

*Against the stream:
C. S. Lewis and the Literary Scene*

(The Inaugural C. S. Lewis Memorial Lecture, 8th October 1982)
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It was in the inaugural professorial lecture he delivered at Cambridge that Lewis presented himself boldly as a surviving relic of Old Western Man, a breed rapidly becoming as extinct as the dinosaur: and he suggested that, as such, he ought to fascinate his contemporaries as a rare specimen of how the civilised mind once worked and what it contained. It was of course a brilliant stroke on Lewis's part thus to parody the assumption of his enemies that he was out of date. But the claim was something more than an ironic counter-shaft. It had real substance for him. And I want to reflect on the validity of the image of the lonely embattled leftover in relation to the two sides of Lewis's output—his literary output and his theological output. I accept that the division is clumsy and inadequate. One of Lewis's greatest works, *The Screwtape Letters*, is at once a little masterpiece of imaginative literature and a telling moral and theological tract. Indeed Lewis once made clear to me that he saw himself as being about the same task in writing the *Narnia* books as he had been about in writing *Mere Christianity*. But Lewis the writer plainly has a standing in both literary and theological circles; and any sense of his being the odd man out no doubt had reference to both.

In the literary world secular humanist propaganda would naturally try to persuade us that the works of Lewis and other writers of his circle are museum pieces. It became fashionable in literary journals and critical books in Lewis's later years and after his death either to ignore him, and Charles Williams too, as literary figures, or to give them grudging recognition as freaks. The Christianity they represented might have its interest for a closed circle of reactionaries, but in terms of 20th century literary history in general it was something of an oddity and a throwback. As fashionable criticism saw it, the mainstream of 20th century literature flowed on its way reflecting the values and concerns of a post-Christian society. Twenty years ago that was the assumption you would have encountered had you been bold enough to raise the names of Lewis and Williams in some quite influential academic circles. It was a totally false assumption, but it was the kind of thing Lewis's antennae accurately registered when he burlesqued himself as a dinosaur.

Times have changed, yet traces of this attitude linger on—I mean the pretence that any serious reversion to Christianity in poetry, drama, or fiction

is embarrassingly irrelevant to the main concerns of modern life.

When Lewis wrote a paper on Christianity and Literature, he had some penetrating things to say about critical presuppositions in an age of naturalistic thinking, but the paper shed no light on his work as a Christian in the field of imaginative literature. He was clearly not too happy to be presented with topics like Christianity and Literature. He was probably at heart too earnest an evangelist to be content to side-step crucial issues of conversion and salvation by woolly talk about Christianity AND this and that. He was quick to point out the ambiguities of expressions like 'Christian literature' and 'Christian writer'. One could see his point. If a man is a devout Christian and his job is to edit and write specialised articles for a Pig-Breeders' Journal, his work is probably not going to bear evident marks of his Christian commitment, but presumably he has the right to call himself a Christian writer. More so, I suppose, than the man who is an unbeliever but who weaves the substance of Christian thought and practice into his work. James Joyce would be a good example. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* contains sermons, prayers and spiritual wrestlings, but James Joyce could not be called a 'Christian writer' nor his book 'Christian literature'.

We must not chase exceptions. On the whole we know what we mean when we speak of Christian literature. There is literature whose substance is essentially the substance of Christian revelation and Christian faith. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an obvious example. It is concerned with the Fall of the Angels, the Fall of Man, and the Redemption of Man in Christ. No substance could be more Christian than that. And it is concerned with these truths of revelation, not just as material for a work of objective artistry, but for a work whose purpose is to justify the ways of God to man. Moreover it is a project carried through in a spirit of prayerful dedication. The poem itself works out the poet's God-given vocation by the invoked power of the Holy Spirit. Literature thus soaked in Christian thinking and deeply concerned with man's earthly situation in the light of eternity has an important place in our literary history. One thinks of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and the mediaeval mystery and morality plays. One thinks of writers like the 17th century Metaphysical poets, Donne and Herbert, who focus with intensity on the personal spiritual pilgrimage, the wrestlings of the soul against the temptations of the world, its struggle to find peace in the knowledge and love of God. And one thinks of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

