

Literature and Theology

New Interdisciplinary Spaces

Edited by

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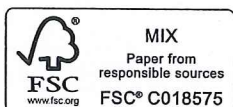
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Chapter 12

The Devil in Disciplines:
The Hermeneutic of Devil-hood in
C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*

Christine Hsiu-Chin Chou

In C. S. Lewis's theological fantasy *The Screwtape Letters*, which is a text featured by its *ironic* inversion of having a senior devil (Screwtape) author a series of epistles to admonish a young tyro tempter on the tactics, or art, of diabolic temptation, Lewis's devil is fantasized as a penetrating epistler with not only a deep understanding of humanity, but also mastery of irony on human corruptibility. Nevertheless, probing into the multi-levelled structure of meaning of Screwtape's ironic discourse on the despicability of 'human animals', the reader may come to perceive some truth beyond Screwtape's perception – that this infernal master of irony is really a figure of ridicule himself. Ultimately, Screwtape the demonic ironist is 'betrayed' by the rhetoric of irony without knowing it and becomes a real victim of double irony. Concerning what on earth serves to 'unstabilize' or betray the identity of the devil constructed within Screwtape's letters, this essay argues that it is not simply the textual nature of irony, but also certain *theologically* informed ironic twists underlying the text of the devil's discourse. In other words, the double irony of Lewis's devil cannot be really grasped unless an *interdisciplinary* investigation is conducted, that is, approaching Screwtape's ironic discourse from the twofold perspective, literary/rhetorical *and* theological.

Such a reading approach is based on the view that the texture of Lewis's theological fantasy is invested with the inseparable although implicit intermixture of literary art (through the rhetoric of irony) and Christian theology. Indeed, textually speaking, C. S. Lewis's devil is an *interdisciplinary* product which is made out of the conjunction of literary imagination, rhetoric performance and, last but not least, Christianity-based understanding of devil-hood. The recognition that Lewis's devil is born of 'interdisciplinarity' is crucial to the present task of interpretation. As demonstrated in the following discussion oriented toward interpreting the devil as a figure of double irony, the reading act aimed to reconstruct or deconstruct the identity of Screwtape must be, in itself, a cross-disciplinary exercise. It is, to put another way, necessarily a kind of hermeneutical exercise that is willingly responsive to the interdisciplinarity of C. S. Lewis's making and unmaking of devil-hood, both of which are situated at some point where the two disciplines – literature and Christian theology – meet and merge. Therefore, it

is *hermeneutically* held that the very acknowledgement of the collaboration or interplay between literary expression and theological investment is indispensable to wrestling with the hermeneutics of devil-hood in *The Screwtape Letters* as a site of double irony.

From the literary perspective, Lewis's devil Screwtape is read in this study as a rhetorician who uses irony to channel diabolic self-conceit and contempt for human amphibians (i.e., beings of 'half spirit and half animal') (p. 44). In the eye of Screwtape, human beings exist in an 'ironical' state in the sense that they tend to think they are leading their personal life truthful to their existence, but in reality the opposite is often true. According to Screwtape, who is absolutely proud of being pure spirit, these 'human animals' tend to fall short of true knowledge of either their selves or supernatural reality, which leads them to such weaknesses as being psychologically manoeuvrable and spiritually blind. Because of these weaknesses, human beings, in the eye of the devil, are ridiculously prone to turn their mind to vicious trivialities and consequently fail to live out a fruitful life as expected by their (Christian) faith. And yet, however poignantly and even truthfully it manages to penetrate into and lay bare the reality of human life, Screwtape's discourse, structurally speaking, is but a 'surface text'. On the deeper level, this extremely self-conceited devil-mocker is actually no freer than his human victim from being entrapped or betrayed by the rhetoric of mockery – irony, which is, in nature, absolutely negative, uncontrollably self-reflexive and thereby potentially self-deconstructive.

