

Of Virtues and Splendors

Images of Salvation in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis, by Clyde S. Kilby, *Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1978.* \$5.95.

IT IS TOO SOON to start talking about a man's place in the history of literature when he has been dead less than twenty years. Zealots will claim immortality for him, his denigrators will predict early oblivion, and no one will really know. When you have a controversial figure the argument may get shrill; and when the controversy about the man runs along religious lines, you may get brickbats.

This is, perhaps, to raise the stakes too high too soon with respect to the man in question here. But the discussion about C. S. Lewis shows no sign at all of dwindling, and interest in his books seems to increase briskly despite a fairly rigorous silence about him in graduate departments of English (which is where you can really find out who is who—or at least who is supposed to be who).

Lewis piqued everybody by churning out fantasies and children's books and religious apologetics when (they murmured) what he ought to have been doing was attending to his scholarly last. The difficulty here (and the source of the pique) was that when he did turn his hand to his professional last (Medieval and Renaissance English), he swamped everyone with his sheer erudition and his irresistible style. One critic said of Lewis' volume on the sixteenth century in the *Oxford History of English Literature* that Lewis wrote as though he were inviting us all to a feast. (It may be a measure of Lewis' zest that he could write that way despite a certain weariness with the task which came through now and again when he would among his friends refer to his work on the OHEL as the "Oh hell.")

Whatever Lewis' place in English letters ends up being, it is the opinion of Clyde S. Kilby, who knows as much about Lewis as any living person, that that place will pro-

bably be secured on the basis of Lewis' imaginative works. Lewis' apologetics are first-rate, of course; and his scholarly works will no doubt be on the university shelves a hundred years from now. But "Lewis" will mean "narrative" the way "Keats" means "poems," if Professor Kilby's hunch is correct. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and the so-called "space" trilogy (better called the "Deep Heaven" trilogy), plus Lewis' re-working of the Cupid and Psyche myth which he called *Till We Have Faces*—these, along with his autobiographical allegory *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the theological dream-vision *The Great Divorce*, and the waggish/serious fantasy *The Screwtape Letters*, achieved something in twentieth-century imagination that would be hard, perhaps impossible, to achieve by plain argument. They blew open the shutters, so to speak, and let us look out onto a glorious landscape from the dark and stuffy room of modern imagination. In Lewis' narratives, these things appeared not only plausible once again, but blissful and, best of all, true.

Kilby studies each one of these books with the unabashed purpose of discovering Christian parallels and analogies. In each case, he summarizes the story, then notes, as he puts it, "with as little piousness and pretentiousness as possible, the Christian involvements of each story." He has made no attempt to be exhaustive. Indeed, he mentions one unpublished study of *Till We Have Faces* that is as long as the book itself. And anyone who has ever read any of the *Narnia* series, say, will know that virtually every phrase, and certainly every scene, could be heavily annotated with allegorical and analogical notes, so an exhaustive study would be a monstrous literary pachyderm.

Hence, any book as small as Kilby's that undertakes this task will have to exhibit extreme perspicacity and judiciousness. This one does. It is no easy task: I know this from several years of attempting to teach a university-level course in Lewis' fiction. My greatest pedagogical problem has been to know how to proceed in lectures without simply dragging the students along on a

myopic exegetical crawl through every phrase, unpacking the rich freight of glory hidden and revealed there. Kilby has chosen, rather, simply to list observations that will nudge the reader towards a keener awareness than he might otherwise have of the sort of thing at work in the tales. In every case, he points out parallels with Christian experience, or with the very language of the Bible itself. Here would be one brief sample of the sort of thing we find:

At the end of *The Last Battle*, the children saw all the inhabitants of Narnia in vast numbers come to a doorway where stood Aslan and, after looking intently at him, split into two groups. One group, loving the face of the Great Lion, entered through the Door. The others, full of fear and hatred, swerved away from the Door and disappeared into a great black shadow (XIV). This is clearly the imagery of Matthew 25:31 ff. Jesus called himself "the door." (John 10:9)

A possible quarrel might arise, of course. It might be objected that Kilby is forcing Lewis' fiction into a Procrustean (read "Christian") bed and that everyone ought to be free to enjoy and understand these tales without being plucked by the sleeve and told the meaning of the Sunday School lesson. Fair enough: the tales do, in fact, stand quite stoutly on their own, and may be enjoyed by anyone. But it would be humbug for us to pretend that virtually every creature and vista and situation and image in the whole corpus of Lewis' fiction did not stand in a rather stark and unmistakable analogous relation to Christian drama. Indeed, Lewis' friend Tolkien objected strenuously to what he felt was the too-direct allegorical relationship between much of what Lewis wrote and the Gospel. Kilby, in no case, is attaching significance to what Lewis wrote that Lewis would not recognize, indeed that he did not intend.

It is not for nothing that Kilby has called his study *Images* of salvation. His contention is that, we mortals being the sort of creature we are, we respond more readily

to images than to discursive argument and exposition. If this were not so, then all poetry, all metaphor, all ceremony, symbol, liturgy, and sacrament itself, would be a waste, and trivial. He has given us an intelligent study of Lewis' handling of images, and it belongs with the tales themselves on our shelves.

Reviewed by THOMAS T. HOWARD

Feasting on Life

My Works and Days: A Personal Chronicle, by Lewis Mumford, *New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979. 545 pp. \$13.95.*

AT ONE POINT in this collection of extracts from his speeches, autobiographic notes, letters, earlier books, and sundry other items, Lewis Mumford compares Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* with Tolstoy's *War and Peace* by noting: "I have begun to re-read *War and Peace* with the sensation one gets on going to Switzerland, when one passes out of the tunnel and suddenly sees the great ice peaks hanging over one in the distance. Glad to get the smoke out of my lungs and leave the tunnel behind!" I felt the same way while reading this latest of his twenty-seven published books—delighted to leave behind the smog and tunnels of some of today's so-called critics of society. Born in 1895, Mumford has been an eloquent and noble voice since his first book, *The Story of Utopias*, was published in 1922. Age has not dimmed his vision nor muted his voice; it has but given him a more profound perspective both on himself and his times.

This double focus on himself and his times also provides the subject of *My*