

# A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Jason M. Smith on Our Great Misconception

*I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come  
upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God.*

- T.S. Eliot, "East Coker"

I fancied myself chased by hounds of Hell, and fled.

But as I fled, I reasoned: what want of hounds has  
Hell?

Hell is everywhere. It needs neither quarry nor  
guard; they that remain

Themselves harry back from the chapel in its gates;  
they that escape, escape beyond Hell's hope.

So I knew them for hounds of God, and that was  
worse.

It was springtide, and I fled the flooding *Dao*

The river's rush-and-tumble, revel and revelation  
Of headwaters. That bright current  
Dooms the devout to exhaustion or else, against  
    instinct,  
To bruised, broken, bloodied surrender.

And I heard my lover's voice, calling for me.

From love, then, I fled: love, self's best betrayal,  
Love, the undying crucifixion  
Suicide's obverse, all in its consummation  
Love consumes.

But however I fled, ever closer I heard them come:  
Barking dogs, swift-coursing babble, love  
That knew me already by name.

I jerked, thrashed, screamed in the void where no  
    words are,  
No sound, no friction, no space  
Still they closed upon me.

At the moment of utmost horror, my eyes  
Opened: I sat on a bright field  
With dogs playing all about me. Insensate,  
I had been engaged in their happy romp

As they bounded across my lap or pushed noses  
under my unfeeling palms  
Whether I knew or not, whether I would or no.  
The sensation of their pursuit had been  
A trick of my own ears, slow to hear,  
And of my mind, slow to wake. I had been at bay  
From the beginning.

## Gloss

Two books accompanied me to the car dealership that day: Holly Ordway's *Not God's Type* (the first edition, with the goldfish on the cover), which I was finishing; and C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*, which I was starting.

An acquaintance had put Ordway's memoir literally into my hands — after overhearing me describe what I was then calling the “veiled apologetic” in my fantasy novel series *Fayborn*. He interrupted his own conversation at the next table to swivel his chair around and interrupt mine. “You need to meet Holly Ordway,” he said. “Apologetics and the imagination — that's what she does!” Next week, he brought me *Not God's Type*, which he traded for a promise of safe return. “It's not in print right now,” he explained. “Irreplaceable.”

My car's airbag was part of a recall, and I was stuck at the service center, waiting. At a wooden picnic table in the parking lot I poured through the final pages of Ordway's story, compelled not by any mystery around *what* would happen but *when*, and *how*, and *why*. I remember pacing around the table at the conclusion, processing through energy and excitement, before picking up *The Great Divorce*.

It would have been my second time through *The Great Divorce*, but I got no farther than the Preface — arrested by a curious line in which Lewis proposes that Earth “will not be found by anyone to be a very distinct place.” Here is its context:

I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish; but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road. A wrong sum can be put right: but only by going back till you find the error and working it afresh from that point, never by simply going on. Evil can be undone, but it cannot "develop" into good . . . 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. I believe, to be sure, that any man who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned (even in plucking out his right eye) was precisely nothing: that the kernel of what he was really seeking even in his most

depraved wishes will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for him in "the High Countries." In that sense it will be true for those who have completed the journey (and for no others) to say that good is everything and Heaven everywhere. But we, at this end of the road, must not try to anticipate that retrospective vision. If we do, we are likely to embrace the false and disastrous converse and fancy that everything is good and everywhere is Heaven.

But what, you ask, of earth? Earth, I think, will not be found by anyone to be in the end a very distinct place. I think earth, if chosen instead of Heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region in Hell: and earth, if put second to Heaven, to have been from the beginning a part of Heaven itself.<sup>1</sup>

In view of Ordway's testimony, these words struck home like lightning. I seized pad and pen and scribbled out (more or less) the poem you have just read. For it is not about Earth that we in our rebellious state are primarily mistaken, but rather, as *The Great Divorce* shows in example after example, we are mistaken about ourselves. The

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), viii-ix.

great mistake does not consist solely of conceiving of Earth as a “distinct place,” but fundamentally in conceiving of Myself as a Distinct Person. Both fantasies are scarcely true. A rebellious soul is lapsing toward nothingness, increasingly unreal, increasingly unable to recognize reality. As *The Great Divorce*’s MacDonald puts it, we rebels are “Grumblers” gradually disappearing until only a “Grumble” remains. Because we are wrong about ourselves, we can’t help but be wrong about . . . everything else.