This deconstructive reading of Screwtape's discourse and his devil-hood is based on the theory, upheld by different thinkers, that the question of subjectivity is inherent in the act of irony. In Kierkegaard's philosophy of irony, for instance, the rhetoric of irony is approached in terms of its relationship with the speaking subject. In *The Concept of Irony*, irony is defined as a 'determination of subjectivity',¹ which according to Kierkegaard is a determination of the subject to be 'negatively free' by meaning not or the opposite of what is said so as to retain the subject's independence of any 'actuality', including the 'relation to others' and the relation to one's self. Evidently, in Kierkegaard's conception, emerging from the performance of irony is the disjunction not simply between 'phenomenon' (words) and 'essence' (meaning), but also between the rhetoric (irony) and the existential (the self) and even reality (actuality). Generally correspondent with Kierkegaard's existentialist hermeneutics of irony, Paul de Man proclaims in his noted essay, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', that irony is essentially 'a problem that exists within the self'.² To an extent echoing both Kierkegaard and de Man, David Jasper in *Rhetoric, Power and Community* describes irony as '[e]ndlessly self-reflexive, engag[ing] in perpetual redescription of established beliefs and assumptions in order to break free from

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony: With Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: Collins, 1966), 279.

² Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1971] 1983), 211.

their power'.³ Notably, these three thinkers of the rhetoric of irony all underscore the connection between irony and the problem of self. Such an insight can definitely serve to illuminate this investigation into the way that irony can backfire at the speaking subject that enacts the rhetoric of irony, i.e., Screwtape. Indeed, it is absolutely of relevance and value to the present study aimed at interpreting Screwtape's discourse of irony together with his ironic devil-hood.

As far as Lewis's fantastical text is concerned, the rhetorical backfire provoked by the very act of irony against the credibility of the speaking subject, Screwtape's devil-hood, is significantly reinforced by the ironic twists interpolated by Lewis the fantasist and grounded on Christian theology. Besides, either the rhetorical self-betrayal or the theological-based backfire' by means of the underlying ironic twists must at the same time involve the act of reading done by us – the 'outside' readers of the text of Screwtape's ironic discourse. Indeed, it takes the reader's response to the, so to speak, textual clues in order to sense the possibility of turning the demonic discourse on temptation around to scrutinize the authenticity of the devil's identity constructed by Screwtape's discourse. For example, in spite of Screwtape's outspoken arrogance and self-assurance shown in the writing of all his cunning plans to manoeuvre the human mind, here and there within his strategic admonition could be detected an intriguingly ambivalent undertone of Screwtape which meaningfully suggests the existence of a certain subtext beyond this epistle-writer's control.

Such a subtext is basically related to a 'theological triangle', namely, the interpersonal or triangular relationship of the human creature, the loving Creator/God, and the treacherous devils, who are the self-assumed underworld contenders for human souls against their Enemy God. In such a context of spiritual contention, Screwtape, in the midst of his confident treatment of human 'objects' as easy targets of temptation, at times sounds reluctant or unable to guarantee the success of his clever schemes of tempting humans. Between his lines, there is some obvious indication that the whole business of temptation is really running under the threat of being undone by the counterforce from their Enemy, the Creator and also, as acknowledged by Screwtape, the supreme minder of human souls.

From a hermeneutical perspective, how can we readers be enlightened and affected by such an indication, namely, by Screwtape's ambivalence toward how successfully the infernal purpose of tempting humans against the Enemy (God) can be achieved? In effect, we could be 'tempted' to read these diabolic letters with certain suspicion and rethink the hellish point of view that is invested with a strong sense of demonic superiority over humans. Pushing this readerly suspicion further, we (human readers) may as well reapproach the text by reversing the upside-down point of view that belongs to the devil. If, when first approaching Screwtape's text – an arrogantly rendered discourse on the contemptibility of human beings – we follow C. S. Lewis's advice on reading literature, namely, suspending our

³ David Jasper, *Rhetoric, Power and Community* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1993), 126.

disbelief so as to enter into the devil's self-aggrandizing and human-humiliating discourse on temptation, we now might suspend this initial suspension and reread the kind of ambivalent Screwtape with such possible interrogations as follows: Are humans alone the substantially ironical beings even in the devil's discourse on temptation? How about the demonic articulator, so proud of its devil-hood (as pure spirits) and its power to victimize the human patient with the hope of totally, if only gradually, demolishing his Christian faith even if its perpetual, determined struggle against God is somehow crippled in certain sense? In what sense, then, can we read Screwtape, the tactful master of temptation and the very deliverer of the ironic ridicule on the susceptibility of the earth-bound or self-bound human beings to temptation, as another ironic creature (without knowing it), right in its own ironic discourse targeted at the despicably ironic human animals? In other words, how can we say the ironic discourse within Screwtape's epistle writing is essentially a discourse of double irony after all?

