**MIGHTY ONES WHO DO HIS BIDDING** *Janice brown, grove city college*

Angels and devils are creatures of myth in the broadest sense, but they are also part of the true myth that is Christianity. Of devils, Lewis said that there are two equally serious errors: disbelief in them and an “excessive and unhealthy interest in them” (Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*).

The imaginative and theological cunning he brought to *The Screwtape Letters* made Lewis famous as a spokesperson for the demonic point of view—a point of view that was by his own confession a very oppressive one. Though *The Screwtape Letters* may be entertaining to read; Lewis did not find writing about devils pleasant. He did take much delight, however, in writing about their spiritual opposites, angels, in his fiction, non-fiction, letters, and poetry.

Several of his poems that are directly about angels, and these provide an introduction to Lewis’s sense of the nature of angels, and—by means of contrast—create a particular perspective on what it means to be human. Some deal with the inability of angels to understand human experience, and the idea that humans reflect the divine nature in a way that angels cannot.
The poem “On Being Human” builds an increasingly moving case for the sheer joy of being a human rather than an angel. Yet the vast superiority of angelic beings is apparent from the first stanza. Angels have a pure “intelligence” that allows them to “discern” the ultimate forms of nature, the “Archetypes,” and directly grasp the “verities” (absolute truths) that are accessible to mortal minds only indirectly and in limited forms. Their perception is astounding:

Transparent in primordial truth, unvarying,
Pure Earthness and right Stonehood from their clear,
High eminence are seen; unveiled, the seminal
Huge Principles appear.

The Tree-ness of the tree they know—the meaning of
Arboreal life, how from earth’s salty lap
The solar beam uplifts it, all the holiness
Enacted by leaves’ fall and rising sap;

They know the things of nature as God knows them, perceiving the essential meaning of every created thing, and the holiness of it. Yet Angels cannot know the intensity of the world perceived through the senses: the blessing of coolness, the pleasure of summer smells, sea smells, fire smells, the satisfying flavors of food and drink. Nonetheless, their advantages are vast—“far richer they.” We, in our human form are in fact protected, guarded, by our senses, from the vast sphere they inhabit—“heavens too big to see”; we would die from exposure to that piercing glory, that “barb’d sublimity.” The divine beauty they live within would be like a fatal sword thrust: we could not endure it were that “dazzling edge of beauty” to be “unsheathed.” No, for us, living “within this tiny, charm’d interior” of our senses is enough for now. Yet in this homey space with our brains, our human consciousness, we have a point of connection with God himself that Angels cannot share. Because God became man and experienced our human, sense-bound existence, there is a secret that is “Forever ours, not theirs.” This private intimacy is something so wonderful, so absolutely unexpected that, as 1 Peter 1:12 tells us, angels long to understand it.

Modern infatuation with angels is based on imagery that is far removed from Psalm 103’s depiction of angels as “mighty ones who do his bidding.” With the loss of knowledge and respect for scriptures has come a greatly demeaned understanding spiritual realities, especially those concerned with supernatural occurrences. And Lewis is more concerned about the danger of a wrong conception of angels than about obliviousness to them. He speaks about this in his Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*:

*[A] belief in angels, whether good or evil, does not mean a belief in either as they are represented in art and literature. . . . They are given wings . . . in order to suggest the swiftness of unimpeded intellectual energy. They are given human form because man is the only rational creature we know. Creatures higher in the natural order than ourselves, either incorporeal or animating bodies of a sort we cannot experience, must be represented symbolically if they are to be represented at all. . . .*

*In the plastic arts these symbols have steadily degenerated. Fra Angelico’s angels carry in their face and gesture the peace and authority of heaven. Later come the chubby infantile nudes of Raphael; finally the soft, slim, girlish and consolatory angels of nineteenth-century art. . . They are a pernicious symbol. In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying “Fear not.” The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say “There, there.”*

In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis’s Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature, he explains that Plato associated angels with the stars, and thought of them as “true gods” (41) (in contrast to the degraded versions that of them that appeared in mythology), and he believed them to have some sort of material form (40). In the Middle Ages angels were understood as the “highest created spirits”(41)—godlike, but quite distinct from God, and essentially *without* material forms. In a letter of 1940 Lewis clarifies this point saying, “About Angels’ bodies: as far as I have seen incorporeality is the normal medieval view (appearances being explained by the temporary manufacture of a body of air)” (*Letters* II 450). *The Discarded Image* points out that there was some movement away from this view of angels as having no bodies. Florentine Platonists preferred the older more Platonic view — substantial angelic bodies reappeared, quite visibly, in art. But even then, the representations of these “immortal, celestial, and stellar creatures” (56) were best understood as symbolic. Lewis points out that “educated people in the Middle Ages ever believed these winged men who represent angels in painting and sculpture to be more than symbols” (71).

