

Lewis, Chesterton, and the Uses of Enchantment

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A few weeks ago, reading the diaries of the Oxford historian and man of letters A.L. Rowse, I came across a passage that made me pause. As everyone knows, Rowse was prickly, opinionated, and lonely, a man of acquaintances but almost without a friend in the world. His journals reflect that pinched and melancholy life. All the same, he was a sharp social observer—the reason, perhaps, he *had* so few friends—and one remark seemed sharper than most. Visiting a church in Huddersfield he found, nestling in the back, what he called the ‘shaming works of C.S. Lewis’. The discovery prompted a Niagara of bile:

I read his *A Grief Observed*—title imitated from Fry’s *Venus Observed*. Imagine observing his wife’s death from cancer in order to turn it into Christian journalism. The self-exposure for Christian profit is nauseating; so is the pushful candour, not much better than Buchman.² ‘This book’ [he quotes Lewis as writing], ‘is about myself, and her, and God, in that order; when of course it should have been in the opposite order’. I like that ‘of course’—bogus-humble. His wife’s death-bed is taken advantage of [for the sake of literature]. I must give him what should be coming to him one day...

It would be easy to see in this passage jealousy or hypocrisy or both. Rowse’s own diary was self-exposure for profit, a journal composed for publication. He also resented the success of a man whose academic and literary career strangely mirrored his own: both from the Celtic fringes, both Oxford dons, both commercially successful, both resented (even rejected) by their academic peers, writers, both public figures whose appeal to the public was the revelation of some inner private life—their own. Yet at some point the parallel paths diverged. With the public, if not with academia, Lewis was admired, beloved, a sage. Rowse, on the other hand, was a professional curmudgeon, a figure of fun, a comically irritable Colonel Blimp. In the end, he became a national institution and a national joke: more A.L. Grouse than A.L. Rowse. Perhaps that explains the harshness and unpleasantness of the passage.

Yet another explanation for the remark offers itself: that it was actually true. For all his petulance, Rowse seems to be on to something. Who was this C.S. Lewis? Why should we take him any more seriously than Rowse? He presents the paradox, I think, of a man hard to like but easy to love. Lewis was a private person who was turned, and who turned himself, into a public figure. The distance between the two—the public and the private—was wide and deep. As a child he was solitary, clever, and bookish, a study in precocity. ‘I have a prejudice against the French,’ he announced at the age of four. Why? ‘If I knew why it wouldn’t be a prejudice.’ At the age of nine he was reading *Paradise Lost* and (he wrote in his diary) making ‘reflections there-on.’ At the age of fourteen, he had written an entire novel. As a schoolboy classicist, he graded the ancient authors as if they were competitors with him for academic prizes: Thucydides was ‘desperately dull and tedious’, Plato and Horace were ‘charming’, Homer was a giant. There is only so much of this priggishness a person can take. Reading more, thinking more, remembering more than his peers, Lewis was a person to be admired at a distance but to be avoided in the deeper intimacies of life. A childhood of ‘long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences and endless books’ prepared him to take on the world and to win. He was happiest when arguing for victory. Many of those arguments were with his father, whose love for a brilliant son was returned with irritation and contempt. With his mother dying when he was nine, Lewis sought refuge in a library, not in the companionship of a man, like himself, obviously needy, lonely, and ready for love. They only reconciled at the end. Throughout his life, Lewis addressed letters to his ‘dear Papy’ and signed himself a ‘loving son’. It is one of his less believable fictions.

Yet for all this, Lewis has now been turned from academic terror into favourite uncle—warm, friendly, and benign. The Kilns (his Oxford home) and the Eagle and Child (his favourite pub) have become shrines. Every summer, hundred of evangelicals from Ohio and Tennessee visit the first and—more timidly—the second. His books sell in millions. C.S. Lewis has become ‘C.S. Lewis’—a brand label, a type, a marketing device. This is the hazard—you might say—of any Christian, certainly of any Christian writer. Spiritual pride and intellectual laziness go hand in hand, smug and polished as a Toby jug. To his credit, Lewis understood the dangers of spiritual vanity, and knew, too, that winning an argument could be as dangerous as losing one. ‘No doctrine is dimmer to the eye of faith’, he once wrote, ‘than that which a man has just *successfully* defended....