To figure out these questions concerning hermeneutics of devil-hood correlated with hermeneutics of irony, one is reminded of the textual nature of irony as a rhetorical act, what Jasper observes as 'endless self-reflexivity' with a view to setting the self free from the persuasive power of the authoritative text which is stabilized by 'established beliefs and assumption'. And it is precisely this 'inherently unstable and destabilizing' nature of irony that, according to Jasper, brings into play the 'principle of *intratextuality*', speaking of the 'energetically' deconstructive functioning of irony to 'work against its own narrative discourse and against its own textuality', which accordingly brings about 'a text within a text' lying in 'the deep structure of the text' of the 'surface discourse'.⁴ Enlightened by this literary conception of the principle of intratextuality of irony, we, the outside readers of Screwtape's text, may modify our inquiries not simply into this infernal epistler's ironic discourse, but also into the text within or underlying it, by asking further questions: In what sense or terms is the structure of meaning of the devil's ironic discourse against mankind turned upside down, that is, becoming its own *self-deconstructing* discourse? What does this self-alienating *intra-text* have to do with any theological implication about devil-hood and about the spiritual triangle mentioned above?

That the devil, as the agency of either tempting the human self into degenerated or lost faith or constructing an ironic discourse to deprecate humanity, is really a captive of double irony can be testified in more than one sense. In terms of textuality, Screwtape, the ironist expressing diabolic self-conceit and contempt for human creatures and defiance against the divine Creator, can never escape from being entrapped by the self-reflexivity of the rhetoric of irony. As regards how to understand the devil as a captive of self-betraying irony, it is a complex issue not concerned with the textual or the rhetoric alone, but invested with theological signification and also involved with hermeneutical practice. From the theological

⁴ See Jasper's discussion on irony and 'intratextuality' in *Rhetoric, Power and Community*, 126–133.

perspective, the issue can be tackled by considering a simple and basic question – *who is the devil*, the real identity of the tempter ‘collaged’ (to readers) between the lines and in the context of the devil’s ironic discourse within the Screwtape letters? As far as hermeneutics is concerned, the theological approach to identifying the devil-hood *underlying* the text is based on the reader’s suspension in the process of interpretation, if appropriate, of *belief* in the devil’s viewpoints or even, when necessary, of *disbelief* in the mere existence of the devil in the spiritual world.

In fact, without suspension of belief or disbelief as such, either the religious meaning or the author’s (Lewis’s) apologetic implication may not really speak to the reader of Lewis’s or Screwtape’s text of these temptation-concerned letters. After all, textuality, implied or so-called smuggled theology, and the reader’s reception or hermeneutical exercise inspired (or maybe enforced) by the text must be interrelated to a well-coordinated extent so that the (artistic) work of literature can be meaningful for enjoyment and also for heuristic or didactic purpose. Actually, the interconnection between the literary/rhetorical construction of the work, the surplus meaning yielded by theological association and the indispensable element of the reader’s open-mindedness⁵ can be regarded as a fundamental guideline of the ‘hermeneutics of art’, as maintained by the two hermeneutical thinkers, Ricoeur and Gadamer. In this regard, Gadamer sounds perfectly convincing and also echoes Lewis’s critical views to some extent when he asserts, ‘in the experience of art we must learn how to dwell upon the work in a specific way’ so that the work of art would ‘display its manifold riches to us’.⁶ To explain what this means, Gadamer uses the art of architecture as an example (similar to Lewis’s instance of sculpture), suggesting that to fully appreciate it one has to ‘go up to the building, ... both inside and out’, otherwise there is no way to really sense ‘what the work holds in store for us and allows it to enhance our feeling for life’. In terms of this Gadamerian hermeneutical principle, it is definitely valid to dwell upon the textual space of Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* through going both into and outside its rhetoric performance (i.e., irony) and faithfully, if only temporarily, acknowledging its theological preoccupations.

However, it should be emphasized that such a cross-disciplinary approach, literary and theological, to Lewis’s imaginative and religious text does not in the least mean to endorse the critical view of Gunnar Urang, who criticizes the ‘pervasive weakness’ of C. S. Lewis based on his observation that as a literary

⁵ That ‘open-mindedness’ should be regarded as a fundamental attitude of reading this devil-predominated text of Lewis’s is indicated in the ‘Preface’, wherein Lewis touches upon the issue of belief or disbelief in the devils and recommends that either the obstinate disbelievers (such as materialists) or the obsessive and ‘unhealthy’ believers (like magic-addicted people) are ‘ill-disposed or excitable people’ and thus not ideal readers of his book. See ‘Preface,’ *The Screwtape Letters*, 9.

⁶ Both this and the following citations are derived from Gadamer’s essay ‘The Relevance of the Beautiful,’ *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 45.

writer of Christian apologetics Lewis simply leans too heavily on traditional theism and supernaturalism. Not really convincingly, Urang holds Lewis's 'overemphasis' upon the 'convictions about transcendence and the supernatural help' as the latter's, as it were, 'creative/literary incorrectness' on account of the tendency not merely to 'baptize', but more keenly to 'confirm' his readers' imagination.⁷ Yet, whether baptized or confirmed, it must be to some degree dependent on the reader's participation in the whole play of literary imagination/creation so that the literary work can be resonantly meaningful, for entertainment or for persuasion or whatever. Rather than any intrusive imposition of traditionalist persuasion based on Lewis's own faith, what is more likely presupposed by C. S. Lewis's authorship and his creative text is the free play of the imagination which demands a certain extent of self-forgetting on either the author's or the reader's part, although it must at the same time involve some kind of subjective preoccupation from the author, the reader and even the text itself. In view of this, Urang's criticism of Lewis's literary apologetic – simplistically focused on 'the problem of belief' that Lewis's fantasies are presumably involved with – appears to be too narrow-minded as a reading or critical perspective.

Concerning how devil-hood is defined or deconstructed by the double irony underlying the text of Screwtape's ironic discourse and also how the intra-discourse about the devil's selfhood is related to the apologetic and hermeneutical enterprises that not merely Lewis the fantasy writer is engaged with, but the reader should also participate in, the correlation between subjective reality and supernatural/spiritual reality, specifically the triangular interrelationship between the devil, man and God, is, again, significantly involved. After all, what makes the devil appear *existentially* ironic lies in the very ironic discourse rendered by Screwtape in which the demonic despite against human beings is both based on the most vicious mark of the devil-hood – self-pride – and entangled with the devil's hatred and antagonism toward God. According to Screwtape's theory, it is crucially prompted by so-called love in their Archenemy (i.e., God) for His human creatures, those despicable 'earth-born vermins', that their Underworld Father (i.e., Satan) decided to oppose against God. That pre-ordained loving relationship between God and mankind is disgustingly incredible and unacceptably unreasonable from the standpoint of the proudly ambitious and rebellious angels, now called devils, the self-assumed Adversary to God as well as to man. Accordingly, the 'object of divine love,' which is supposed to be the status of human souls in supernatural reality, becomes the target of preying to the devils, now that they are rivals against God. Such a self-justifying theory of Screwtape's, with a view to making plain to its far less acknowledgeable junior the existential meaning of being a devil as well as the philosophy of their agency of temptation, is indeed ironical in the sense that instead of justifying the devils' state of being, the discourse unintentionally yet revealingly exposes the manifold depravities of devil-hood.

⁷ Gunnar Urang, *Shadows of Heaven: Religion and Fantasy in the Writing of C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1971), 38.

In the context of Screwtape's account, which on the surface is about tactics of temptation and yet at the deeper level speaks of the demonic perception about their own selfhood, the otherness of manhood or Godhead, it is evident that Lewis's representation of the devil's personhood hints at the truth that both the devil's cognitive and emotive faculties are at best flawed. In his essay entitled 'Evil and God', Lewis, in the terms of Christian theology, identifies the devil precisely as a fallen and rebel angel and argues against the doctrine of Dualism about good and evil as equal though opposite entities. There Lewis asserts that evil is to be viewed as a mere perversion of good and it stands in subordination to good both in existence and in perception. On the ontological status of evil, Lewis obviously follows the Augustinian-Thomist tradition, which pinpoints the relation between good and evil, as John Hick in his book *Evil and the God of Love* details: 'every existing thing is a good creation of a good God... Evil is thus loss and lack, a deprivation of good, and ... it tends ... toward nullity and non-existence.'⁸ Based on the teachings of Augustine and Aquinas, Lewis observes: 'good should be able to exist on its own while evil requires the good on which it is parasitic in order to continue its parasitic existence.'⁹ Lewis's depiction of the devil in the fantasy of *The Screwtape Letters* is basically consistent with this observation about the devil's perverted and parasitic state of existence. However eloquently scornful Screwtape may sound, when it comes to the devil's identity, Screwtape seems to totally and *ironically* dismiss from his understanding of the devils' selfhood the facthood of their parasitic as well as depraved existence. In other words, what seems beyond Screwtape is the very actuality of his own existence of depravity, a state of being resulting from the Satanic transgression of becoming *the* opponent against God and also from the demonic corruption and subversion of the identity as angelic creation, that is, 'the helping spirits' (cf. Hebrew 1:14), or, the 'mean between man and God'.¹⁰

In addition to the nature of depravity, the parasitic quality of the devil is manifested by the demonic agency of temptation. As suggested by Lewis in *Preface to Paradise Lost*, the devil 'cannot directly attack' the Enemy, (i.e., God,); as a result, it simply engages itself with ruining human beings. Against such a psychological background, Screwtape makes the following underworld utilitarian proclamation to the junior tempter: to us, a human is primarily food; our aim is

⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 179–180.

⁹ Lewis, "Evil and God," in *C. S. Lewis Essay Collection: Faith, Christianity and the Church*, ed. Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 94.

¹⁰ Quoted from Lewis's *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964), in which Lewis introduces the development of the medieval 'Model of the Universe', a system synthetically built from multiple sources and elements, Pagan and Christian. On page 74, Lewis comes to the discussion about pseudo-Dionysius's appropriating the idea of 'The Triad (agent-mean-patient)' into his cosmological scheme, of which the key notion is phrased by Lewis as: 'the total angelic creation is a mean between God and Man . . .'

the absorption of its will into ours, the increase of our own area of *selfhood* at its expense' (p. 45, emphasis added). The identity of the devil as a ravenous predator feeding on human souls echoes Dante's figuration of Satan in *Inferno*, where Satan is represented as continuously chewing on the souls of the damned in Hell. In *The Screwtape Letters*, the straight identification of devil-hood with the 'predator' of human beings made by Screwtape himself can be viewed as a verbal act of exposing his selfhood to an *ironic* revelation.

This can be inferred from the fact that the demonic 'predatism' toward human's exploitability, that is, the diabolic weapon of offence against God, reflects the infirmities of the devils' own, particularly in being both insulated from and ignorant of the interpersonal relationship based on *love*. Discernibly, Screwtape's hatred toward humans is connected with his incapacity to make sense of divine love toward humans. The devil's incomprehension in this respect is actually related to the fundamental distinction between heaven and hell regarding the relationship between selfhood and otherness. To use the well-said comment of Clyde S. Kilsby, the author of *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis*, 'God loves "otherness," but hell hates it'.¹¹ Indeed, that God 'really *loves* the hairless bipeds he has created' (p. 74) is acknowledged by Screwtape as 'nonsense' and 'the most repellent and inexplicable trait in [their] Enemy' (p. 74) simply because it contradicts the 'whole philosophy of Hell', which may be summed up by 'the axiom that ... one self is not another self [and] "To Be" means "to be in competition"' (p. 92). In light of the contrast between the hellish philosophy of *being* and the divine mindset of love governed by the principle that the 'good of one self is to be the good of another' (p. 92), it seems absolutely reasonable that this love is sheer impossibility and nonsense to the devil. Yet, what is more importantly revealing in such contrasted mindsets of heaven and hell is that it manifests the reality of devil-hood, namely, the impossibility of being a devil to acquire the knowledge of love, in mind and in existence.