Yet Lewis saw the danger in presentation of angels in art and especially literature. He said, “The literary symbols are more dangerous because they are not so easily recognized as symbolical.” The exception was, of course, Dante. Lewis says. “Before his angels we sink in awe” (Preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, viii-ix).

We sink in awe, similarly, before the depiction of angels in Lewis’s fiction, particularly the Space Trilogy. In a letter of 1957 Lewis makes it clear that he was working off of both the view of the early Middle Ages that angels ethereal bodies of gross matter and the later view that they are composed simply of act and potentiality” (*Letters* II, p. 873). The absence of matter does not mean the absence of form. Lewis’s angels have a form based on their power and potentiality—a form that need not be, but may be, expressed in a material way. In the same letter Lewis observes that from a religious or theological point of view the question of the bodily manifestation of angels has little importance. He adds, “And anyway what do we mean by ‘Matter’?”(873).

In *Out of the Silent Planet*Ransom’s sense of ‘what is matter and what is not’ is challenged when he first encounters the*eldila*, the spiritual beings who preside over the planet Malacandra (or Mars). (Plot background: He has been kidnapped on earth by two evil men who have brought him to Mars to serve as an offering to the authority who rules the planet, but he escapes from them and finds protection and friendship the the Malacandrian creatures called hrossa.) Eldila are first described to Ransom (by his *hrossa* friend Hyoi) as a kind of *hnau*—or rational beings, but beings that are hard to see because light goes right through them and they may be easily mistaken “for a sunbeam or even a moving of the leaves” (76). Ransom greatly fears the presiding*edila* whom rules the planet, but it is not like a fear of the supernatural in the sense that one fears a ghost. He knows that the *Oyarsa* was “a real person” (86), and that, having been summoned, he must go and appear before him. The journey to this dreaded audience means ascending to higher elevations and traversing a far more austere and terrifying landscape than the comfortable valleys where he had felt safe. The difficulty of seeing *eldila* is a large part of the fear. Ransom asks the sorn, who is his guide for this difficult journey, “Why can I not see them? Have they no bodies?” The*sorn* explains:

*Of course they have bodies. There are a great many bodies that you cannot see. . . . Body is movement. . . . If movement is faster, than that which moves is more nearly in two places at once. . . . But if movement is faster still . . . faster an faster, in the end the moving thing would be in all places at once. . . . The swiftest thing that that touches our senses is light, we only see slower things by it, so that for us light is on the edge—the last thing we know before things become to swift for us. But the body of an eldil is a movement swift as light; you may say its body is made of light, but not of that which is light for the eldil. His “light” is a swifter movement which for us is nothing at all: and what we call light is for him a thing like water, a visible thing, a thing he can touch and bathe in—even a dark thing when not illumined by the swifter. And what we call firm things—flesh and earth—seem to him thinner, and harder to see, than our light, and more like clouds and nearly nothing. To us the eldil is a thin half-real body that can go through walls and rocks: to himself he goes through them because he is solid and firm and they are like a cloud.  (94-95)*

The explanation provides a rational context within which Ransom can begin to think about the *eldila* with a little understanding and much respect, rather than simply fear.

Soon Ransom comes to Melidorn the place where the *Oyarsa* manifests himself to the creatures of the planet. He is called into his presence. Despite the *sorn’s* explanation, Ransom feels “a tingling of his blood and a pricking of his fingers as if lightning were near him; and his heart and body seemed . . . to be made of water” (119)

*“What are you so afraid of, Ransom of Thulcandra?” it said [the eldil asks].*

*“Of you, Oyarsa, because you are unlike me and I cannot see you.”*

*“Those are not great reasons,” said the voice. . . “These are not the real reasons. . . . You began to be afraid of me before you set foot in my world. And you have spent your time then in flying from me. My servant told you to come to me, you would not.” (119-20)*

In order to explain his fear Ransom is forced to identify the root of it: the sinfulness of his own planet where “false *eldila*” (fallen angels) destroy men is what has caused human beings to assume that if there is any life beyond their own air it is evil” (121).

Yet *goodness*is the most magnificent characteristic of this*eldil*—this presiding Oyarsa—who deals out justice tempered with mercy to the two other earthlings and to Ransom. Indeed goodness is the most magnificent characteristic of all the *eldila* we encounter in the trilogy. And the goodness is most striking for being both serene and energized.