This is literature which cannot be adequately described or discussed in any depth without reference to the Christian faith—to God and Christ, to sin and forgiveness, to salvation and damnation. There is a quantity of such literature in the 17th century and in the Middle Ages. When I wrote a *Short History of English Literature*, I found myself frequently using specifically Christian concepts and theological vocabulary in covering these periods. Not so, however, in covering the 18th and 19th centuries. Apart from the hymns and poems of Cowper and that isolated oddity, Christopher Smart's *Song to David*, the 18th century produced little first-class Christian literature. In the 19th century, there is G. M. Hopkins, but he is an odd case in that his poetry

was not published until well into the 20th century. Otherwise, Hopkins apart, if one is looking in the 19th century for Christian literature in the sense in which we have defined it, one has to turn to minor writers like Christina Rossetti and Coventry Patmore.

But—this is the extraordinary thing—when we get to the 20th century—the mid 20th century, I should say—the literary historian finds himself, time and time again, referring to specifically Christian substance, not just in the work of minor writers, but in that of major writers, indeed often dominant writers. T. S. Eliot is a notable example. His output from the *Waste Land*, through *Ash Wednesday* to *Four Quartets* provides us with a new Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso which bring contemporary civilisation under judgement, analyse the Christian's personal progress through penitence to self-surrender, and project the way of renewal and recovery in strict incarnational and redemptional terms. Nor is Eliot alone. There are those—and they are very good judges indeed—who find a comparable private intensity and public sweep in David Jones's monumental poem *The Anathemata* (1952). Like Eliot's great work, this poem is an ingathering of fragments without narrative continuity. Jones was a Roman Catholic and the poem takes what patterning it has from the Mass. Again like Eliot, Jones rolls history and contemporaneity up together. The poem has been called 'a comprehensive declaration of the links between the whole of humanity and the Redemptive Act, between Art and Sacrament, between Bethlehem and Calvary.'

Then too we have 20th century poetry of spiritual wrestling as intense as Donne's or Herbert's. Indeed R. S. Thomas is a 20th century George Herbert both in the quality of his poetry and in his austere dedication to the work of the rural parish priest in Wales. His experience of the hill farmers has taught him how Nature is at once a brutalising force over against the demands of moral virtue and spiritual discipline, but at the same time a source of healing over against the corrupting effects of urban decadence and sophistication. This dual potential of Nature to brutalise and to heal is subsumed in a Christian awareness of man's openness to the bestial and to the spiritual. Thomas sees his fellow-creatures caught in this tension. In the same way he explores in ruthless detail the personal tensions of the priestly life—the bewilderment and spiritual testing provoked by the stark contrast between inclination and vocation, between what seems to make sense in earthly terms and the calling he has embraced. I was glad recently to hear Brian Morris on the radio call Thomas the best of our living poets. I think he is. And, if he is, it is surely interesting that the best living poet at work among us at any time during the last 50 years—Eliot, Auden, R. S. Thomas—has been a practising Anglican.

The 20th century has been rich too in the projection into fiction and drama of the kind of spiritual wrestling that an R. S. Thomas or a George Herbert expresses personally and directly. Indeed Lewis's own *Screwtape Letters* is a case in point. On a slightly different level there are the novels of Graham

Greene and those of William Golding. And of course there is Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, a fine archetypal study of the conflict between the spiritual and the temporal which relates every Christian's struggle to the pilgrimage of the martyr and to the passion of Christ. There is nothing finer or more enriching in this vein unless it be Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard*, surely one of the masterpiece's of our century's literature.

