

# Echoes of the Eternal in C.S. Lewis's Fiction

## Review Essay

**Marsha Daigle-Williamson**, *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2015) \$14.95 (paperback), 275p.

In *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis*, Dr. Marsha Daigle-Williamson invites readers to imagine the links between Dante's classic text and C.S. Lewis's fiction. As soon as we ask the question about Dante's influence in Lewis's work, we can begin to see these links. Three of Lewis's essays in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, spanning more than twenty-five years of work as a critic, are about Dante. He also discussed Dante in his "Panegyric for Dorothy L. Sayers" and referred to Dante hundreds of times in his letters and writings, from the point he learned to read Dante in the original when he was eighteen through to his last books, *Letters to Malcolm* and *The Discarded Image*. When talking about Milton or Donne or imaginative literature, Lewis finds himself going back to Dante. He was for Lewis the West's master poet with a genius science fiction mind who wrote the most theologically rich and integrated work of the late Middle Ages. As a literary historian of Medieval and Renaissance literature, Dante was—and remains for researchers after Lewis—an almost unmatched figure.

Given this literary interest, in what ways do we find Dante making his way into Lewis's fiction? *The Great Divorce* immediately springs to mind as the story most obviously influenced by *The Divine Comedy*, with its heaven and hell geography and purgatorial principle. *The Silver Chair*, too, has resonances of Dante's narrative and sense of space. *The Last Battle* is about heaven, *The Screwtape Letters* is about hell, and *Till We Have Faces* includes a purgatorial last judgement netherworld. It is clear there are a number of intextual links back to Dante from Lewis.

In *Reflecting the Eternal*, Marsha Daigle-Williamson has most fully answered the question of Dante's influence upon Lewis's fiction. In a strong, detailed, book-by-book analysis, Daigle-Williamson gathers together the reading data of each of Lewis's published long-form fiction works in order to make every possible link back to *The Divine Comedy*.

### ***Describing the Eternal***

*Reflecting the Eternal* takes each of Lewis's works of published fiction in chronological order, covering Narnia in a single chapter and choosing not

to treat Lewis's poetry or any of his incomplete, posthumously published work. The chapters are each similarly organized, including: a two- to four-page summary of Lewis's work; a discussion of that work's fictional world in conversation with Dante's imaginative universe; a discussion of the journey of the main character(s) and how that pilgrimage has parallels in *The Divine Comedy*; a consideration of the characters (or objects) in Lewis's work that fulfill the role of Beatrice to his protagonists; and a very brief conclusion.

Though a dense, exegetical, book-by-book detailing of a theme rarely makes good reading—even if it is an ideal way to approach research—the unique features in each chapter provide a great deal of interest. Though I would have liked to see more focus on the spatial geography and speculative cosmography of each text, few critics are even considering that shaping of imaginative construct as a point of inquiry. Echoes are not always verbal, but might be imagistic, spatial, rhythmic, structural, or doctrinal. Fortunately, Daigle-Williamson does take time to consider more than just the verbal and literary echoes, allusions, and quotations that are the focus of her work.

The question of a Beatrician (or Virgilian) character in each of Lewis's works is a fascinating one. If not pressed too far, Daigle-Williamson does it very well. Not a slave to her outline, she appropriately splits her chapter on *That Hideous Strength* into two paths: that of Jane Studdock on the road to St. Anne's, and that of Mark Studdock on his way into Belbury. As noted by Joe Christopher—one of Daigle-Williamson's most important dialogue partners—Ransom is a Beatrician character for Jane. The reader can parallel Jane's encounter with Ransom in the study with Dante's encounter with Beatrice in the garden—and consequently see that Beatrician encounter emerge again and again in Lewis's fiction. In a dramatic reversal worthy of more critical work, Jane emerges as the Beatrice for Mark, both as the theological and figural centre of his conversion.

