Hell, the Devil and Us

Commentary and staged reading of *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis

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DR. THOMAS HOWARD'S REMARKS

The conveners of this conference have asked if I would sketch in a few remarks about my own contacts with C. S. Lewis, both in correspondence and in a personal visit. I am happy to do so.

My first contact with Lewis came in the 1940's when I was a school boy. An older sister of mine came home from college one vacation, talking about an odd book she had been reading. It was entitled *The Screwtape Letters.* If you have heard of this book, you will know that it contains what purport to be some letters from an elder devil named Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, whom he is training in the art of tempting Christians. Of course I found myself encountering all-too familiar stuff: that old devil had tried out virtually all of his tricks and tactics on me—very often, alas, with total success.

The book ushered me in to the glorious world—universe, I should say—of C. S. Lewis. To this day, seventy years later, I find myself regaled by his theological works, his literary scholarship and criticism, his Christian apologetics, and (to my mind, perhaps best of all) his imaginative works, namely *The Chronicles of Narnia,* the so-called "Space Trilogy" (which I suspect Lewis would have preferred to call "the Deep Heaven" trilogy) , and, to my mind, his crowning success, *Till We Have Faces*, which is Lewis's re-working of the Cupid and Psyche myth.

I think I can say, without exaggeration, that it has been the writings of C. S. Lewis that have, in effect, formed my entire picture of the moral order of the Universe—what he called "The Whole Show."

To my mind, his picture of The Dance—that radiant, solemn, fixed, majestic, and thunderously beautiful order of things—this picture stands at a polar distance from modern assumptions about

things, namely the notion that all things celestial, inter-galactic, angelic, human, animal, vegetable and inanimate are merely the result of blind Chance.

It was during my college days that *The Chronicles of Narnia* appeared. Something perverse in me—something truculent, I would say in retrospect now—kept me from looking into them just then. I think my idea was that since everyone was so manifestly exuberant about these books, I would not climb onto any such bandwagon. And I shamefacedly admit that this was to my own impoverishment. Eventually, of course, I came to these chronicles, and, again of course, I found myself regaled. Also, at about that time, a friend of mine kept plucking my sleeve about another of Lewis's books, *That Hideous Strength.* He had written this in the l940's, and the somber truth of the matter is that it could have been written tomorrow morning. Lewis's mordant perspicuity in seeing exactly what was happening, not only in academic circles, but in the juggernaut of philosophical and moral speculation as to the nature of things –he saw this trend could lead only to the collapse of civilization as we know it. I would, to this day, recommend it as perhaps the most useful handbooks on the peril that now confronts our mortal life.

My correspondence with Lewis began in about 1958, when I was in the Army at Ft. Benning, Georgia. I had been assigned as a chaplain's assistant, which did not mean that you were religious: it meant that you could type. As it turned out, I found myself with vast amounts of leisure time for reading. A friend sent me the first volume of Tolkien's massive myth, *The Fellowship of the Ring.* The book was entitled *The Hobbit.* Like everyone else, I was ravished. But, in my zeal, I fired off a letter, not to Tolkien but to Lewis. I think it was because I knew how I could reach Lewis at Magdalen College, Oxford, but I did not know exactly where I could find Tolkien himself. In any event, I wrote off rhapsodically to Lewis. And presently I got the following letter from him: "Dear Mr. Howard, Oh, but believe me, you are still only paddling" [that's British for "wading"] "in the glorious sea of Tolkien. Go on from *The Hobbit* at once to

The Lord of the Rings: 3 volumes and nearly as long as the Bible and not a word too long (except for the first chapter which is a botch—don't be put off by it). [Lewis thought that Tolkien's account of Bilbo's birthday party was frivolous and tedious.] "*The Hobbit* is merely a fragment of his myth, detached, and adapted for children, and losing much by the adaptation. *The Lord of the Rings* is the real stuff. Thank you for all the nice things you say about my own little efforts. Yours sincerely, C. S. Lewis."