I must stress that this resurgence of the Christian voice in our literature has occurred since 1930. In the earlier decades of the century the great names, with the exception of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, carried no Christian connotation. Think of them. Shaw, Wells, Bennett, Barrie, Hardy, Kipling, Masfield, Galsworthy, Forster, Edward Thomas. Add the lesser names of Georgian poets, Monro, Davies, Hodgson, Gibson, De La Mare and the rest. Add the war poets, Graves, Sassoon, Rosenberg, Owen. (I am not saying none of these were Christians, but that they did not produce Christian literature.) After 1930 however it becomes easy to list writers whose Christian faith determines the character of their work overtly or implicitly. Among poets, Eliot, Auden, David Jones, Edith Sitwell, Edwin Muir, Andrew Young, R. S. Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings, Norman Nicholson, Jack Clemo, George McKay Brown, Vernon Watkins, Anne Ridler, Francis Berry . . . not to mention Betjeman. Christopher Fry must be added to the list as a verse dramatist. And in prose fiction there is Graham Greene, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Helen Waddell and William Golding. Muriel Spark, J. R. R. Tolkien, Dorothy Sayers, Barbara Pym and Evelyn Waugh have also some claim to be named.

The poets are a remarkable bunch. Andrew Young, a Scot, eventually a canon of Chichester, wrote a fine speculative poem about the after-life, *Out of the World and Back* (1958). Edwin Muir, another Scot, an Orkneyman, found in Christian revelation the archetypal imagery in which to express his personal experience of exile and loss. G. McKay Brown, another Orkneyman, is something of a Scottish R. S. Thomas. Jack Clemo, a Cornishman, a Calvinist, totally deaf and blind too, has a profound sense of Christianity as 'a redemptive invasion of nature by divine Grace'. The tension between nature and divine grace runs like a high-voltage current through his poetry. Norman Nicholson, a Cumbrian and an Anglican, has allowed his faith to interpenetrate his work both as poet and as verse-dramatist.

Of the novelists I will say a word only about Graham Greene. In an early essay he complained that the religious sense had been lost to the English novel in the early twentieth century, and with it what he called the sense of the importance of the human act. He even went on to lament that through seeking a compensatory importance in deeper layers of personality, subjective novelists like Virginia Woolf, 'having lost the spiritual world, lost the physical world also'. Indeed he went so far as to describe the characters of Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster as wandering 'like cardboard symbols through a world that is paper-thin'. Perhaps that makes clear what Greene was about in his determination to bring spiritual dimension and supernatural orientation to bear upon human dilemmas. In Greene secular humanistic notions of right

and wrong, of decency and caddishness, are distinguished from the Christian ethic—rooted in the idea of grace. This is evident in *Brighton Rock* (1938), in *The Power and The Glory* (1940) and in *The Heart of the Matter* (1944). You cannot talk about these novels without talking about sin and forgiveness, damnation and salvation, about the pressing demands of God upon the human soul. It was an achievement to make such issues central in works of literature. If Greene did nothing else, he impressed upon his readers the distinction between a happiness-orientated secular ethic and an obedience-orientated Christian ethic. In most fiction happiness is predominantly at issue. It has to be allowed, of course, that Greene overplays his hand in this respect. Sometimes scarcely merited haloes seem to float over the heads of prayerful Catholics who have sinned themselves into martyrdom, while ordinary decent unbelievers get small credit for their acts of genuine altruism. But when all is said, Greene deserves credit for packing fiction with religious content and getting away with it, even among secularists.

This is obviously not the proper place for me to try to make a survey of what the various writers I have mentioned stand for. I see it as remarkable that no such attempt appears to have been made as yet to pull together for general consideration the mass of literature produced by these writers, for it defies the prevailing drift towards the total secularisation of life and thought that has been evident during the last few decades. But it is not difficult to establish the point that the volume and quality of Christian literature since 1930 has been without parallel since the 17th century. Lewis was not as lonely as perhaps he thought he was.

Indeed Lewis began writing just at the point when this minor Christian Renaissance in literature was taking off. His *Pilgrim's Regress* came out in 1933. And the 1930s were a remarkable decade in this respect. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* came out in 1930, *The Rock* in 1934, *Murder in the Cathedral* in 1935 and *Burnt Norton* in 1936. Charles Williams's *War in Heaven* was published in 1930, *The Place of the Lion* in 1931, *The Greater Trumps* in 1932, and his play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* in 1936. Helen Waddell's *Peter Abelard* came out in 1933. Meanwhile on the stage James Bridie had great popular successes with his biblical plays *Tobias and the Angel* (1930) and *Jonah and the Whale* (1932). Then by 1937 Christopher Fry was launched with *The Boy with a Cart*. That same year saw Dorothy Sayers's *The Zeal of Thy House* performed, and David Jones's *In Parenthesis* and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* published. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet* followed in 1938 along with Williams's *Taliessin through Logres* and Greene's *Brighton Rock*. Eliot's *Family Reunion* followed in 1939, Greene's *The Power and The Glory* in 1940. During the same decade Evelyn Waugh was getting known and Rose Macaulay was in spate. Edwin Muir, Andrew Young and Francis Berry appeared in print.

So when the literary historian looks back at the English literary scene in the 1930s and 1940s he is going to see C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams, not as freakish throwbacks, but as initial contributors to what I have called a Christian literary renaissance, if a minor one. It was to extend over succeeding

decades, but they were in at the start. This is not the role of the dinosaur.

If the image of C. S. Lewis as the last surviving dinosaur does not fit his historical standing as an imaginative writer, what about his theological standing as a Christian apologist? There is no doubt that he suffered from *odium theologicum* to a painful degree. He was acutely sensitive to the fact that his theological books made him much hated as well as much loved. 'You don't know how I'm hated', he once said to me with great feeling.

Perhaps I should say a word at this point about my own connection with C. S. Lewis. I went up to Oxford in 1935 and, by an odd coincidence, I had read *The Pilgrim's Regress* soon after it came out in 1933. I re-read it carefully, pencil in hand, when I learned that C. S. Lewis was to be my tutor. Now you must remember that this book was coolly received and sold few copies. I did not find any fellow-student who was aware of it. I do not recall how soon or in what way I made it clear to C. S. Lewis that I had read it and enjoyed it; but naturally I did not waste this opportunity to get in with my tutor, and the point was made. I mention this because it is possible that I was soon marked in his mind as The Student who had actually read *The Pilgrim's Regress*. Be that as it may, we got on well together and C. S. Lewis was always ready to chat when the business of the tutorial was over.

It was some years after my student days were over that I came back into Lewis's orbit as a young writer. He helped me generously over my first books to be published and from time to time I went to spend a night at Magdalen for dinner, an evening's conversation, and breakfast with him. When my trilogy of theological novels came out in 1954 and 1955, *The Devil's Hunting-Grounde*, *Cold War in Hell* and *Blessing Unbounded*, Lewis read them and wrote to me encouragingly about each in turn. So his letters at that time tended to be about my books. But of course sometimes something was said which threw light on his own and, in this connection, one memory is worth recalling. I should explain that my trilogy is a sequence of journeys on the Dantean pattern through regions of the after life, though not exactly Purgatory, Hell and Heaven. The narrator is guided by his guardian angel. To spice the books and to suggest the element of judgement on the human soul, I gave my angel the idiom of the bureaucrat and the pedant—a mixture of the two, I suppose. Lewis questioned me about this. He thought it very funny, but he also seemed a little apprehensive lest I was not taking angel-hood seriously enough. He told me that when he wrote *Screwtape* his first idea had been to combine letters between the two devils trying to ensnare the human soul, with corresponding letters between two angels looking after the young man on the other side. But then he hesitated to enter the angelic mind—as though it might be too presumptuous. Now this—put in the friendliest possible way—certainly carried a probing point to cause me grave reflection. It appeared that I had rushed in among the angels where Lewis had feared to tread.

But my purpose here is to say something about the Oxford attitude to

Lewis the theologian, which no doubt helped to give him his sense of standing against the stream. Humphrey Carpenter has said some interesting things about it. Oxford dons objected to Lewis, not for becoming a Christian, but for advertising the fact. His way of putting intellectual and moral pressure on people in print for the purpose of converting them was an offence against academic etiquette. Unspoken rules of academic decorum required one to be decently secretive about religious convictions. One must remember, in this connection, that Lewis had no degree in theology and was therefore, in the eyes of some, trespassing into other people's rightful territory, an amateur taking on the experts. Plainly professional academic theologians could not be expected to enjoy having their thunder stolen. Lewis appealed to a vast audience, over the heads, as it were, of the university establishment and in defiance of academic protocol. In the eyes of some, he was using a donnish know-how to mesmerise the innocent masses with dialectical conjuring tricks.

As Christians we know that Lewis was right to do what he did. The message of the gospel is unmistakable in this respect. The disciples were ordered to preach the gospel throughout the world, and there was no mention of their need to graduate in theology first. By comparison with what C. S. Lewis had to tell his generation the protocol of even the most exalted university was trivial and petty. Nonetheless the offence was an irritating one for the Oxford academic mind. It was all very well to use the machinery of rigorous logic in playful exercise. It was good fun to manufacture syllogisms in the privacy of the tutorial room to sharpen and discipline the mind. And it was high sport to bring the artillery of logic into play in a spirit of semi-mockery in public debate in the Union on such propositions as: 'This House believes that a woman's place is in the home'. In these circumstances dialectical battle could be sportively joined and a thumping good time had by all. But here was a man, Lewis, who took the machinery of logic and soberly, devastatingly, proved that Naturalism was the implicit creed of half his academic colleagues and that it was nonsense; that dons and workers alike were miserable sinners, that Almighty God was calling upon them to confess themselves such, to cut the cackle and get down on their knees; for everything else they were involved in was trivial by comparison.

That was one of the most unpalatable home-truths of all. They'd got their priorities wrong. Wasn't Lewis as good as telling most of them that they had no sense of proportion, no awareness of what mattered supremely in life, being obsessed with the peripheral and the ephemeral? Wasn't he insisting that if they were not moving into the Christian way, they were lost in the mists of error, the unwitting agents of the evil one? The man had a perfect right to believe this secretly and share his strange notions with his friends in decent privacy. But he had no right at all to enter the public arena and use the verbal and dialectical equipment of the Oxford scholar and philosopher to press such a message upon others. The take-it-or-leave-it attitude was vulgar. The either-or dichotomy was a lapse from good taste. In the field of religious argument into which C. S. Lewis had entered, the polite method was to express every opinion tentatively, to begin every crucial sentence with expressions like 'It

could be argued that', 'A case might be made that' or 'It is possible to hold that'. And instead of indulging in such civilised exchanges of unruffled urbanity, here was a man who brandished the tool of learning like a battle-axe, and who brought his weapon crashing down to cleave the sheep from the goats in the name of God himself.

The intensity and coherence of Lewis's Christian understanding of life and thought provided one of the most formidable instances of Christian synthesis in our country; and it thrust Lewis into collision with the Oxford establishment. No doubt the collision could be identified as a collision between the Christian mind and the secular mind. But perhaps there would be justification for seeing it in some respects as a collision between the Irish mind and the English mind. I take up this matter for speculation because a notion has run in my head for some years that the English are allergic to Christianity, while the Irish readily get hooked on it.

