A Western Vision of Heaven:

C. S. Lewis’s Platonic Imagery in *The Great Divorce*

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C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) dubbed himself an “Old Western Man” referring to his classical idealism and, from this Platonic light, his views about the shadows of earthly experience. As a Christian scholar, moreover, Lewis merges Plato’s Reality with the Bible’s Heaven, as many have done before and since. Lewis thereby assigns readers the task of recognizing the religious imagery of the West—a land often viewed imaginatively and philosophically from Plato onwards as the shadowlands of an idealized Reality. This is the case in *The Great Divorce* (1946), a narrative that illustrates hell as a shadowy “grey town” and “Heaven is reality itself.” Given the abundance of Platonic imagery, one might wonder: How much does Lewis dream a Platonic dream in *The Great Divorce*? This question of synthesis touches the larger issue of distinguishing what in Christian literature derives from Athens and what from Jerusalem, as if to peel back the layers of Platonic imagery that overshadows (or highlights) more authentic imagery of heaven. Critics tend to approach this question from three differing dispositions and viewpoints: the *enchanted* assume that Lewis simply tells the story of human pilgrimage to heaven, and the *traditionalists* (like Lewis himself) acknowledge their “Old Western” idealism but not a fundamental distinction between Platonic and biblical imagery of the afterlife. However, *critical readers* find that Lewis smuggles in a problematic dualism with his Greco-Christian worldview that gives shape to a distinctly Western vision of heaven in works like *The Great Divorce*. Consequently, Lewis imagines a Heavenly Reality that privileges the ideal over the real, timeless eternity over created time, spirit over body, and reason over emotion in a dualism that Plato and his students could appreciate but possibly not Moses’ or Jesus’ disciples in showing how to get to heaven.

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2 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperCollins, 1946), 70; Lewis capitalizes Heaven signifying that he construes it as Plato’s divine ideals or forms, where everything is more real.

3 Traditional idealists, part of the philosophical heritage, recently include Wayne Martindale (2005), Adam Barkman (2009), and many views represented in *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (2010).

4 Critical readers include David Allred (2010), but they subordinatethe problem to Lewis’s good aims.
Key and Technical Terms (to be defined)

Platonic idealism

Philosophical dualism as part of a rational (and mystical) system of hierarchies

Storyboard Outline (topic sentences and any development sentences)

First, Lewis structures his narrative on Plato's ideal-real dichotomy and imagery, in which Plato's transcendent reality of the forms finds its locale in Lewis's heaven.

Second, Lewis borrows Plato's eternity-time opposition and imagery, in which eternity seems to be non-temporal.

Third, Lewis appropriates Plato's spirit-body imagery in the sense that spirits and reason are primary (the larger the better), and bodies and emotions are not trusted.

Fourth, since Platonism became a mystery religion, interesting problems of perspective and coherence result, old problems of Western (and Gnostic) dualism, when authors synthesize Platonic allegory with Christian perspectives, however seemingly successfully.

Draft conclusion: Lewis may be the most successful modern poet in the tradition of Greco-Roman Christianity, yet this traditional synthesis results in a problematic dualism that ultimately confuses the biblical fall with idealism's bias against human finitude.
Works Cited