In my youthful naivete, I supposed that this letter gave me the warrant to correspond with Lewis. Those of you who know anything of Lewis's biography will know that writing letters to the thousands of enthusiasts who felt as I did—that this constituted perhaps the most dreary and onerous element in Lewis's life. But he soldiered on at it, all of it written with pen and ink.

So, over the next few years I had a number of exchanges with Lewis, as often as not by post card since I was in the habit of using this brief method, and I didn't want to swamp him with letters. He always, heaven's blessing s light upon his weary head, replied.

Then in 1961, I found myself teaching in a boys' school in England. At the Easter holiday that year, I visited an American friend of mine who was at Queen's College, Oxford, doing a graduate degree in law. And it occurred to me that I might pop out to Headington where Lewis lived, just outside Oxford, for a conversation. Again, of course, I look back on my presumption with the most embarrassed feelings. But, in reply to my post card, Lewis wrote out directions as to how to get to The Kilns, which was the name of his house. I took the bus—it was only a short rid-- and alighted at the point which he had indicated. One followed a little dirt road into a grove of trees (it is all built up with terrible houses now) and presently found The Kilns on one's left. I knocked at the door, and Lewis himself answered. "Mr. HOWARD?" rang out in his jovial and bell-like voice. He acted as though nothing could have pleased him more. He looked the very image of what one had hoped he would look like: a large bald head, a rubicund face with twinkly

eyes, a shapeless tweed jacket and baggy flannel trousers. He led me into a small parlor furnished with appalling overstuffed chairs done up in mud-colored velvet. We talked for about forty-five minutes, I think. I had at least a rag of modesty which suggested that I might make my visit short.

This was in the days before any electronic recording devices (there were clumsy tape recorders back then), and I didn't want to sit and scribble notes while he talked like a tiresome reporter or an eager votary. (I was most certainly one of his eager votaries, but I didn't want to *seem* like one.) So I have only sketchy memories of the topics we canvassed. I mentioned various things in his writings that had especially arrested my attention—the robin in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe,* for example, or Lucy, or Coriakin the old man doing his Purgatory in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader.* In that connection, I think I must have disclosed my then-Protestantism by intimating that Purgatory might be **an idea rather than an actual state of affairs. His lapidary remark was, "There might be such a place."**

Certainly it was the various characters that appeared in his tales that had specially vivified my own understanding of the nature of good and evil: Wither, Frost, and Lord Feverstone in *That Hideous Strength;* Weston in *Perelandra;* Shift the ape in *The Last Battle;* and even poor Orual in *Till We Have faces.* The tyranny of pride and self-delusion in this noble woman who was clearly *en route* to freedom and sanctity—it would be hard to find another such treatment of the power of evil in an otherwise well-intentioned person who eventually does, thanks be to God, win through to true nobility.

Among my own favorites of Lewis's works would be: *The Discarded Image*—his study of the mediaeval world-view which he admits is "not true." But one knows perfectly well that he loves this outlook, and that he believes that it is indeed, in the deepest sense, *true,* in ways that no Hubble Telescope nor accelerator nor cloud chamber can ever disclose. And his *Preface to*

Paradise Lost: his treatment here of ritual and ceremony on pages 17 and 21, in connection with Milton's poetical achievement is, to my mind, the best thing I have ever read on the topic. *A Grief Observed*, his remorselessly courageous and candid account of his own grief at the death of his beloved wife Joy*:* here again, one feels that no other scrutiny of grief has handled the subject with such agonizing clarity—without any tincture of self-display or weakness. And the volumes of his letters: such a record of crystalline clarity of mind, and of muscular intellectual and moral integrity, and of modesty, wit, and humour—such a record has only a very few parallels.

My debt then, to this giant Christian, philosopher, apologist, critic, and spinner of enchantments, is, quite simply, overwhelming.