There is in Ireland a frank, open religiousness not evident in England. To say that Irish Christians take their religion more seriously than English Christians would be misleading. Some of them, after all, take it more humorously. But no one who has read the literature of the Irish can be insensitive to the way Christianity seems to soak more pervasively into both their seriousness and their humour. Irish autobiographies abound in records of childhoods dominated by religious practices and religious talk. This often applies to the works of those who have rebelled against the faith as well as of those who have continued in it. It is the same in fiction. There often seems to be a more deeply ingrained awareness of Christianity in novels by Irish unbelievers than there is in novels by English believers. Christianity seems to 'take' with the Irish, to get into their bloodstream so that, healthily or pervertedly, gravely or comically, it surfaces in their life and thought. I mentioned Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* earlier. If literature is our guide, it seems that with the Irish Christianity 'takes' in such a way that they cannot even shake it off (mentally) when they cease to believe in it. Are the English, by comparison, Christianity-proof? I ask because the spectacle of unbelievers who seem unable to get Christianity out of their systems is an Irish spectacle, whereas the spectacle of supposed believers, especially theologians, who seem incapable of getting Christianity *into* their systems, is plainly an English spectacle. This, after all, was what Lewis was up against as an apologist.

There are certain aspects of Lewis's work that seem to me to mark him as an Irishman, yet when I try to define them, somehow the concept 'Irishness' tends to get lost. For instance, I would point to his mental sharpness, his devastating logic, his pictorial and illustrative abundance, his taste for myth and fantasy, his irony, his humour, his fluency, his rhetoric, his pugnacity and his symbolism. I would add to these that most central and significant quality of all; the theological clarity and inclusiveness, the all-embracing wholeness of theological articulation that subsumes all experience and all thought within its grasp; the appetite for comprehensiveness and universality. Obviously writers of various nations could be cited who share many of these

qualities; but somehow it is the list that comes to my mind when I try to analyse the recipe behind the overall savour of Lewis's work as an apologist that offended the nostrils of the English establishment and still offends them.

I naturally begin to wonder at this point whether the concept 'Irishness' has been called into being only as a converse to the concept 'Englishness', or perhaps I should say 'pukka Englishness'. For I argue that Lewis's rich dialectical combativeness and his taste for inflating the particular to the status of the universal go against the grain of the respectable English preference for niggling at particulars in isolation, for not leaping to conclusions, for avoiding what may lead to head-on intellectual conflict, for discouraging the whipping out of polemical swords, the unfurling of unambiguous credal banners. The English 'establishment' preference is for blunting sharp edges in controversy and greasing the works of social and intellectual interchange with the oil of non-commitment.

I must make the point that an Irish writer vastly different from Lewis engaged my attention for some years, as my book on Joyce's *Ulysses*, *The Bloomsday Book*, indicates. There is nothing remarkable, I suppose, about the fact that Joyce has many of the qualities by which I tried to define Lewis's Irishness—mental sharpness, logic, imaginative abundance, humour, rhetoric and so on. And I have sometimes thought that interesting comparisons might be detected in the kind of symbolism used by the two writers. Lewis's talking trees in *Narnia* somehow remind me of the arboreal wedding in the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses*, and the head-long pursuit in *The Last Battle* (is it?) reminds me of the chase in Joyce's 'Circe' episode. The taste for allusive correspondences and fused layers of meaning is common. But I have been more interested in the dominant refusal of both writers to see the particular, the prosaic, the apparently trivial except within the context of what is universally significant. For both of them the ordinary person is embryonically heroic, his slightest acts or decisions potentially earth-shaking. Both, in their vastly different idioms and with totally different motives, involve the ephemeral, the pedestrian, and the diurnal with the epic and the cosmic, with archetypes that pattern all our ways.

The universality and comprehensiveness of literary significance cultivated by Joyce and Lewis is vastly different in motivation. The upgrading of the individual to the universal serves in the one case a decisively artistic purpose and in the other case a deeply moral purpose too. When Joyce's advertising agent, Leopold Bloom, strides about the streets of Dublin with a cake of soap clenched in his left hand and a rolled-up newspaper brandished in his right hand, Joyce makes clear that he is equipped with the shield and sword of the epic hero. For soap, the chemical product of modern manufacturing is a sure hygienic defence against all the ills threatening a materialistic civilisation, and the newspaper is the weapon with which modern man fights his battles. The symbolism and the parallels are, in T. S. Eliot's words, 'a way of controlling, ordering, of giving a shape and substance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'. But of course, to give literary shape and significance to what is futile and anarchic, though of some

satisfaction to the aesthetic observer, is not necessarily of much inspiration to the man who would seek to replace futility by purposefulness and anarchy by order in life itself. It may carry an implicit judgement on modern life, and therefore convey an oblique, though vague recommendation to do something about it. In Joyce this is tenuous at best, whereas Lewis never forgets that there is something to be done, and people can do it . . .