In *Perelandra*, the second book of the trilogy Ranson is brought to Perelandra (Venus) by the will of God himself, Maledil, and through the operation of his *eldila*, but he does not encounter any *eldila* on the planet until the closing episode. Having climbed to the top of the great mountain where he perceives (dimly at first) the presence of the Oyarsa of Perelandra and the (visiting) Oyarsa of Malacandra. They are enormous in power and authority, and they are speaking of him:

“The small one from Thulacandra is already here,” [said one *eldil*].
“Look on him, beloved, and love him,” said the [other], “he is but breathing dust and a careless touch would unmake him. . . . But he is in the body of Maledil and his sins are forgiven.”

The Oyarsa of Perelandra tells how she created the planet:“I rounded this ball when it first rose from Arbol. I spun the air about it and wove the roof. I built the Fixed Island and this, the holy mountain as Maledil taught me.” Through such glimpses of the activity of the edila Lewis re-works our perceptions of the nature of the universe. He breaks down any sense we may have of space as terrifying and inhospitable. It is not empty and dark, but full of mighty and holy beings carrying out the purposes of God.

The two *eldila* are perceptible to human eye as uncanny alterations in the quality of the light, but they wish to appear in a more substantial form in honor of this momentous occasion—the handing over of the planet Perelandra to the King and Queen who are to rule over it. They ask Ransom to help them determine what would be a meaningful form in which to manifest themselves. First they appear to him as “darting pillars filled with eyes, lightning pulsations of flame, talons and beaks and billowy masses of what suggested snow . . .” (197).  Ransom screams in horror, so they try something else—“rolling wheels . . . concentric wheels moving with a rather sickening slowness one inside the other” (198). The size is appalling, but beyond that this manifestation is inscrutable and lacking in significance to human perception. Ransom suggests they try again:

*And suddenly two human figures stood before him. . . . They were perhaps thirty feet high. They were burning white like white hot iron. The outline of their bodies . . . seemed to be faintly, swiftly undulating as though the permanence of their shape, like that of waterfalls or flames, co-existed with a rushing movement of the matter it contained. . . . Whenever he looked straight at them they appeared to be rushing toward him at enormous speed: whenever his eyes took in their surroundings he realized that they were stationary. This may have been due to the fact that their long and sparkling hair stood out behind them as if in a great wind. . . . It was borne in upon him that the creatures were really moving, though not moving in relation to him. This planet . . . was to them a thing moving through the heavens. In relation to their own celestial frame of reference they were rushing forward to keep abreast of the mountain valley. Had they stood still, they would have flashed past him too quickly for him to see, doubly dropped behind by the planet’s spin on its own axis, and by its onward march around the Sun.  (198-99)*

Again, the absolute goodness of the angelic beings is placed in the context of their terrifying reality. The changeless expression of their faces is charity—archetypal charity—arising from “pure, spiritual, intellectual love” (199). Yet simultaneously these *eldila*are the true embodiments of the mythic Mars and Venus, part of the “celestial commonwealth” (201). Ransom recognizes, in awe, that “our [earthly] mythology is based on a solider reality than we dream” (201)—a mythology that though contaminated by “filth and imbecility” retains its gleams of “celestial strength and beauty” (201).

The strength and beauty of God’s nature as depicted through angels is explored in two other fictional works of Lewis. *That Hideous Strength* further develops the connection between the classical idea of superior spiritual beings (the gods and goddesses of mythology) use of angels in the Christian myth. In *The Great Divorce* angels appear in several forms: a bus driver gloriously charged with light and color, a speaking waterfall that pours himself perpetually down  . . . with loud joy, and a flaming being who deals ruthlessly with the lizard of lust.

It is through angels, more than any other imaginative motif (other than Aslan himself) that Lewis conveys the divine majesty. Though (as the Oyarsa of Malacandra tells Ransom) there are eldila in our own air (142), they are manifestations of celestial majesty to which we are usually completely oblivious.

The nineteenth century poet Francis Thompson speaks of our blindness to angelic presences, asserting that the Kingdom of God is not distant from us in a strange far away realm, (Malacandra or Perelandra?) but is as close as our breathing. The movement of angels’ wings, “the drift of pinions,” we so long to hear*are*right alongside us, but we cannot hear the sound because we have our doors shut so tight against the supernatural. The guardian angels have not forsaken us, they keep their ancient divinely appointed places. The Psalmist speaks of angels protecting us from striking our foot against a stone (91.12). Here Thompson depicts a scene of stumbling a little, turning over a stone in the path , and the angels lurching forward their wings outspread protectingly. The fault lies with us; it is our estrangement from the holy, that causes is time and time again to “miss the many splendored thing (“The Kingdom of God”).

Lewis, like Thompson, is saying “Listen, hear ‘the drift of pinions’.” He does not allow us to miss the splendor of these mighty beings who accomplish God’s purposes, but who may be so easily mistaken “for a sunbeam or even a moving of the leaves” (76).
——————–