*Arch-Natural Psalms: The Poetry of The Great Divorce David Llewellyn Dodds*

In Lewis’s first published prose fiction, [*The Pilgrim’s Regress*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2011/08/08/the-pilgrim%e2%80%99s-regress-and-the-reader%e2%80%99s-progress/) (1933), the dream-vision is characterized in the last two books by poems amidst the prose. Perhaps not dissimilarly, in the later part of [*The Great Divorce*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2014/11/24/3/) (chs. 11, 13) the dreaming Lewis hears two songs, which, on closer inspection prove to be adaptations of two psalms. Not versifications, as have been common since the Reformation, and produced by such poets as Wyatt, the Sidneys, Herbert, and Milton, but a sort of prose poems like the chantable Coverdale translations of the *Psalter* published in *The Book of Common Prayer* (which Lewis later called “in beauty, in poetry, […] beyond all […] I know” – shortly before accepting an invitation to help revise them).  Indeed, the adaptations observe their orthographic conventions of capitals beginning the verses and colons subdividing them.

Who sings them? The answer for the second (an adaptation of Psalm 91:3-7, 11-13, 16) is easiest: “Bright Spirits” – presumably the “bright Spirits, not the Spirits of men,” who led [Sarah Smith](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2015/03/16/sarah/)’s procession (ch. 12). However, since the second of the “Bright People” whom Lewis ever heard speak he  called a “Spirit” (ch. 5), it is conceivable that they, or both angels and humans together, are meant. There is a similar ambiguity when he hears “their singing” at that first appearance of her procession (the details of which music Lewis cannot remember).

Who sings the first adaptation (of Psalm 110:1-4) is harder to answer. It follows the only dialogue between an Angel and a Ghost. But Lewis says, “It was the voice of that earth, those woods and those waters” and then glosses this, “The Nature or Arch-nature of that land rejoiced […]. It sang”.

This recalls an earlier event, of speech rather than song, and one-sided admonition and invitation rather than dialogue. Then, Lewis “knew that the waterfall itself was speaking” to Ikey, and next saw “that it was also a bright angel, who stood, like one crucified” – and it speaks of “the very leaves and the blades of grass” delighting to teach (ch. 6).

Is the “Nature or Arch-nature”, then, angelic, as that “Water-Giant” (ch. 7) was?

The earlier scene also proves a foil of that with Sarah Smith. Ikey is the second Ghost to talk with Lewis (ch. 2) and one of the Ghosts treated at greatest length. When Lewis sees him again (ch. 6) he is trying to put into practice his earlier plan to “come back with some *real* commodities” and so “be a public benefactor”.  Ikey had said he was “not going this trip for my health” and didn’t “think it would suit me up there.” Lewis learns that what he calls Ikey’s apple-bearing “*via dolorosa* to the bus” is a fruitless one when the angel tells Ikey, “You cannot take it back. There is no room for it in Hell.” The scene could be a working out of Mr. Vane’s brief confession in [MacDonald](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2013/03/04/be-careful-what-you-read-c-s-lewis-literary-encounter-with-george-macdonald/)’s *Lilith* (1895) “to an altogether foolish dream of opening a commerce in gems between the two worlds – happily impossible”, and, not unlike Ikey, he had similarly vain aspirations “for the development of a noble state” (ch. 34).

[](https://apilgriminnarnia.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/based-on-great-divorce-lewis.jpg)The striking description of the angel standing “like one crucified” seems reminiscent of a vision of which Chesterton, for example, gives a vivid account in his *Saint Francis of Assisi* (1923), saying  he saw ”a vast winged being like a seraph spread out like a cross”, and noting, “St. Bonaventure distinctly says that St. Francis doubted how a seraph could be crucified, since those awful and ancient principalities were without the infirmity of the Passion.”  In any case, the “Water-Giant”, like One crucified, as unfallen creature, obediently, freely “poured himself perpetually down” – something the penitent, like Sarah, can also do, while the impenitent, like Ikey, cannot yet do so, “not even the best and noblest” (ch. 11).

If angels and “the bright people” can truly attempt benefaction as someone like Ikey cannot, there are still limits to what they can do. Exactly echoing the words of “the Water-Giant”, MacDonald tells Lewis, of Sarah, “There’s not room for her”: like the apple, “She couldn’t *fit* into Hell.”  “Only the Greatest of all can make Himself small enough to enter Hell.”

Here we meet two points about the psalms and their adaptations. Years later, in *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis discusses the likelihood of both of these psalms being understood in the New Testament not only as Messianic but as Christological in the sense of applying to Jesus as Messiah because that is how Jesus Himself understood them (chs. 11-12). The adapted Psalm 91 verses apply to Sarah because, as she says (ch. 12), she is “in Love Himself” and so “not lonely” – indeed, “The Happy Trinity is her home” – and in Christ in the Trinity she is “Strong, not weak.” She “will not stub her toes” as Ikey or even Lewis are still likely to do. And she could as well say to them as to Frank, “You shall be the same. Come and see.”