Furthermore, the sense of irony connected with the devil's incapacity to love is heightened by Screwtape's self-contradictory attempt to justify their devil-hood through devaluing the personhood of the divine Being. In order to make up for his slip of the tongue about the truth of God's love and to rationalize his mental incapacity to grasp the meaning of love in the Enemy, Screwtape, on the one hand, expresses strong suspicion about the personality of God, specifically his loving nature. Yet, on the other hand, Screwtape himself cannot but admit, in a sort of undertone, that the ground for his dismissing the impossible love is really the impossibility of the devil's mind to unravel its secret. In this sense, the very act of Screwtape's inferring the divine love as nonsense can be regarded as the reflection of the nonsense of his own mental faculty. That is to say, the inference, in itself,

¹¹ Quoted from Kilsby's review of *The Screwtape Letters* in the chapter entitled "Hell and Heaven," *The Christian World of C. S. Lewis* (Appleford, Abingdon: Marcham Manor Press, 1965), 41.

is *self-reflexively* derived from the absurdity in the selfhood of the devil himself rather than the otherness of the devil's Enemy.

Such a self-betraying irony is further reinforced by Screwtape's advocacy to his apprentice about the grand scheme of their moral assault on foolish human beings – by 'darkening [the human] intellect' (p. 106). In light of the Devil's intellectual, not to mention his moral, flaw, Screwtape's advice cannot but sound ridiculous and ironic. Full of malign ingenuity, as well as a contemptuous attitude, the worldly-wise senior tempter simply ignores the essential part of the destiny of devil-hood, that is, its fallen and depraved state of being. Specifically, the irony of Screwtape here rests on his blindness to his own intellectual defectiveness. The devil's depravity in the intellectual aspect can be referred to Lewis's critical review about the fallen state of Satan dramatized by Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis notes: 'the same rebellion which means ... corruption for the will means Nonsense for the intellect.'¹² This notion about the devil's 'Nonsense intellect', in fact, echoes Augustine's doctrine of evil as Non-being, i.e., a being of no substance, absolutely void of goodness. Also, it is a claim correspondent with the observation of the greatest medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, who too identifies demons as Fallen Angels whose minds are darkened to such an extent that things like love or wisdom are completely beyond them. Aquinas' insightful viewpoint exactly explains Lewis's representation of devil-hood, that is, the knowledge of love is simply beyond the reach of the devil's 'Nonsense intellect'.

But, the depraved nature of the devil is of course not limited to the intellect. Theologically, according to Aquinas, the selfhood of Fallen Angels is marked by two predominant states of mind: Pride and Envy. 'Pride means insubordination, not submitting to one's superior. Envy means sorrowing over another's good, in this case, Mankind's.'¹³ Actually, underlying the devil's spiritual discrimination against human beings can be a blending of these two mentalities. As pointed out in the discussion above, Screwtape's grudge against the human creatures on account of the Enemy's desire to 'fill the universe with a lot of little replicas of Himself' (p. 45) is intermingled with his proud sense of superiority over humans. Throughout *The Screwtape Letters*, the presumptuous devil postures as always ready to heap scorn on the human 'patient'. Nevertheless, Screwtape's satanic laughter can be found subject to Lewis's satirical fight-back.

For instance, reading closely into Screwtape's disputation against the divine condescension happening in human prayers despite the poverty and even absurdity of the human perception of the transcendence, we could discern how ironically superficial the arrogant and jealous devil's sense of superiority actually is. Extremely absorbed in the consciousness of his being pure spirit, Screwtape even holds that his being a devil is dignified as the Enemy God. On the one hand,

¹² Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, 97.

¹³ These words are Aquinas's derived from his *Summa Theologiae* (1.63.2), quoted by Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 244.

it is entirely natural that Screwtape would acknowledge his state of being as the *equivalent* position to that of God, since deep inside the demonic nature lies the very aspiration to become god. On the other hand, such self-assertion is in reality a *lie*, full of self-deception and inappropriate self-belief. Compared with human beings, the devils may seem reasonably proud of their powerful perception. However, it is equally preposterous for the devils to make such a self-claim since their nature as spirit and their intellect have both become blemished. Otherwise, how can the very knowledge of God can be ‘permanent pain’ (p. 26) and ‘stabbing and searing glare’ (p. 26) to the fallen, dark-minded angels when it is both permanent joy and embraceable and enriching lightness to the good angels and to the ‘poor-sighted’ yet obedient humans alike. In view of this sharp contrast, Screwtape’s blindness to his own degradation and his insistence on the stupidity of humans, once again, make him a fool of himself.