Thus the universality and comprehensiveness of significance cultivated by Lewis is something more than a literary matter. When he upgrades his mouse Reepicheek to the status of the battling hero, he is about something more than Joyce was about in turning Bloom's soap and newspaper into Homeric shield and sword. In both cases we are meant to smile at the ironic piquancy of the inflation; the plebeian ad-cadger Bloom becomes the epic hero Odysseus; the frail little mouse Reepicheek becomes the swashbuckling warrior. But in Reepicheek's case we are meant also to warm with admiration for courage, and indeed to ask ourselves whether *we*, in spite of our amusement, could emulate the dauntlessness of this little creature whom we should never have associated with valour.

You see both Joyce and Lewis turn the tables on the reader's initial laughter at the incongruity of humble ad-man or feeble mouse being heroic. But Joyce turns the tables only in the sense that the reader revises his view of the relative status of the anciently heroic and the currently pedestrian. Lewis turns the tables *qua* moralist. And that gets to you. Thus Lewis's purpose and technique in inflating the particular to the level of the universal goes to the root of the fact that he aroused fervent enthusiasm in some readers and violent antagonism in others; also to the root of the fact that this enthusiasm and antagonism were not so much literary/aesthetic as moral/philosophical. In this respect the issue is precisely Lewis's reading of the human situation in such terms that the apparently trivial is framed within the context of what is universally significant. All that man is about from day to day is embryonically heroic, potentially earth-shaking. The character of his apologetic and his fiction alike are determined by this fact.

For instance, in *The Screwtape Letters*, the powers of hell and heaven bear down on the question whether Wormwood's human patient is going to overcome his irritation at the way his mother lifts her eyebrow, or the question whether he will take a country walk down to an old mill for tea. One day the young man reads a book for pleasure—instead of for vanity or show—and takes a walk on his own because he enjoys it, and the senior devil comes down on the junior devil like a ton of bricks. Two solid but commonplace pleasures have been disinterestedly enjoyed—without any intrusion of conceit or self-congratulation—and the diabolical progress to date is all undone. There is anger in hell and a hint of joy in heaven.

The understanding of life in terms such as these plainly overturns any scale of values based on familiar secular criteria. There is nothing gimmicky about it. Nor is it simply a device for restoring the status of myth to pedestrian 20th century life—which was what Joyce was about when he made the smiles and banter of Dublin bar-maids and the sentimental ballads of Dublin ne'er-do-

wells lure his hero into the grip of idle sentiment, and paralleled it with the way Homer's Sirens tried to charm Odysseus from his duty long ago. For Lewis was about something more than the task of upgrading modern man to heroic stature for the purpose of shrouding him in literary pathos and ironic dignity. Lewis was about the serious business of putting human souls in the way of salvation. It was, of course, an imaginary soul that was under assault in the fictional *Screwtape Letters*. But there was an oblique assault too, a hidden assault, directed—not by His Abysmal Sublimity from his miserific hide-out—but from his great Enemy's Headquarters, and directed at the soul of the reader himself. For it is not just in fiction that supernatural realities bear down upon the soul of modern man. In his own life Lewis found that he was not safe from them when lifting his eyes from his book in the evening quiet of his study in Magdalen, when riding on a number two bus to Headington, or been given a lift on a trip to Whipsnade Zoo. As we know from *Surprised by Joy*, there was a divine Chess-player at work, watching his every moment of unweariness, and pushing him relentlessly into a corner.