Behind Ikey’s aspirations to be a “benefactor” is fear: in the expectation “It will be dark presently” and “they come out when it’s dark”. These are hints of the devils so present in *Screwtape*, and seemingly so absent here. In *Christ in the Psalms* (2000), Patrick Henry Reardon, in discussing Psalm 91 (Septuagint and Vulgate 90), notes “the sustained persuasion that this psalm has to do with divine protection from satanic attack”.  And the adaptation in lines 4-6 seems to draw upon the Greek and Latin rather than simply, say, Coverdale, where he has “sickness” and they ‘daimoniou’/’daemonio’ and Douay-Rheims “devil”, while he and Douay-Rheims share “terror by [or “of the”] night”. (Lewis in fact named St. Jerome and Coverdale together in his praise of psalm translators “in beauty, in poetry, […] beyond all whom I know.”)

But it does so in a surprising way. Line 4 begins, “Bogeys will not scare her in the dark”.1  The 1929 *Concise Oxford Dictionary*notes ‘Bogy’/’Bogey’ as quoted only since 1840, and gives as range of meaning “The devil; goblin (nursery, *the b. man*); bugbear”, cross-referencing “Bogle” (“Phantom, goblin; bugbear; scarecrow”) which is said to have been introduced from “Scotch writers”. In this one word, the devil(s) can be at once taken seriously as enemy, and seriously scorned into place as foolish to near inanity. Almost [*The Screwtape Letters*](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2012/02/09/70th-anniversary-of-the-screwtape-letters/) distilled to a noun.

As Sarah has spoken to Frank (though somehow bifurcated, or shrunken to the Dwarf while projecting – and succumbing to – the*persona* of the Tragedian), so hers is a psalm-adaptation of external relations, whether dangers averted, the company of creatures, or even the interrelations with the Persons of “The Happy Trinity” in her response to what Lewis elsewhere calls “the arch-natural appeal of the tenderest and closest personal relation that can be imagined” (*Studies in Words* (1967 ed. 2), p. 33).

The encounter and psalm-adaptation which precede hers are distinctly different in various particulars. Neither talking lizard nor mute stallion have human appearance, yet Ghost and Lizard converse with each other (as Dwarf and Tragedian do not), though the Ghost also says killing the Lizard would “tear me in pieces.” They seem to appear distinct, being in relation to each other, while also being one. And what sings is – or, sing in the plural, are – “The Nature or Arch-nature”, but not seen as at once “waterfall” and “also a bright angel” or any variety of such. And it “rejoiced to have been once more ridden, and therefore consummated, in the person [!] of the [horse](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2015/03/23/horses/).”

Where in Psalm 110 in exegesis within the New Testament “my Lord” is both David’s descendant and his Lord, Jesus, and “The Lord” is His Father, in this adaptation, “The Master” is (or includes) Jesus, and “our master” is perhaps the “new-made man” become rider, perhaps, too, each and all humans (potentially) such. (Interestingly, while the first “Lord” represents the Tetragrammaton in the Hebrew text, “master” is the preferred rendering of the second (*l’adoni*) in some Jewish translations.) To the psalm’s “Sion”, corresponds this song’s “the very Place” – surely translating the Hebrew Name of God, ‘HaMakom’, and so also corresponding to the psalm’s “The Lord” in three of these four verses. Behind the whole adaptation might well be seen the seventh in the second series of MacDonald’s *Unspoken Sermons* (1886), “Abba, Father!”, with a text from Romans 8:15, and especially its attention to the passage from verses 18 to 25 of the same chapter.

When the Psalm 110 adaptation has been sung, Lewis, responding to the question “Do ye understand all this”, speaks of “everything […] that is in us”, and MacDonald stresses the need of every thing to be “killed”, to submit “to death”, quoting from 1 Corinthians 15:44, and insisting that Lewis ask, “if the risen body even of an appetite is as grand a horse as ye saw, what would the risen body of  maternal love or friendship be?” – and so preparing for the appearance of Sarah as the foil of Pam (and of the flirtatious Ghost) as well as of Ikey.

The details of these songs of “new-made” people (in relation to the whole of themselves, and to the rest of creation, and especially to the Angels, as well as to their Creator) – of what we might call these ‘Arch-natural psalms’ (though what exactly that could mean, is not the least of the questions) – in comparison to their sources, invite and reward more attention than can be given here: both where they stay close to their source-psalms, and the success, or otherwise, of their exuberance and humour where they do not. But I might note, as parting suggestions for further brooding, the modernity and historical and imaginative sweep of the second, with its bullets, germs, clear glass, rattlesnakes, knights, and dinosaurs, and the challenge of what the first may entertain about Angels and “Arch-nature”.2

1Compare  – and contrast – *Dymer* (1926), III, 27, “A bogy will not scare me” in its context (and note, too, the “Bogies” and “bogy” of VII, 12 and 31 in their context). I assume the use of “Bogeys” in the song goes beyond the sense “Ghosts, plain and simple: mere bogies” (ch. 9), while including it.

2[Arend Smilde](https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2012/01/28/great-links-allusions-in-the-screwtape-letters-and-popular-authors-on-lewis/) has kindly drawn my attention to Lewis’s letter of 10 December 1958 to Corbin Scott Carnell: “I think I took over the expression Arch-Nature [in *The Great Divorce*] because it was C.W.’s own. The implication is, I suppose, the Platonic one & that the Real is not *ganz anderes* but the archetype of the Phenomenal.”