Furthermore, Screwtape the devil is characterized as hopelessly defective in emotion as well as in intellect. Aside from his failure to understand the possibility of love, emotionally, this demonic character is depicted to be an impossible *lover* as well. As a matter of fact, all demons are doomed to fall into the state of mind incapable of loving as well as understanding ‘love’ because, as Stanley Fish explains in *Surprised by Sin*, ‘[f]or the agent who loves, love is the affective complement of what the intellect discerns’.¹⁴ In spite of this genuine incapability, Screwtape nevertheless reiterates in all his letters how ‘truly affectionate’ he is to his nephew apprentice. This certainly is a lie, and an intriguing lie, because of the ironical effect of how Screwtape twists the conception of love. Essentially, love in Screwtape’s infernal dictionary is nonsense. In the mouth of Screwtape, the old-hand deceiver and tempter, who maliciously admits his love for his demon-nephew as ‘dainty a morsel as ever he grew fat on’ (p. 156), the very notion of love is appropriated as a deceiving smokescreen for covering his devouring desire to increase his own self by means of the incorporation of other selves. In view of the self-interested nature shared by the two devils and the fact that they really hate each other, the mere reiteration of love from one devil to the other effectively adds into the whole representation of the devil’s perverted selfhood some cunning sense of diabolical fun and irony.

In addition to the sense of black humour instilled by Screwtape’s recurrent trick of twisting the idea of love, Lewis’s satire on the devil contains another more important black parody – concerned with the subject of death. The treatment of the death of the human soul concerned, from the perspective of Screwtape, or in the hand of C. S. Lewis, is perhaps the most excellent example of a *double-edged* rhetorical twist in the whole of *The Screwtape Letters*. To Screwtape, the very subject of death is one of the best weapons for the demonic tempter’s job of darkening the human mind by making humans pathetically scared of death so that humans would not live to perceive the true spiritual meaning of life and death.

¹⁴ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: the Reader in Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997, 2nd ed.), 335.

Concerning what human birth and death signify for a human soul in the eye of God, Screwtape sounds like one full of spiritual insights: 'It is obvious that to Him [the Enemy] human birth is important chiefly as the qualification for human death, and death solely as the gate' (p. 145) into 'the new life' (p. 157). That is the main reason why Screwtape strongly admonishes the junior infernal agent to fight against time and not to risk losing his patient before it becomes too late to take him into captivity once he dies. Accordingly, Screwtape makes a serious yet interestingly twisted admonition that the tempter ought to guard his patient 'like the apple of [his] eye' (p. 142). What renders such advice laughably strange lies in Screwtape's act of parodying the biblical idea of the Heavenly Father guarding His people 'like the apples of His eye' (Deuteronomy 32:10, King James Version) and twisting it into the diabolic guideline of sustaining the human life within their control. From a critical perspective, Screwtape's rhetorical twist, or black parody, can be seen as deliberately devised by C. S. Lewis to caricature his demonic character as a malicious and meanwhile farcical *imitator* of Providence, including His will and His image.

The devil's double scheme of manipulating the significance of death – by propagandizing death as the prime evil to mortals and meanwhile endeavouring to keep mortals from dying to enter into the highest good – at last, backfires. The patient concerned finally dies his untimely death and thus is freed from the captivity of his infernal lifeguard/predator and indeed enjoys a new life and the ultimate spiritual enlightenment in Heaven. So, the whole mission of temptation ends with the total failure of the devil. Devastated by his great disappointment, Screwtape bursts out with his loser's pathos in the final letter, which is marked by an unusually self-doubting pessimism in the self-confident Screwtape. Unmistakably, the ultimate defeat of the devil dramatically precipitates the collapse of Screwtape's self-illusion. Rhetorically speaking, it avails Lewis the fantasist to turn all the elemental falsities in the devil's knowledge of his selfhood inside out and upside down, mainly through portraying the reversal of Screwtape's self-experience: from self-belief to self-doubt, from belief in self-sufficiency to admitting the necessity of being empowered by the knowledge of the Enemy, and from the consciousness of superiority to the awareness of powerlessness.