For a moment, you see, it has seemed to rest upon oneself: as a result, when you go away, it seems no stronger than that weak pillar'. What if his arguments were wrong? What if they were too clever by half? What if they were self-serving? What if victory in the eyes of the world meant defeat in the eyes of God? The scrupulous possibilities were endless, a thicket of Lutheran self-examination. Apologists, he concluded, can be saved 'only by falling back continually from the web of our own arguments...into the Reality—from Christian apologetics into Christ himself'. That was a satisfactorily Calvinist formulation—a good argument about the dangers of good arguments. It was also true.

Why the change from awkward youth to admirable adult? To Lewis's most recent biographer, Alan Jacobs from Wheaton College in Illinois, it had to do with Lewis's discovery of Christianity.³ Pre-conversion, Lewis was 'neither a particularly likable nor a particularly interesting person'. Once he 'admitted that God was God', and that Christ was the true revelation of that God to Man, that this was the one 'dying god' myth that had actually happened, 'the key to his own hidden and locked-away personality was given to him. What appears almost immediately [Jacobs writes] is a kind of gusto, the sheer bold enthusiasm for what he loves, that is characteristic of him ever after'. Conversion stories demand such neat dichotomies. Psychological complexity tends to be sacrificed for a pithy parable. Still, Jacobs makes a plausible case that, suddenly, joy entered Lewis's life. He experienced, almost for the first time, a capacity for enchantment. He knew that the world made by a loving Father and redeemed by a self-giving Son was a world to be embraced, enjoyed, and loved. He discovered, you might say, the sacramental imagination and with it a thoroughly Catholic theology of pleasure:

There is no good in trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us. We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.

This could be Chesterton at his most Chestertonian—full of beer and cigar smoke and the company of friends. It was not the soda water world of Lewis's Ulster childhood. No wonder some of those mid-western evangelicals agonize over whether they should darken the doors of the Eagle

and Child.

What, then, *was* this life-transforming enchantment? To understand it, think for a moment of an irony. As a child, Lewis was reading Milton when he should have been reading fairy stories. As an adult, he was reading fairy stories when he should have been reading Milton. In that sense, his later life was an attempt to recover the imaginative wonder only fleetingly experienced as a boy and then not properly understood. Chesterton was the same—a kind of child genius all his life, never at home in the everyday tedium of punctuality and tidiness and nine-to-five. He spoke, in *Orthodoxy*, of the Ethics of Elfland, describing a place he knew well. In neither case was enchantment a kind of infantilism, a refusal to grow up. Nor was it some Rousseauian cult of childhood as a land of lost content, a place uncontaminated by the grime of the world. C.S. Lewis was not Lewis Carroll. G.K. Chesterton was not Peter Pan. (In fact, to look at him, he was more Frying Pan than Peter Pan.) Enchantment was not whimsy or optimism, not escapism or hoping for the best, but a glimpse of how things really are. Nostalgia for a lost Eden was *not* the idea. It was, in fact, the very opposite of the idea. The whole point of fairy stories is not their removal from the drama of the moral life but their embrace of it. Events in Elfland—or Narnia—do not happen by magic. They happen by choice. Those stories reveal truths sometimes obscured by more portentous theologies: that darkness is real, but so also light; that death will come but that life will triumph; that the universe has moral structure and that we are part of it. They reveal something of the adventure of Christianity. Here, for instance, is Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*:

All Christianity concentrates on the man at the cross-roads. The vast and shallow philosophies, the huge syntheses of humbug, all talk about ages and evolution and ultimate developments. The true philosophy is concerned with the instant. Will a man take this road or that?—that is the only thing to think about if you enjoy thinking. The aeons are easy to think about, anyone can think about them. The instant is really awful: and it is because our religion has intensely felt the instant that it has in literature dealt much with battle and in theology dealt much with hell. It is full of danger, like a boy's book: it is at an immortal crisis. There is a great deal of similarity between popular fiction and the religion of the western people.