### ***Evaluating the Eternal***

The most substantial section of each chapter, the journey section, is a line-by-line treatment of all the pertinent quotations, allusions, and echoes of Dante in Lewis's fiction. Though it might be easiest to get bogged down here, this is where many of the "aha!" moments are. The connections to the Ransom material, for example, provide layer after layer of new meaning for the reader. I was slowly won over to the connection between Dante and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*: in the end Daigle-Williamson jolted me out of my Homeric rut to provide a whole new way of reading Lewis's Narnian aquatic travelogue.

Partly because of the rigor of her analysis and the convincing nature of her thesis, there are moments where Daigle-Williamson pushes her conclusions too far. She highlights, for example, how Dante's featured sins find their way into Lewis's work. While there is value here, I do not find the cardinal sin analysis in Ransom to be consistent and strong as a whole. Orual's "blas-

phemy" in *Till We Have Faces* is a critical feature of the structure of Lewis's novel and central to the narrative, so I am not sure the Dantean parallels are exact. Blasphemy is an open-and-shut case for Dante, but in *TWHF* it is a more nuanced question of self-delusion and revelation. Is it not right of Orual to resist the gods that she has been presented with—dim and shadowy versions of the true God she cannot see? It is true that her self-imposed and learned blindness limits her vision of divinity, but her complaint against the gods—her blasphemy—ultimately leads her to see the God beyond gods (182–7). In the case of *Till We Have Faces*, as in the Ransom books, Daigle-Williamson's analysis is applied too rigidly.

Where the treatment of the named sins in Dante and *TWHF* might have been stretched, her work on *The Great Divorce* shows the intimate architectural unity between Lewis's and Dante's dreams of the afterlife. While I was not won over by her argument that the George MacDonald character was a "detailed composite of five characters from *The Divine Comedy*" (137)—partly because of the question of intention I will discuss below—her inquiry bears interesting fruit and demonstrates well the "continuous, multilayered echoes of Dante's poem" (137). The division of the ten main narratives of *The Great Divorce* into two tables—five stories of perverted love and five stories of disordered love—has merit. Daigle-Williamson's argument, then, is that Lewis is tapping in not to Dante's discussion of the seven cardinal sins, but to his underlying logic of love behind the sins. It is a sophisticated argument worthy of consideration, but it also helps any reader to see Lewis's stories more in a more dynamic way.

Beyond the unsurpassed detailed analysis of Lewis's fiction, it is this feature of helping us as readers where *Reflecting the Eternal* is of most critical benefit. Again and again I was lifted to a new understanding of the rich resource that Dante was to Lewis as Marsha Daigle-Williams buoyed my understanding of both authors and their fictional worlds.

### ***Critiquing the Eternal***

Because *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis* was such a rich resource—excellently conceived and carefully researched—I am going to offer a substantial critique. Some of these criticisms and concerns are gaps in *Reflecting the Eternal*, while some are opportunities for further work in Lewis's use of Dante. Moreover, Daigle-Williamson's model of research could be considered for other Lewisian dialogue partner, such as Edmund Spenser, John Milton, Jane Austen, the Inklings, the Arthuriad, or classical authors. I am going to cover four main critiques: approach, theory, intentionality, and limitations, of which theory and intentionality are central concerns.

### ***Approaching the Eternal***

I have already admired Marsha Daigle-Williamson's adept use of book structure and detailed research, so I can offer a comment about the limitations of her particular approach in a way that everyone will recognize is a point of considering more than merely a point of criticism. In very minor ways, her excellent approach creates an artificial weakness in presentation.

