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Reason and Logic Belong to God. So Do Imagination and Myth.

A new book explores what C. S. Lewis believed about the multileveled nature of reality.

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I still remember vividly the intellectual liberation I felt when I read the first letter of C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*during my graduate years at the University of Michigan. It was not my first time reading the book; that had taken place when I was a teenager. But when I read it this time, it came alive for me in a new and bracing way. Secular colleges and universities, like the secular world itself, have a way of convincing students, without them realizing they are being convinced, that the real, solid world belongs firmly in the realm of science and that anything relating to God or heaven belongs in the abstract, invisible world of dreams and wish fulfillment. Reason, in this telling, is on the side of those who keep their eyes fixed below, while those who wish to turn their gaze upward must be satisfied with faith. Growing up means learning to trust reason, face facts, and accept the world as all there is—at least all there *really* is.

In one fell swoop, *The Screwtape Letters* tore away the curtain to expose the phony smoke and mirrors behind this worldview. Reason, logic, and argument, Lewis helped me realize, belong neither to the devil nor to the atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists. It is God, the one Screwtape calls the Enemy, who invented these tools and uses them with greater skill, precision, and honesty. Thus, when his nephew Wormwood shares his plan of using logical scientific arguments to draw his patient away from God, senior tempter Screwtape warns against using such a dangerous strategy:

*The trouble about argument is that it moves the whole struggle onto the Enemy’s own ground. He can argue too; whereas in really practical propaganda of the kind I am suggesting He has been shown for centuries to be greatly the inferior of Our Father Below. By the very act of arguing, you awake the patient’s reason; and once it is awake, who can foresee the result? Even if a particular train of thought can be twisted so as to end in our favour, you will find that you have been strengthening in your patient the fatal habit of attending to universal issues and withdrawing his attention from the stream of immediate sense experiences. Your business is to fix his attention on the stream. Teach him to call it “real life” and don’t let him ask what he means by “real.”*

I had never heard or read anything like this before! Of course, the omniscient God who ordered the cosmos and gave humanity the gift of reason *would* be the real supporter of logic and argument. And of course, real life had little to do with the stream of disjointed sights and sounds and smells that greeted me each morning on my drive to work. If there is something real out there, it must be something that lasts, that has shape and form and weight. Animals perceive the world as a flood of sensations without and instincts within, but that is because they lack both reason and a sense of that which is real and true.

**The source of all ‘facthood’**

As I worked my way through Charlie Starr’s *The Lion’s Country: C. S. Lewis’s Theory of the Real*, I experienced again that sense of intellectual liberation I had first felt while reading Screwtape’s opening letter to Wormwood. Starr, a professor of English at Alderson Broaddus University who is also an expert on Lewis’s handwriting, has a deep and intimate knowledge of Lewis’s full body of work. In his new book, he marshals that knowledge for a single purpose: to tease out what Lewis had to say in his fiction, nonfiction, essays, letters, and sermons about the nature of reality.

He begins at just the right place, with the contrast that Lewis makes in *Miracles* between the naturalist and the supernaturalist view of reality. Both know that there must be an ultimate and basic fact on which everything can be grounded; they simply disagree on the identity of that basic fact. “Lewis,” Starr explains, “says that the Naturalist thinks nature is ‘the ultimate and self existent Fact,’ whereas the Supernaturalist thinks ‘God is basic Fact or Actuality’ and ‘the source of all other facthood.’” Which is not to say that matter is therefore bad or illusory or inconsequential. It was the young atheist Lewis, longing intensely for beauty, who thought that matter and nature were evil. Only after coming to believe in a good God who created the world and became incarnate in that world could he accept nature as a good thing that pointed beyond itself to a “Transcendent Other” that Lewis, in Starr’s words, “would ultimately recognize as the true source of his longing.”

As counterintuitive as it might seem to modern people raised in a post-Enlightenment world that makes a sharp division between fact and fiction, reason and imagination, our experience of literature and myth often draws us closer to reality. It certainly did for Lewis. Starr sums up the false division with commendable brevity: “If it comes from the imagination, it is imaginary. If it is imaginary, it is not real.” He later sums up Lewis’s position with equal brevity: that “myth gives us experiences of transcendent reality, and from those experiences we can abstract all manner of truths about that reality.”

Starr returns often to a key Lewisian distinction between looking at (or studying) something and looking along (or experiencing) that same thing. In “Meditation in a Toolshed,” Lewis discusses the difference between looking *at* a beam of light breaking into a dark shed and looking *along* that same beam to see the world outside. While most moderns study myths as objects or artifacts, Lewis embraced them as imaginative vehicles for experiencing the greater, unseen reality that transcends our own. The sad frustration is that, in our current state, we cannot do both simultaneously; we cannot analyze and enjoy, dissect and taste, know *about* and *know* at the same time.

At least we cannot do so in our fallen world. In heaven, we will be able to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord *and* participate in his triune life. One of Starr’s most exciting contentions in *The Lion’s Country* is that Lewis provides direct insight on this aspect of heaven in his science-fiction novels *Out of the Silent Planet*

and *Perelandra*, in which he whisks us away to the unfallen planets of Mars and Venus. In heavenly worlds like Mars or Venus, knowledge might work the way it does in heaven proper: in the highest reality of heaven, there is no distinction between fact, truth, or myth. But on Earth we cannot bring fact, truth, and myth together, either in history or in our thinking except in two instances: in myth, which can give us glimpses of higher reality, and in the Incarnation, where the three came together in the person of Christ—this too, though, is a myth for us to encounter: the myth that became fact. In an unfallen world, as in heaven, one need not choose between specific, concrete facts and general, universal truths. There, they are one and the same. There, mythic tales that on the earth are lovely but untrue are historically real, without losing any of their imaginative wonder and aesthetic beauty. Indeed, if I may highlight a scene Starr does not mention, Lewis, in the penultimate chapter of *Perelandra*, allows us to gaze on the eternal essence of masculine and feminine rendered concrete in the guardian angels of Mars and Venus.

Such is the nature of reality in an unfallen world, but, Starr adds in the quoted passage above, our fallen world still affords us some glimpses of that reality. Through myth we catch an echo of a world where soul and body, subject and object, longing and fulfillment become one; where, to borrow a line from the poet William Butler Yeats, we can no longer distinguish the dancer from the dance. In the incarnate Christ, the two actually become one: not just perfect God and perfect Man, but perfect Myth and perfect Fact.

**World within worlds**

*The Lion’s Country* offers many insights like these that both connect and open up Lewis’s diverse works. I will just mention two more that I found particularly helpful.

First, Starr connects some of Lewis’s signature distinctions—between history and myth, fact and reality, looking *at* and looking *along*—to another central distinction Lewis discusses most fully in *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*. Whereas the laws of nature define the way things are, the laws of *human* nature define the way they ought to be. By introducing the word *ought* into the discussion, Lewis calls up the distinction between prescription and description. The Law of Nature describes how things are; the Law of Human Nature prescribes how things ought to be. And the facts of human behavior (the descriptions) frequently oppose the fact of how people ought to behave. Nevertheless, for Lewis, Natural Law in prescribing *Ought* is as real as any descriptive *Is*.

Both *is* and *ought* are equally real and true, though the source of the second is ultimately supernatural, communicating to us a divine facthood that transcends the brute facts of nature. One is not real and the other illusory, or one objective and the other subjective. Rather, they point to what Starr calls “multiple *levels* of reality,” a “hierarchical complexity” that cannot be accounted for by the limited tools of natural science or naturalistic philosophy.

And that leads to a second insight, a second connection that Starr makes. As Lewis analyzes these hierarchical levels in his nonfiction—particularly in his sermon “Transposition”—so he illustrates them, and thus allows us to experience them, in his fiction. In *The Great Divorce*, Lewis helps us see that as hell is less real than the earth, so heaven is more real than the earth. On the lower level of the earth, we pursue truth intellectually; on the higher level of heaven, writes Starr, we “meet Truth in person. On Earth, truth is abstract statements one makes about reality. In heaven, truth is concretely real.”

Meanwhile, in Narnia, the stacked levels of earth and heaven morph into a different yet similar configuration. The reason Narnia runs on a totally different temporal scheme than the earth is because Narnia exists in a different dimension that lies along, rather than above or beneath, our own. When Digory and Polly land in the Wood between the Worlds in *The Magician’s Nephew*, they discover that it is not a place with its own history and inhabitants but a waystation between different worlds.

When they, along with the other five friends of Narnia, make it to Aslan’s Country at the end of *The Last Battle*, they encounter another space-expanding configuration. Connected, like spokes in a wheel, to Aslan’s Country, they see not the multitude of worlds accessible through the Wood but the perfections of each. These perfections (Plato would call them Forms) lie *within* the worlds, but they are bigger and more real. Just so, the baby that lay in the manger in Bethlehem was far bigger than the stable, the city, and the world around him.

In his fiction, Starr argues, “Lewis imagines the possibility of vertical, horizontal, and even interior realities, a multiverse of being that is even more than merely hierarchical. Like a cube, it may have vertical realities, horizontal realities, and realities of depth.” Reality upon reality, existence alongside existence, worlds within worlds: all connected, in perception, by the isthmus of myth and, in fact, by the Word made flesh. Such wonders await the reader who, guided by Starr, ventures into the realms of C. S. Lewis.

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