‘The life of man is a story’, he later wrote: ‘an adventure story: and in our vision the same is true even of the story of God.’

Part of enchantment, then, has to do with the apprehension of the reality of things—the way the world really is. Not its appearance, mind you, but its very being. The world is charged with spiritual life, not as a mythic super-imposition on its earthy materiality, a kind of romance to help us through the valley of tears, but as the deepest truth and meaning of that materiality. ‘God loves matter. He invented it’. All of creation is a kind of sacrament.

Events in Elfland and Narnia do not happen by magic. They happen by choice. Let us think a little more deeply about magic. What is it? Why did Lewis and Chesterton write fairy stories, not magic stories? Why the distinction? To understand it is to grasp the hinge on which their entire work revolves. Magic is not the weaving of spells, the abrogation of nature, the miraculous repeal of the laws of physics. No: it is an attempt—often hubristic—to control those laws, to master that nature, and to turn both into power. In one of his most important books—*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*—Lewis spoke of the change that came upon the world in the late Renaissance and early modern period. That change, of course, was the rise of science and, with it, a new and dangerous notion of man’s place in the created order. To most of us who accept the assurances and affidavits of modernity, science means rationality, the victory over superstition, the end of hocus-pocus, a wizardry that actually works. To Lewis, the old Renaissance magic and the new modern science were essentially the same project, the only difference being that ‘science succeeded and magic failed’. Both, he said, ‘sought knowledge for the sake of power’. Both cherished the dream of a world in which all things would be possible. Both sought to raise up man and ended, unwittingly, by destroying him. One of his more urgent books, indeed, is called *The Abolition of Man*, a warning for the ages:

There is something that unites magic and applied science while separating both from the ‘wisdom’ of the earlier ages. For the wise men of old, the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline and virtue. For magic and applied science alike, the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice

of this technique, are ready to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious.... What we call man's control over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over others with nature as its instrument.

Here, surely, is the lesson of Lewis and Chesterton and Tolkien for today. None of them had a quarrel with science—its methods, its benefits, its desire to know. Nor should we. Their quarrel, and ours, is with scientism—the objectification and glorification of science as a self-sufficient and self-ratifying order of human understanding, a form of materialism immune to all moral claims except those of utility and then, eventually, immune even to them. They articulated—better than almost any other writers of their generation—the insistent and urgent plea of Christian humanism for wisdom, beauty, and truth. Chesterton warned in *Eugenics and Other Evils* of a world in which distinctions between human beings—the bright, the fit, the beautiful—became reasons for destroying human beings. Tolkien warned in *The Lord of the Rings* of a world in which Morgoth and Sauron and Saruman could place their trust in the Machine, Saruman with his ‘mind of metal and wheels’ indifferent to ‘growing things except as far as they serve him for the moment’. Lewis warned in *The Magician’s Nephew* of the scientist who could proclaim, all irony forgotten, that ‘men like me...possess hidden wisdom [and] are freed from common rules’. All that meant, his nephew suddenly realized, was ‘that he thinks he can do anything he likes to get anything he wants’.

This is why Lewis is important. He discovered that enchantment based on love is Christianity’s deepest impulse, its hard, irreducible, objective core, its profoundest challenge to the loneliness of the solipsist and the sinner. Only thus was the self-obsession deplored by Rowse (and shared by Lewis himself) turned to creative purpose. Lewis told us the difference between the magic world and the world of Faery. Magic is about power and Faery is about love. We have a choice. We are part of the adventure story. We can know the hidden life of God. Should we not—today and tomorrow and always—choose love?

Notes:

1 This paper was given at St Patrick's College, Maynooth, on 25 March 2006. Parts of the paper previously appeared in *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* as a review of Alan Jacobs' *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (HarperCollins, 2005).

2 This is a reference to Dr Frank Buchman, founder of the movement first known as the Oxford Group, later as Moral Rearmament.

3 With the exception of the quotation from A.L. Rowse (*The Diaries of A. L. Rowse* [Penguin, 2004], p. 365) all extracts in this piece are from Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian*, which may be recommended not only for its high intelligence but also for the many fine passages from Lewis, Tolkien and Chesterton.