Specifically, in treating Lewis chronologically, the first book we encounter is *The Pilgrim's Regress*. While Daigle-Williamson's analysis bears fruit even here, I found the Beatrician section in this chapter the least convincing and the most atypical of the book. Unlike Lewis's other novels, Daigle-Williamson makes the argument that the Island in *Pilgrim's Regress* is the theological equivalent to Beatrice in the *Comedy*; in other cases the Beatrician parallel is a person. I am a little skeptical of her overall argument that we should view Dante's *Comedy* and not *Bunyan's Progress* as the prime Urtext to *The Pilgrim's Regress*, but this idea and the analysis are worth consideration. In presenting the *Regress* first, though, with an unusual and less convincing figure of Beatrice, the first content chapter does not offer an ideal paradigm to the book.

This is linked to a second concern of presentation. After highlighting key points in the central journey section—and in some degree the Beatrice section—Daigle-Williamson lays out the pertinent Dantean parallels line-by-line through the text. While I would dearly love to see the spreadsheet behind the volume, there is a weakness to this approach. As the intertextual data is not weighted, exceptionally strong links are set next to weaker ones with little differentiation in the paragraph. Part of Daigle-Williamson's thesis is that Lewis is intentionally and carefully shaping his intertextual use of Dante. A vast amount of data—and there really is a large number of links—will not demonstrate this thesis, and I found myself as reader putting ✓ and X marks on the page next to stronger and weaker data.

A more nuanced approach and one that would increase readability would be to freely admit the thinner links but use the weight of the stronger links to carry the argument. Perhaps Daigle-Williamson began to see the pattern in Lewis's texts, and once she saw the pattern found it confirmed at every turn. For those of us not yet won over, a more cautious approach that admits to exceptions would be more credible overall.

### ***Theory of the Eternal***

In contemporary literary criticism there is perhaps an over-reliance upon literary theory and approaches that can sometimes be faddish or cause the text at issue to disappear. Granted that weakness, in Lewis studies there is not always a sufficient attention to theory. In the case of *Reflecting the Eternal*, inattention to theory means a loss of potential impact of a great book. One of these is the critical question of intentionality which is covered in the next

---

section. Here I will focus on two other points as examples of this missed opportunity.

### *The Theory of Intertextuality*

Marsha Daigle-Williamson's dialogue with secondary sources is superb, though made painful by the endnote layout of the text (a common publishing approach). Her bibliography of Lewis studies is one that any student should turn to for an orientation to the field. Missing from her bibliography, however, is a grounding in intertextual theory. The resources for studying intertextuality are rich, from Gérard Genette, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva of the 1960s, to later critics such as Harold Bloom, Umberto Eco, and John Hollander. While a complete expertise in the field is unnecessary, knowledge of a survey like Graham Allen's *Intertextuality* (2008) would show the potential that some grounding in theory could give.

For example, Daigle-Williamson is genius at recognizing that Dante's links in Lewis are multilayered, appearing in many forms beyond allusion and quotation. She has, however, an unnecessarily linear appreciation of the texts behind Lewis's text. Daigle-Williamson appreciates the Dante-to-Lewis link, but there are many possible text relationships, including: Dante taken up by Lewis as fiction writer; Dante taken up by Lewis as critic and then used in fiction; Dante taken up by a mediating author like Milton or Williams and then used by Lewis; Lewis in dialogue with both Dante and the secondary literature on Dante; Lewis working in Dante with his Bible or Virgil open; the cluster of mythological, classical, medieval, and biblical ideas and images coming to Lewis through Dante; a theological or literary question that Lewis considered on his own but turns to Dante as a conversation partner.

These are not all the possible intertextual links, and they are reduced to their simplest components. These idea-maps, however, make clear that the project of using Dante—whether conscious or not—is far more nuanced and complex than we might at first think. There is a richness to that multilayered reality that I think could enhance Daigle-Williamson's impact.

### *The Intertextuality of Lewis*

Following from this previous point, it is important to note that C.S. Lewis himself is one of the important thinkers about intertextuality, using various metaphors in his work to capture his organic and rhizomatic understanding of the development of literature. Specifically, Lewis did write an essay where he distinguished "Source" and "Influence" in the project of considering the intertextual relationship of an author and the texts that he or she is working with. Considering the essay, "The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version," would have provided Daigle-Williamson with a way of thinking about the kind of impact Dante had on Lewis in the text. She is an

expert at thinking about the multi-layered effect of Dante in Lewis's fiction when it comes to theme and structure, but less helpful in this critical distinction that Lewis himself makes.

