe's Faust")*

C.S. Lewis's impressions of heaven, including the distinctive notions of Shadow-lands and *Sehnsucht*, were shaped by George MacDonald's fiction.¹ The vision of heaven Lewis and MacDonald share is central to their stories because it constitutes the *telos* of their main characters; for example, the quest for heaven is fundamental to both Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress* and MacDonald's "The Golden Key." Throughout their fiction, both writers reveal a world haunted by heaven and both relate rapturous human longing after the source of earthly glimpses; both show that the highest function of art is to initiate these visions of heaven; and both describe a heaven that swallows up Earth in an all-embracing finality.

The play *Shadowlands* is aptly named; for Lewis, the greatest earthly joys were merely intimations of another world where beauty, in Hopkins's words, is "kept / Far with fonder a care" ("The Golden Echo" lines 44-45). He was repeatedly "surprised by Joy," overcome with flashes of *Sehnsucht* during which he felt he had "tasted Heaven" (*Surprised* 135). For Lewis, ". . . heaven remembering throws / Sweet influence still on earth . . ." ("The Naked Seed" 19-20). This "sweet influence" is a desire, not satisfaction; in his words, it is a "hunger better than any other fullness" ("Preface" from *Pilgrim* 7). In the "Weight of Glory" he describes this experience as the yearning to be "united with the beauty . . . to bathe in it, to become part of it We cannot mingle with the pleasures we see," he writes. "But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in" (37).

Robin, “The Man Born Blind” in Lewis’s short story by that name, is a symbol of this intense desire to find the source or form of beauty, of “light.” Not content merely to see things *by means of* light, he **[end of page 43]** yearns for the light itself and longs to “mingle” with it. In desperation he casts himself into a shining, mist-filled ravine in an effort to embrace the “light, solid light, that you could drink in a cup or bathe in!” (103). Robin’s death illustrates that attempting to grasp the source of *Sehnsucht* is futile in this world. As Lewis notes in an early poem, if one gropes in the darkness, “fretted by desire,” one comes “still no nearer to the Light” (“In Praise of Solid People”). Nevertheless, innate desires always have objects, and thus, as Lewis argues clearly in his non-fiction and implicitly in his fiction, there must be a fitting object to *Sehnsucht* beyond this world: shadows possess originals.² In *The Last Battle*, Lord Digory describes why the old Narnia resembled the new: “[It] was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here And of course it is different: as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream” (160-161). As Digory notes, the idea is not really new — it is “all in Plato” (161). In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis further elucidates the Platonic concept of perfect Forms reflected imperfectly on Earth: “the material world . . . is the copy of an invisible world . . . [;] it is we who are the allegory” (44-45).³ Aslan himself assures the children: “You are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning” (*Battle* 173).

In *Unspoken Sermons*, George MacDonald writes of the concealed beauty reflected by the real world: “The heavens and the earth are around us that it may be possible for us to speak of the unseen by the seen; for the outermost husk of creation has correspondence with the deepest things of the Creator” (*Selections* 33). This concept resonates through MacDonald’s fiction. In *What’s Mine’s Mine*, for example, Ian speaks of experiencing all the things of nature “only for the sake of what they say to us. As our sense of smell brings us news of fields far off, so those fields, or even the smell only that comes from them, tell us of things, meanings, thoughts, intentions beyond them, and embodied in them” (211). Like Lewis’s Robin, blind Tibbie in *Alec Forbes of Howglen* perceives that “light” has a source. She argues that she knows better even than Annie what light is: “Ye canna ken what blin’ness is; but I doobt ye ken what the licht is” (195). For true light is not a thing of the eyes only, but a metaphor for a higher beauty: “Syne ye hae the licht in yersel—in yer ain hert; an’ ye maun ken what it is. Ye canna mistak’

it" (193).

David Neuhouser, in his essay "George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis," notes some passages in MacDonald's novel *Robert Falconer* that resemble Lewis's "far-travell'd gleams" ("Sweet Desire" 1). Robert experiences "a strange longing after something 'he knew [44] not nor could name'" (123). In discussing this indefinite desire, the narrator concludes, in a fashion similar to Lewis's argument for the source of *Sehnsucht*, that "There must be a glory in those heavens that depends not upon our imagination Some spirit must move in that wind that haunts us with a kind of human sorrow" (123). The clearest image in MacDonald's fiction of how earth whispers of heaven, however, is probably the source for Lewis's "Shadow-Lands." In "The Golden Key," Tangle and Mossy travel together and grow old in a valley filled with "a sea of shadows," shadows thrown by a place inhabited by elegant creatures and graced with beautiful foliage invisible to their sight (193). The two friends weep in that empty valley because they can only see the "unspeakable beauty" in profile; they long after the "country whence the shadows fell" (195). When they finally come to the threshold of their destination, they know they are approaching the source of those shadows of beauty; they know they will soon "see face to face."

Concerning the notion of *Sehnsucht* that is so pivotal to Lewis's works, his friend Sheldon Vanauken argues that "secretly we are all perhaps the Questing Knight. And yet, whatever the object of our quest, we learn when we find it that it does not ever contain *the* joy that broke our heart with longing This, I think," Vanauken continues, "is what C. S. Lewis' life and writings are about" (*Severe* 207-208). *Sehnsucht* awakens an "inconsolable longing" for palpable beauty. Joy cries, "It is not I. I am only a reminder. Look! Look! What do I remind you of?" (*Surprised* 176). The longing to one day "enter in" to that which is beautiful "is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods," Lewis writes in "The Weight of Glory." "They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul: but it can't. They tell us that 'beauty born of murmuring sound' will pass into a human face; but it won't. Or not yet?" ("Glory" 37).

More than a reference to Shelley, the analogy of the west wind sweeping into the human soul is the foundation for *Till We Have Faces*. When Psyche claims that she lives in a palace and has a divine husband who only visits her at night, Orual tries to call her back from this imaginary lover and his "horrible, new happiness" only to discover that he is a god after all. Boreas, the West-wind, comes to Psyche in darkness in order to conceal

his splendour (292). Eventually this god, “the only dread and beauty there is,” grants forgiveness to Orual (307). Psyche’s child-like acceptance of the Wind’s goodness is rewarded by his nightly visits, but when she betrays his trust, both she and Orual have to pass through trials before they can see him face to face. The original moments of rapture without sight, when the soul is mysteriously swept away, given an invisible palace, [45] and made love to by night, represent the ecstasy of religious experience (moments of *Sehnsucht*) that declare the existence of an unseen god and palace. Sensing that the soul has experienced something beyond this world, one can either with Orual deny its goodness and even existence, or with Psyche look ahead to the day when the West-wind reveals himself.⁴

In MacDonald the North Wind is a Christ-figure who sweeps away a soul and gives it a taste of heaven. She is mysterious, and, like Psyche, the boy Diamond responds to the divine wind or inspiration with absolute trust, sensing the depth of the beauty he sees in her. For both writers the use of the wind-image is telling, especially in the Greek context of Psyche’s story and the double meaning of the word *pneuma*. Like the West-wind, who is called the Shadow-brute by ignorant villagers, North Wind is called “Bad Fortune, sometimes Evil Chance, sometimes Ruin” (*North* 364). But the child Diamond has faith that her actions are all good, even as Psyche trusts that Boreas has a reason for hiding himself. Diamond must pass through the North Wind in order to reach her Back; the way is painful (*North* 112) and the story suggests that North Wind takes Diamond once more to her Back when he dies. Orual goes through trials and arrives at last at the palace before her death. When she dies there is little doubt that her soul has finally been swept away by the West-wind.

The highest function of art for Lewis is to reflect true beauty and to inspire *Sehnsucht*. The best example he offers of this type of art is *Phantastes* itself, in which, as he recounts in *Surprised by Joy*, he discovered a catalyst for the most poignant moments of Joy in his life. He saw a “bright shadow coming out of the book into the real world and resting there, transforming all common things and yet itself unchanged”; his “imagination was baptised” (146). This image of the bright shadow is a reversal of Anodos’s shadow of self that steals the fantastical from things it falls upon. In illuminating the closeness of the “world beyond,” *Phantastes* shaped Lewis’s notion of “glimpses of heaven” by sheer example: it was a conductor of *Sehnsucht* in itself and thus perfectly fulfilled the aim of art. As the unicorn explains in *The Last Battle* upon reaching the New Narnia: “The reason why we loved the old

Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this” (162). That which truly inspires a vision of beauty is necessarily a shadow of heaven, where final Beauty waits. In the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lucy reads a story in the Magician’s Book that seemed to point so far beyond itself that it could not be remembered, but “ever since that day what Lucy means by a good story is a story which reminds her of the forgotten story in the Magician’s Book” (131).

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One possible antecedent for the Magician’s Book is in *Phantastes* where Anodos reads the fairy-books that “glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness” (146). Like Lucy, he “carried away in [his] soul some of the exhalations of their undying leaves” (179). The precise role of art for MacDonald, though, is more clearly described in his short story “The Shadows.” Ralph Rinkelmann believes that he has seen a *true* vision: “for instead of making common things look commonplace, as a false vision would have done, it had made common things disclose the wonderful that was in them. ‘The same applies to all art as well,’ thought Ralph Rinkelmann” (114). This brings to mind Lewis’s experience with *Phantastes*: it transformed “all common things” (*Surprised* 146). The artist grants us glimpses of heaven.