Despite such a hint at the positive growth of the devil's self-knowledge, the basic tone of this ending, nevertheless, remains ironic. In fact, it serves to underscore, to a greater extent, the ridiculous flaws in the devil's understanding of either his selfhood or the otherness of humanity. With the devil's failure in the end, Lewis tactfully endows the whole text with a sense of religious optimism, which is certainly derived from Christian faith. It is denoted by the indication of certain truth directly opposite to the devilish lie about spiritual reality, namely, a true possibility that superior as the devil's intellect can be, the ultimate victory may come to the inferior humans, who have good chances not to be consumed by evil, but hopefully to overcome it – even through death. That is to say, from such an ironic inversion of having the devil's tactics of temptation backfire at devils themselves emerges a sign of hope for human victory over the devil's temptation. Of course it does not mean that

Lewis's writing aims to *underestimate* the power of evil. On the other hand, Lewis's satirical treatment of the double irony in Screwtape's speech act or mindset indeed rings like an apologetic reminder that it is equally unnecessary to *overestimate* the power of the devil. Through characterizing Screwtape, the outstandingly ingenious admonisher on temptation, as ultimately an ironic creature, Lewis seems to propose to his readers that we amphibian humans might not be necessarily outwitted by the devil. Nor must we be tricked and tempted by the devil's lies, supposing that we know better what the devil is and is not up to, namely, to grow more knowledgeable about the truth about devil-hood as Lewis's theological fantasy, *The Screwtape Letters*, invites us to.

As shown in the discussion above, by having a devil articulating an ironic discourse for revealing certain truths about human life in his fantastical text, Lewis, no less sharp-witted than his devil, manages to interpolate the surface text of such a discourse with some penetrating ironic twists that successfully provoke rhetorical, theological and hermeneutical backfire against the devil's construction of the discourse and his subjectivity. In view of this, we may reasonably conclude that in making up these infernal letters full of diabolic hostility and contempt toward the human and the divine, Lewis's intention, in both literary and theological senses, is to turn the devil's derision around against its own selfhood 'so that', in biblical words, 'we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs' (2 Corinthians 2:11). Nor are we, pure spirits though we are not, too poor-sighted and too naïve to come to perceive the irony of devil-hood.

For us readers, such sophisticated perception and spiritual insight into the ironic reality of the devil cannot be attained unless we take Lewis's theological fantasy, *The Screwtape Letters*, as what it is – an *interdisciplinary* piece of work formed and informed by the intermixture of the literary/rhetoric (/metaphoric) and Christian theology. In other words, to arrive at the hermeneutic of devil-hood as delineated above, we must engage in the same game of interdisciplinarity that Lewis the fantasist and Christian apologist in his text is playing. That is, we must partake in the interdisciplinary enterprise in order to become hermeneutically responsive to the rhetorical and theological 'backfire' against the Lewis's devil, *the* rhetorician of irony within the text of *The Screwtape Letters*.

After dwelling upon or going in and outside Lewis's text, just as Gadamer suggests regarding appreciating a work of art, Lewis's readers may embrace the manifold riches accommodated by the text indeed. Among these textual riches is perhaps some heuristic power emerging from Lewis's interdisciplinary construct of devil-hood. As far as the hermeneutic of devil-hood in Lewis's fantasy is concerned, the abounding heuristic power, to use Paul Ricoeur's phrase, does not give rise to any self-evident or pre-occupied meaning, but, in effect, awaits to serve for a hermeneutical exercise that attempts to envision through the interdisciplinary lens and beyond the rhetoric of irony the *reality* of Lewis's devil.¹⁵

¹⁵ This final hermeneutic reflection is based on Paul Ricoeur's notion of the 'heuristic power' developed in his book about 'the hermeneutics of metaphor', *The Rule of Metaphor*:

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Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language, trans. R. Czerny, K. McLaughlin and J. Costello (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), in which Ricoeur observes that metaphor has its power 'to redescribe reality ... to refer to a reality outside of language. Accordingly, metaphor presents itself as a strategy of discourse that, while preserving and developing the creative power of language, preserves and develops the heuristic power wielded by fiction.' See Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 6.