This weakness may be an indication of the light way that Daigle-Williamson uses Lewis as a critic to his own material—though she does refer to Lewis's work on Dante at various points.

### *Intentionality in the Eternal*

Though I treat this point separately, the question of authorial intention is actually a point of theory that has occupied literary theory in the century since C.S. Lewis's early essay on "The Personal Heresy." I would like the reader to grant with me Daigle-Williamson's thesis that Lewis's fiction is saturated with Dante in a variety of expressions and at many levels of depth. A question naturally follows: to what degree was this intertextual layering intentional on Lewis's part?

In pp. 9–15 of the Introduction, Daigle-Williamson lays out critical foundational approaches: Lewis takes his lead from medieval authors both structurally and theologically. Dante is chief among the authors that Lewis follows, and Daigle-Williamson delineates six kinds of intertextuality—including the echo of world-building that is such a fresh innovation in her criticism. Lewis knows he is doing this kind of thing; his pushback on the modern fascination with "originality" and his insistence on a medieval outlook on authorship is evidence of this. Lewis delighted in using other authors and their fictional worlds in his own writing.

Marsha Daigle-Williamson, though, takes the presumption of Lewis's intentional shaping of previous books and book-worlds and imposes that presumption upon individual echoes and allusions. She writes "Lewis intends . . ." on p. 32 and throughout the text at various points. She cautions that not all of her examples were necessarily intended by Lewis, but she still sees the value in speculating about intention:

How conscious and deliberate are these parallels to Dante on Lewis's part? On several occasions in response to specific queries from readers, Lewis confirms that particular parallels with Dante in his novels are intentional. Otherwise, Lewis is silent. We can only wish that readers had asked him more questions. However, the sheer number of specific allusions and parallels are evidence, at the very least, that Dante's poem was an integral part of Lewis's thinking. (6)

The paragraph concludes correctly, but must we narrow "thinking" to the conscious activity of making links between two authors and their respective text-worlds? Daigle-Williamson clearly views the process as an active,

conscious one on Lewis's part, concluding that, "Once a specific genre was chosen [for his next piece of fiction], Lewis's use of Dante was necessarily tailored to that genre" (205).

I would push back on this point for various reasons. Primarily, we do not know all parts of Lewis's writing process, but only the final product supplemented by a few letters and an occasional draft scrap in archives. In her footnote to the section I quoted, Daigle-Williamson refers to a caution that Michael Ward gives about the hidden nature of an author's work, but reveals her hope that as time goes on "more and more of Lewis's literary strategies will be uncovered" (211). As a critic and writer and historian, I hope the same. But this fascination with scrying an obscured strategy can draw the reader away from the extraordinarily helpful analysis to the question of the credibility of the writing strategy thesis. In this case, there is simply not enough evidence to go far with Daigle-Williamson on the intentionality thesis.

Moreover, as we think of ourselves and our relationship with books, is not the process of intertextuality more dynamic than linear? True, we intentionally quote or echo an author at the dinner table, on social media, or in our writing. But have you not gone back to old work that you left alone for a while and discovered links that you never imagined? When we fully immerse ourselves in a text and an author as Lewis did of Dante and the period, we find literary accents slip into our speech and narrative perspectives begin to shift as the way we make connections or view the world takes on new forms. This intertextual relationship is subtle and sublime; the question of strategy and authorial intention, beyond its unavailability to us, is a different kind of question.