Lewis argues that heaven, as the final reality, embraces the past, making all of life heaven for those who reach it. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis has MacDonald say, in describing the nature of heaven, “The good man’s past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven And that is why, at the end of all things . . . the Blessed will say ‘We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven,’ and the Lost, ‘We were always in Hell’ And both will speak truly” (62). The eternity of humanity’s final condition has a reciprocal effect that transforms the entire journey into the “foothills” of heaven. In fact, even hell is a “state of mind” and located under a blade of grass in heaven, for “Heaven is reality itself” (63). The Fox, Orual’s mentor, looks forward to a “far distant day when the gods become wholly beautiful, or we at last are shown how beautiful they always were,” a time when “this age of ours will. . . be the distant past. And the Divine Nature can change the past. Nothing is yet in its true form” (*Faces* 305). For the children of the Narnia tales, all their life in the “Shadow-lands” 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 no one on earth has read” (*The Last Battle* 228). Or, as Lewis puts it in the poem “Wormwood,” “All that seemed earth is Hell, or Heaven” (12).

Again we can see precedents for this notion in MacDonald's symbolism. In *Lilith*, for example, when Mr. Vane sees the predicament of the skeletons who seem to be in purgatorial suffering, he is confused because so many other elements of this land are good. He cries out: "These are too wretched for any world, and this cannot be hell, for the Little Ones are in it, and the sleepers too! What can it all mean? Can things ever come right for the skeletons?" (95). He gets a characteristically cryptic reply from Mr. Raven, who in some ways [47] resembles the guiding figure of MacDonald in *The Great Divorce*: "There are words too big for you and me: *all* is one of them, and *ever* is another . . . You are not in hell . . . Neither am I in hell. But those skeletons are in hell!" (96). Raven speaks of the skeletons slowly growing able to love and says they will "by and by develop faces" (96). This formation of identity through suffering is a necessary part of their growth. Similarly, considering her past ordeals, Orual asks: "How can [the gods] meet us face to face till we have faces?" (294). Since Lewis noted in the Preface to his MacDonald anthology that he has never written a book without quoting his "master," we can assume that this is the source of Lewis's title.

George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis both wrote about the world as purposefully filled with catalysts of *Sehnsucht*, pockets of beauty designed to lift up the eyes of the beholder. These experiences of true beauty are visions of heaven in disguise, visions provoked by art fulfilling its most noble purpose. If we will have "eyes to see" it, heaven is beneath the husk of nature: "We are summoned to pass in through nature, beyond her, into that splendour which she fitfully reflects" ("Glory" 37). In *Lilith*, when Vane awakes from his sleep, Mara defines the idea of a heaven that is present on Earth: "I told you, brother, all would be well!—When next you would comfort, say, 'What will be well, is even now well.' She gave a little sigh, and I thought it meant, 'But they will not believe you!'" (250, emphasis added). MacDonald was committed to revealing glimpses of heaven to those who do not see heaven in their lives. His writings, and those of Lewis, are true art if they can make their readers taste something unearthly for a moment, something that suggests that "all shall be well."

Notes

1. In order to offset other comparisons that consider the entire scope of MacDonald's influence on Lewis (see Sayer 1988, Durie 1990, Neuhouser 1996), I have narrowed my discussion to the idea of heaven and how it is illuminated by their fiction. To uncover the substance of Lewis' literary debt to his "master" will require further

study of particular symbolic antecedents in MacDonald's stories that take new form in Lewis's works.

2. Peter Kreeft and others have called this "C. S. Lewis's Argument from Desire." See Kreeft, Peter. *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989. 201 ff.

3. For an insightful discussion of Plato, MacDonald, and Lewis, see Frank Riga's "The Platonic Imagery of George MacDonald and C. S. Lewis" in McGillis, Roderick, ed. *For the Childlike* Metuchen: ChLA, 1992. 111-132.

4. Like Orual, many will deny the authenticity of intuitions of the transcendent and claim that believers in heaven simply exaggerate earthly qualities to people an imaginary celestial world. Lewis answers forcefully that the situation could just as easily be reversed—that earthly beauties derive themselves from Platonic Ideas.

An excellent analogy of this can be found in *The Silver Chair*. The Queen of the

[48] Underworld, trying to convince the children and Puddleglum that there is no Overworld or Narnia, mocks them: "You have seen lamps, and so you imagined a bigger and better lamp and called it the *sun*. You've seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat, and so it's to be called a *lion* Look how you can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world" (152). But of course their very situation refutes the Queen's argument; the reader is aware that the lamp is a copy of the sun and not vice-versa. Puddleglum responds, "In that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones Four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world" (155).

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