## Notes

**Title:** Paired with the first-person narrative, “A Case of Mistaken Identity” suggests that the poem’s genre is a detective story. The poem sets up this expectation and subverts it twice. First, in detective stories the reader is accustomed to relying on the narrator for an objective view into the facts and events of the case. Here, the poem relies instead on the Untrustworthy Narrator trope to set up its turn. Second, in first-person detective stories the narrator is usually the sleuth or sleuth’s companion, solving the case or at least contributing to its resolution. Here, the narrator progressively realizes his

powerlessness and awakens in the nightmarish moment just before death, only to realize that the case had long been resolved — and that he was the last to know.

**Epigraph:** “East Coker” is particularly invoked in the 8<sup>th</sup> stanza.

**“I reasoned”:** Ordway and Lewis both were greatly persuaded by reason and rational argument and engaged by believing friends to reconsider their positions on God and Christianity. “Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord.” (Isaiah 1:8)

**“the chapel in its gates”:** On rare occasions when I have heard preachers address Matthew 16:18, they have spoken of the Church as if it were a battering ram or some other siege weapon that the closed gates of Hell are unable to resist. This picture, I think, confuses the grammar of Christ’s statement (of the two nouns, Hell’s gates is the thing acting, not the Church) and confuses the sequence of events (Christ’s harrowing of Hell occurs before the Church is founded; see Eph. 4:8-10, 1 Pet. 4:6). Here the poem implies a more Lewisian image: though Christ has already opened the gates of Hell, the self-damned keep on trying to close them again; a chapel,

placed as a doorstep to prevent the gates from closing, creates the egress through which the penitent can freely escape.<sup>2</sup>

**“Hell’s hope”**: “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n. / What matter where, *if I be still the same . . .* / Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav’n” (*Paradise Lost*, Book I, *emphasis added*).

**“hounds of God”**: This poem’s central image is indebted to Francis Thompson’s 1893 poem “The Hound of Heaven.”

**“that was worse”**: The narrator would rather be caught by Hell-hounds than by God, baldly revealing his perspective. “Amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about ‘man’s search for God.’ To me, as I then was, they might as well have talked about the mouse’s search for the cat . . . I had always wanted, above all things, not to be ‘interfered with.’ I had wanted (mad wish) ‘to call my soul my own.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Compare Lewis’s speculations about Hell and its willing occupants in *The Great Divorce*, *The Problem of Pain*, and *Mere Christianity*.

<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Mariner Books, 2012), 227-8.

**Dao:** This word (formerly more often anglicized as *Tao*) and the experiences and argument of this stanza will be familiar to readers of *The Abolition of Man* and *Mere Christianity* Book 1: “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe.” See also Romans 7: “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”

**“obverse”:** This word implies that the untrustworthy narrator sees love and suicide as two sides of the same coin. He gets that love consists of self-sacrifice or self-denial for the beloved’s sake . . . and has no interest in taking part.

**“however I fled”:** *c.f.* Psalm 139.

**“babble”:** Words like this reinforce the narrator’s incapacity to truly understand what is pursuing him and what he is being offered.

**“in the void”:** A calculated retreat from God is, ultimately, a retreat into Nothingness and inagency. Without realizing or acknowledging it, the self-damned will the loss of their will — and eventually, according to *The Great Divorce* and *The Problem of Pain*, they get what they want.

**“engaged in their happy romp”**: That God pursues us for our own good, for in fact the only real and lasting good we can possibly experience, is incomprehensible foolishness to the soul in rebellion and astonishing to the rebel soul when finally glimpsed. This is the truth one must first believe in order to see. “O taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Psalm 34:8) There is no greater proof of God’s greatness than his glory and stature being undiminished, even magnified, by his undignified and delighted pursuit of a stubborn and rebellious people.

**“at bay / From the beginning”**: Surrendering to God feels like the loss of everything when we finally face that choice. But then, looking back from the other side, we see clearly that we had nothing, and so lost nothing. Choosing not to lay down arms (what arms?) is futile, if God were not meek. A soul that continues in rebellion is a babe in its mother’s womb, demanding not to be born. Yet if we consent to our fingers being pried from the nothingness to which we cling, we begin, and continue into joy.

*Jason Smith writes poetry and fiction under the pen name J. Aleksandr Wootton. "A Case of Mistaken Identity" is slated to appear in his sophomore collection, due out soon. His first collection, Muninn Wandering, is currently available from most major online bookstores.*

# Bibliography

A Case of Mistaken Identity

- Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Mariner Books, 2012.
- . *The Great Divorce*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.