I would argue, then, that too often Daigle-Williamson speaks of "Lewis's use of Dante" (e.g., 201) when it might be more fruitful to separate the process of Lewis's writing from the product that he actually provides for us. For in that later question, Daigle-Williamson is a master, and we can agree with her that Dante is Lewis's guide in the way that Virgil was Dante's guide. This is an elegant argument. Moreover, distinguishing these things will highlight her very fine conclusion:

A reader can find many quotes from Dante in all of Lewis's nonfiction, including his letters, but after his first novel, Lewis never again quotes Dante's poem directly in his longer fiction. *The Divine Comedy* recedes from a kind of facile visibility to be woven into the fabric of Lewis's stories in subtle, powerful ways. (201–2)

### ***Limitations of the Eternal***

Finally, granted that *Reflecting the Eternal* is the critical text of Dante's influence on Lewis, I would like to note a few limitations. Some of these are no

doubt choices the author and publisher made, and really point to future work for scholarship rather than a critical weakness in the text.

First, while I understand the focus of *Reflecting the Eternal* was his novels (his prose speculative fiction), C.S. Lewis's poetry can enlighten his fiction. If Daigle-Williamson had trained her Dantean eye to *Dymer*, for example, there would no doubt be benefits. But I mean more than this. In the second of Lewis's "Five Sonnets," we read:

but first  
Down to the frozen centre, up the vast  
Mountain of pain, from world to world, he passed ... .  
(*Collected Poems* 423)

Here we see a Dantean allusion where Dante's spatial geography is echoed in the human experience of pain—and in a series of poems about echoes and with a number of other allusory hints. The lack of poetry in the volume is noticeable. Added to the note about Lewis as critic above, it makes me hope a second volume is in the works, perhaps subtitled *Dante's Divine Comedy in the Criticism and Poetry of C.S. Lewis*.

Second, as an amateur reader of Dante, I felt Daigle-Williamson did an excellent job bringing in just enough knowledge of *The Divine Comedy* to inform but not enough to overwhelm. I remain a little uncertain, though, of the similarities of and differences between the spirituality of Dante and Lewis. A comparative spiritual theology would be helpful.

Third, in the field of Milton, Charles Williams was absolutely essential to Lewis's thinking. What about Williams on Dante? Williams's *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943) appeared while Williams was living in Oxford and meeting regularly with the Inklings—and while Lewis still had eleven works of fiction to publish. Williams's volume on Beatrice was a literary conversion moment for Dorothy L. Sayers, and Lewis said of it that it was "a book every student of Dante must reckon with" (19 Mar 1959, Letter to Barbara Reynolds; *Collected Letters* 3: 1031). By my count, *The Figure of Beatrice* was referenced only twice, and one of these through another author. What influence did Williams's reading of Dante have on Lewis's infusion of Dante in his own life work? This remains an open question to me, but perhaps one that could be anticipated by Daigle-Williamson.

### **Conclusion**

I have provided such a substantial critique because I believe that *Reflecting the Eternal* is worthy of serious consideration and is an essential text for C.S. Lewis studies. One cannot brace against a weak wall, and a book of this strength is able to withstand some pressure. Dante scholars would approach their criticism from another angle, seeing here critical thought in reception

history and Dante as source and influence in the modern world.

C.S. Lewis read so much and so broadly that it would be impossible to trace his entire book journey. One of the advantages of a community of scholarship is that any one of us need not understand the whole of Lewis's relationship with texts of the past. Individual scholars or teams of critics in dialogue and disagreement can discern the various threads of Lewis's ingrained intertextuality. Marsha Daigle-Williamson provides us the most recent and most detailed work on Dante and Lewis that can operate as the foundation of the Dante discussion and a primer for other intertextual projects. *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis* gives the reader a rich resource for reading C.S. Lewis and understanding his fiction project in a deeper way. It also serves to bring the 21st century reader closer to Dante who is, frankly, in danger of being lost to us.

BRENTON DICKIESON  
PRECEPTOR AND LECTURER  
SIGNUM UNIVERSITY