The sense of proportion, the scale of priorities, which the defeated victim of such divine machinations will cherish are not going to be accessible, let alone acceptable, to those who cannot take with deep seriousness the impress of the supernatural upon natural life. Lewis's attitudes, over the various areas of thought and behaviour which his wisdom illuminated, so starkly forced into the open our Lord's Either/Or—'He who is not with me is against me'—that the reader is consciously left at a junction. Cosier theologians leave you at a comfortable resting-place. They leave you with a sense that you have temporarily got somewhere, can pause for a breather while you ponder such loose ends as they conveniently leave hanging around you. And there is no great urgency in this pondering, for you have a long way to go before there will be any need for grave concern about whether your route is the right one. Lewis, on the other hand, leaves you at a sign-posted junction where there can be no possibility of lingering. He prods you in the back so uncomfortably that you have no alternative but to choose your road—if 'choose' is the appropriate word when one sign reads 'Heaven' and the other reads 'Hell'.

Lewis's books are *active* books. They work on you. They will not let you be. To that extent they bear the marks of their ultimate Creator. Lewis is a writer who insists on being agreed with or disagreed with. Unless you enter fully into complicity with him against all the lurking agents of moral evil and intellectual error which ambush modern man—ambush you in the society which seemed so harmless, so neutral, until he analysed its hidden operations for you and traced its illusory deceptions back to the Father of all lies—unless you enter fully into complicity with Lewis in this respect then you are going to have to reject him utterly, or find evasive terms by which to render his method suspect and his message innocuous. You are going to have to find a way to disarm him by patronisation ('Rather dated, I'm afraid, isn't it?') or jump out of the way of his agile weaponry.

In this connection I recall one of the earliest conversations I had with Lewis at the end of a tutorial when I was a young student. The news had just come

through that G. K. Chesterton had died. I said how much I had delighted in his work and Lewis became warmly enthusiastic in his praise. His indebtedness to Chesterton was evident. Like Chesterton, he sensed the larger struggle between Christianity and paganism or secularism implicit in the minor intellectual conflicts of daily life, as he sensed the struggle between angel and devil behind every man's daily moral vacillations. Chesterton had cultivated a ready knack of imprinting a hint of cosmic conflict between the powers of darkness and the powers of light upon human endeavours, whether they are heroic confrontations on the battlefield or humdrum encounters on a London bus. Chesterton lived mentally in a world lit by tokens of divine order and under threat from the negations of human (and diabolical) rebellion. Lewis inhabited the same world.

This is precisely what cuts a chasm between one reader and another. It could be argued that whether or not a reader responds sympathetically to Lewis's work is a touchstone by which you can measure whether at root he thinks christianly or is infected by secularist criteria. For the Christian mind sees human life and human history held in the hands of God, and there is nothing in man's daily life and thought, however supposedly trivial, that can be dismissed as being outside the scope of that scrutiny that separates obedience from disobedience, good from evil. A writer like James Joyce may have focused the telescopic lens of literature on pedestrian minutiae and daily trivia for dramatic and emotive effect. Lewis did it because the close-up on what you and I or anybody else is about from moment to moment reveals nothing less than the fulfilling or negating of God's purposes for us.

CS Lewis charmed the world with 'Chronicles of Narnia.' The theologian and author of children's books was also friends with JRR Tolkien. Both Lewis and Tolkien reference each other and the meetings of The Inklings as providing support and inspiration for their work. Can you spot Lewis and Tolkien among the Inklings? The most important literary contributions made by CS Lewis were his theological and fantasy works read by millions and viewed in major motion picture adaptations. He remains one of the most popular Christian faith writers of this century. His mass appeal is aided by his mastery of language and logic, and by his tendency to avoid matters where Christians disagree and instead focus on beliefs that are held in common b Christianity played a major role in the lives and works of the Inklings, the Oxford literary circle centred on C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings, by Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, published by Farrar Straus Giroux. Michael Dirda is a US literary critic. © 2015, Washington Post. Share. Most Viewed In lifestyle. The fall of Adriano Zumbo's dessert empire. Million-dollar meme pet Grumpy Cat dies.