

A Chuckle in the Darkness
— *A Symposium on C. S. Lewis* —

A Prefatory Note

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“POLYMATH,” a word often used inappropriately, can be applied to C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), even though this younger son of a woman who took First Class Honours in Geometry and Algebra (1881) and Second Class Honours in Mathematics (1885) from Queen’s College, Belfast, was never able to understand algebra. In fact, had he not been a war veteran (wounded on the Western Front in 1918 by “friendly fire”) and thus “deemed to have passed” Responsions, the examinations for admission to Oxford that included elementary mathematics, he concedes that he “should have had to abandon the idea of going to Oxford.”

Fortunately he did not have to abandon this idea, and at Oxford he distinguished himself by taking three Firsts: Mods (Latin and Greek Literature) (1920), Greats (Ancient History and Philosophy) (1922), and English (1923). The most popular lecturer and don at Oxford during his career (1923-1954), he was denied the Merton Chair of English Literature in 1947 and Professorship of Poetry in 1951 by the votes of his colleagues. Thus, when Cambridge unanimously elected him to the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance English (1954), he left his beloved Magdalen for Magdalene. He subsequently refused Oxford’s offer of the Merton Professorship (1957), re-

maining at Cambridge until poor health forced him to retire in 1963. He died the same day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Perhaps the most persuasive way of justifying Lewis’s status as a polymath is to list the fields about which he wrote: theological apologetics, literary and intellectual history, literary criticism, philology; and the forms the subjects appear in: essays, short stories, poetry, children’s fiction, novels, book-length studies, allegories, letters (both real and fictional), autobiography, radio broadcasts. What structures these works is an intelligence developed by a rigorous education, shaped by omnivorous reading, and salted with a deep-seated sense of humor. What permeates them is an imagination that draws on a childlike intuition of the wonder beyond the horizon. What gleams through them is joy in Perelandra and Malacandra and ancient Glome, in a good hike followed by nourishing tea, in a lively argument, in grief. What inspires them is love of colleagues, of friends, of family, of God.

Lewis loved to recount the story of the horrified Church of England clergyman who wanted his subscription cancelled to the *Guardian*, an ecclesiastical weekly, because of its carrying a series teaching readers how to tempt and corrupt. His

weekly broadcasts to RAF stations that began in 1941 made Lewis famous, a fame that the book version of *The Screwtape Letters* (1942) increased. These broadcasts resulted in several smaller books being collected into another of his best-selling works of Christian apologetics, *Mere Christianity* (1952).

Unfortunately, his great success as a public defender of Christianity resulted in his alienating many of his Oxford colleagues. His public conversion to Christianity in 1932 and his earlier work of apologetics, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), did not arouse such great academic enmity as did his enormous popularity, a popularity that continues. That he still teases his readers into thought is apparent in the papers that follow.

Peter Kreeft explores Lewis's insistence on the reality of the Tao, the absolute difference between good and evil. He describes sixteen moral heresies that Lewis refutes in essays, the *Narnia* books (1950-1956), the space trilogy, *Till We Have Faces* (1956), and his specifically apologetic books, particularly *The Abolition of Man* (1943), and *Mere Christianity* (1942). Professor Kreeft's paper demonstrates that there is a causal relationship between the modern denial of the objective reality of good and evil and the very real horrors of this century. He shows how Lewis used his gifts to expose and defeat the fallacies of subjectivity in all its hydra-headed forms.

Continuing in the same vein, Thomas Howard examines the Tao in Lewis's fiction. After noting how *The Abolition of Man* demonstrates that man has always recognized the fixed order of good and evil, Professor Howard explores characters and events in *Narnia* and outer space and Belbury and Glome. In his survey he contrasts Lewis's mythic vision with that of contemporary writers and concludes with a dissection of the difference between how we achieve authentic joy and what this world demands we do.

Similarly, Stephen M. Fields, S. J., describes how Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* (1936) recovers the now lost synthesis of romantic love and religion that the School of Chartres effected. Father Fields contends that this synthesis was made possible by Christian Platonism and insists that its loss has led to the modern confusion of secular and profane that, in turn, has led to the loss of both. He holds out the hope that our turning to the image of God immanent within us will restore human and humane love.

Vigen Guroian's study of the *Narnia* books exposes the love that awaits those in Aslan's world and in ours who die and are reborn. He demonstrates how Lewis deliberately wrote these children's books in the light of the Gospels. Professor Guroian focuses particularly on *Prince Caspian* (1951), finding in it the motifs of feasts and dancing, of obedience and judgment, of faith and judgment, of love and joy present in all seven of the books.

In the concluding paper, William McFetridge Wilson examines one of Lewis's last books, *Studies in Words* (1960). Professor Wilson impresses us with Lewis's bookishness, his life-long love affair with words and stories. He traces the theological and ethical implications of the movement of words which Lewis charts and about which he reflects. His most serious reflection is that in our world many of these shifts have led to verbicide, the instrument effecting the suicide of the West.

Appropriately enough there are common notes in these papers, despite their approaching Lewis from various angles: literary analysis, intellectual history, philosophical speculation, theological investigation. All five scholars demonstrate Lewis's relevance to the modern condition. All move with ease among the various genres in which he wrote. All mine successfully his canon for apt phrase, the instance on point, the event embodying the principle.

In the *Narnia* books, the space trilogy, the re-telling of the Eros/Psyche myth, the letters of a tempter uncle to his nephew, and a Bunyonesque allegory are found uniquely individuated characters whose conflicts and choices, words and thoughts, assents and denials are recognizable by everyman, everywoman, everychild. There is a freshness in Lewis's imaginative works that calls the theologian, the philosopher, the literary critic,

and the common reader to return again and again to these worlds to see, along with Lewis, the divinity which dwells in things.

Such, also, are his works of Christian apologetics and literary criticism in which his fundamental decency and common sense add to the appeal of his lightly worn learning. Like Chaucer's Clerke, "gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche."