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C. S. Lewis' Warnings for Education

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C. S. Lewis wrote often on education: about its uses and misuses, political involvement, examinations, and even enjoyment. Upon hearing a boy say he might enjoy going back to school, Lewis remarks, "I was feeling, in a confused way, how much good the happy schoolboys of our own day miss in escaping the miseries their elders underwent," but Lewis also was not entirely disenchanted with the education he received: "The good results which I think I can trace to my first school would not have come about if its vile procedure had been intended to produce them" ("My First School" 23, 26). In the mid-1940s, Lewis admitted discontent with some of the shifts in British education. On the American side, the Great Depression caused rapid economic changes to educational budgets. Books and supply expenditures were reduced or eliminated; 10-25% of administrative and faculty salaries were cut; and the length of the school year was even reduced by a month (Judd 876). Youths who left school to find a job were unable to obtain employment and, furthermore, turned away from further education (877). The world entered a state of turmoil from political to personal levels, education included. As Charles H. Judd notes, "With the change in conditions . . . it is no longer possible for most young people to complete their preparation for mature life by securing at an early age profitable employment" (881-82); it may be difficult to believe that Judd was writing in 1942 when higher education has risen to such high demand since the 1960s and 1970s. In the mid-1940s, Lewis recognizes rising problems in the British educational system, warning society of immanent ramifications in educational focus, socio-political demands, and social equality; these concerns, then, foreshadow the development of problematic educational reforms in the U. S. such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Common Core.

Educational Focus

Between the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, educational goals shifted dramatically from content-centered learning to student-centered models: what the student should learn versus what the student likes to learn; Lewis, however, understood the significance of keeping what the student likes to learn as latent content and maintaining necessary knowledge as manifest content.

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Lewis was not resistant to an enjoyable educational system, but he believed that the "good results" did not arise intentionally from the "vile procedure" of the curriculum. Rather, the positive effects of education are often side-effects of the assigned curriculum ("My First School" 26).

Education, like politics and the family, observed tremendous shifts in the mid-twentieth century: from tradition to evolution, from local nuclearity to political universality. In 1942 America, Judd notes the "extremists" who sought for "complete abandonment of the conventional divisions of the curriculum" (882). New educational structures would remove courses in math, spelling, geography, and history and replace them with "such topics as arouse the interest of pupils," conclusively fusing disciplines normally diversified in separate subjects (882). Across the pond, Lewis decried the Norwood Report in both "The Parthenon and the Optative" and "Is English Doomed?" The 1941 Norwood Report resulted in the 1944 Education Act, essentially creating a division among children: academically-inclined students went to grammar schools; scientifically-inclined students went to technical schools; and remaining students attended secondary schools. The division caused public concern, yielding a review of education in the 1963 Newsom Report (Gillard). Norwood, et al. argued for a break away from traditional education to a student-centered approach: "The curriculum then must do justice to the needs of the pupil, physical, spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, practical, social. This is the problem which those who construct curricula have to face" (Norwood, et al. 60). They further called for a curriculum which integrates "the personality of the child . . . by the realisation of his purpose as a human being" (61). In terms of English courses, all examinations should be abolished because they could produce "much harm in its influence" (95).

Lewis challenged the direction in which education was turning when he responds to the overall mentality of the Norwood Report in "The Parthenon and the Optative." Lewis views the Parthenon as a kind of education which deals with the "hard, dry things like grammar, and dates, and prosody" while the Optative "begins in 'Appreciation' and ends in gush" (109). Lewis is challenging Norwood et. al.'s resistance to English examinations because they believe those examinations either test information outside of English or attempt to "test a pupil's appreciation of them by means of an external examination" (93). Lewis rebuts that the exams were meant to test not the appreciation but the knowledge of the student; the problem with the Norwood Report's approach to the examinations is that they focus on the examination rather than the reading ("The Parthenon" 110). Furthermore, Lewis asserts that to remove examinations from the English curriculum—and humanities like it—is to cause a chain reaction over time because a subject without external examinations will not receive governmental scholarships, nor will it retain educators because the courses will no longer be required ("Is English Doomed?" 28). One need only look to modern educational trends for evidence in higher education of Lewis' accurate prognosis: little funding for the humanities, increasing job loss in literary studies, and dismantling of English departments across the United States.

Then, and today, a clear privileging takes place at the secondary and post-secondary levels. The subjects that currently few aspire to and with which many have difficulty are discarded for reasons of impracticality, economic profit, and, according to these mid-twentieth-century reports, the harmful emotions that examinations place on students. In the words of Screwtape, the basic principles of education are that "dunces and idlers must not be made to feel inferior to intelligent and industrious pupils" because these individuals simply have different interests, or, in Norwood terminology, the curriculum has failed to integrate them ("Screwtape Proposes a Toast" 293). It is not that Lewis disapproves of certain student types; rather, he recognizes a survival of the fittest in education. He simply observes that some students will sit in the back of the classroom eating candy and performing poorly because that is the education for which they work. To the poorly performing student's benefit, he will learn that his place is not in academia: "The distinction between him and the great brains will have been clear to him ever since, in the playground, he punched the heads containing those great brains. . . . But what you want to do is to take away from Tommy that whole free, private life as part of the everlasting opposition which is his whole desire" ("Democratic Education" 35). Lewis believes that, if generic Tommy experiences an education which encourages him rather than educates him, then he will resent the inferiorities he may not have known he even had. "Democracy demands that little men should not take big ones too seriously," says Lewis, "it dies when it is full of little men who think they are big themselves" ("Democratic Education" 36).

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Socio-Political Demands

That democracy alludes to a second warning Lewis offers against the changes in school: some changes will inevitably establish problematic relationships among education, politics, and socio-cultural demands. In "The Death of Words," he notes the current synonymy of *moral standards*, *civilized*, *modern*, *democratic*, and *enlightened* (107). All five terms might be applied to the developing educational reforms of the 1940s and beyond (many of the terms, if not all, are used in the reforms mentioned in this essay). Lewis admitted to being a democrat not because of equal representation in government but because of checked power ("Equality" 17). Aristotelian democratic education does not mean "the education which democrats like, but the education which will preserve democracy" ("Democratic Education" 32). A democratic education, then, should check and balance the power and attention given to certain interests and people: "On the one hand the interests of those boys who will never reach a University must not be sacrificed by a curriculum based on academic requirements. On the other, the liberty of the University must not be destroyed by allowing the requirements of schoolboys to dictate its forms of study" ("Is English Doomed?" 27).

European education, notes Lewis, was based on the ancient Greeks, who greatly revered tradition unlike the "modern industrial civilization" ("Modern Man and his Categories of Thought" 62). *Provincialism*, or narrow-mindedness, is the term Lewis applies to the mentality which disregards tradition because it is out of date. Old texts, particularly the Bible, are discarded simply because they are old. Lewis posits that it is as if Satan is acting militarily: instead of attacking, the tactical move is to isolate the enemy regiments from themselves ("Modern Man" 62). Lewis finds recommending Christianity, for example, increasingly difficult because audiences always ask "if it will be comforting, or 'inspiring', or socially useful" ("Modern Man" 65). Modern individuals cannot seem to view something objectively; it must be practical, what, in the realm of education, may be called educational pragmatism. Such are the changes given to education in the mid-twentieth century and beyond—socio-cultural demands which see education for its practicality rather than personal betterment—for *moral standards*, *enlightenment*, and like words are no longer important in the academic realm.

Instead, educational pragmatism begins to see pupils for their utility. As Screwtape says, "the differences between pupils—for they are obviously and nakedly individual differences—must be disguised" ("Screwtape Proposes" 293). Education shifts away from what may be too challenging for one student and, perhaps, even away from what may be too easy, disregarding the significance of knowledge in itself. As a result, asserts the excited demon Screwtape, "At schools, the children who are too stupid or lazy to learn languages and mathematics and elementary science can be set to doing the things that children used to do in their spare time" ("Screwtape Proposes" 293). Little did Lewis know that the 1963 Newsom Report would encourage studies beyond the traditional forms: e.g., handicraft, rural studies (agriculture), and needlework (Newsom, et al. 132-35). This type of democratic education attempts to appease desires, "evil passions," and envies, according to Lewis ("Democratic Education" 34). Yet, "Envy is insatiable," and equality is being applied where "equality is fatal . . . [and] purely a social conception" (34). Lewis reminds his readers of the latent content unachievable in this utility-oriented, socially- and politically-constructed education; virtue, truth, nor aesthetics are democratic. A truly democratic education, on the other hand, is one which preserves democracy—which is "ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly 'high-brow'. In drawing up its curriculum it should always have chiefly in view the interests of the boy who wants to know and who can know" (34).

The problem of a democratic education which seeks to represent all people rather than to educate people took little time from the 1941 Norwood Report to touch higher education in the 1963 Robbins Report, *Higher Education*, in which Robbins et al. call for not only co-ordination between schools and higher education institutions but also a near-doubled enrollment at the higher education level from 1962-63 to 1973-74 from 216,000 to 390,000 students and an additional increase to 560,000 students by 1980-81 (67-69, 269). Robbins, et al. asked that money be set aside to establish new institutions to defer attraction to Oxford and Cambridge (79-80). In the U. S., the Higher Education Act of 1965 attempted to increase access to higher education for all people. It saw the birth of the Pell Grant, Educational Opportunity Funding, grants for teacher education, and the beloved federal and private student loans. Screwtape, timely enough in 1959, prophesies, "At

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universities, examinations must be framed so that nearly all the students get good marks. Entrance examinations must be framed so that all, or nearly all, citizens can go to universities, whether they have any power (or wish) to profit by higher education or not" (293). Political and socio-cultural demands drive the educational system to forfeit, perhaps for better and worse, the elite element of higher education; students whose performance is sub-par may reach the university simply because the demand is to increase numbers. Lewis' cry for a "ruthlessly aristocratic, shamelessly 'high-brow'" education which preserves democracy was never heard or, at least, never accepted at both child and young adult academic levels. Hence, a program such as GEAR UP, an acronym for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, was enacted in the 1998 revision of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and "is a federal program aimed at equalizing access to higher education for low-income students" which promotes information to students and parents about higher education institutions, "individualized academic and social support for students," "parent involvement in education," "educational excellence," "school reform," and student "participation in rigorous courses" ("National Evaluation of GEAR UP" [1]). Ironically, though the executive summary of the first two years of GEAR UP provides explanations for use of funding, student environmental statistics, and educational reform objectives, it surprisingly contains no statistical data about how many GEAR UP children attended or even completed a higher education program.

Social Equality

Nonetheless, one of the driving forces for these demands is equality which, as Lewis observes, is a significant remedy for a broken machine; the final warning, however, is that when equality is valued not as a means but as an end, the medicine becomes a dangerously poisonous drug for the student and culture, alike. Lewis believed that equality, unlike wisdom and happiness, is not something innately good ("Equality" 17). Certain kinds of equality are, in Lewis' words, "necessary remedies for the Fall," but when equality is treated as an ideal rather than a medicine, people develop a sense of entitlement which despises superiority and authority (18). Politically, for example, Lewis praises his nation for having a ceremonial monarchy while maintaining a democratic government, for "there, right in the midst of our lives, is that which satisfies the craving for inequality, and acts as a permanent reminder that medicine is not food" (20). Not admitting the obviousness of natural inequalities will inevitably either remove all required subjects or broaden the curriculum so that every child can pass without a problem; she can be "praised and petted for something – handicrafts or gymnastics, moral leadership or deportment, citizenship or the care of guinea-pigs, 'hobbies' or musical appreciation. . . . Then no boy, and no boy's parents need feel inferior" (33). Of course, the natural consequences of an education which facilitates "dunces" will be not only the "hatred of superiority" but also a "nation of dunces" (33).

This warning against equality-based education permeates Lewis' literature. When Lewis published *The Screwtape Letters* in 1941, the Norwood Report was only being released, as well. Lewis' short essays on education and *The Abolition of Man* to follow over the next few years wrestled with the concept at times, but he did not make a public declaration of his views on equality-based education until the follow-up to *The Screwtape Letters* in 1959: "Screwtape Proposes a Toast." Midway through the address, Screwtape begins his discussion of the word *democracy*, particularly interested in encouraging his fellow demons to confuse human minds as to the meaning of the word (290). In two short paragraphs, he essentializes the first two warnings, followed by the core of the argument: "you can use the word *Democracy* to sanction in his thought the most degrading (and also the least enjoyable) of all human feelings. . . . The feeling I mean is of course that which prompts a man to say *I'm as good as you*" (290). The phrase is Screwtape's way of masking the word *equality*, and the feeling is clearly a feeling of envy which "has been known to the humans for thousands of years. . . . The delightful novelty of the present situation is that you can sanction it—make it respectable and even laudable—by the incantatory use of the word *democratic*" (291). The clause, *I'm as good as you*, becomes the theme of the toast—as the key to the syntactic games and educational advice to come. Screwtape envisions the best way to ruin humanity. Intelligent, gifted children "who are fit to proceed to a higher class may be artificially kept back, because the others would get a *trauma*—Beelzebub, what a useful word!—by being left behind" (294). One may recall the American No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) which established goals to maintain an arbitrary national average

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among student performance.[1] The NCLB has roots in 1965, alongside Higher Education reform, with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. I need not expound on the goal of the NCLB: "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" which includes "closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers" (*No Child Left Behind* I.100[1]). In closing the achievement gaps between high- and low-performing students, the curriculum injures those individuals who may hold a higher aptitude for academic learning because they are restrained from pressing further in their education as a curriculum-based sacrifice to raise—hopefully—the performance of the low-performing students. Lewis, I believe, expresses the aim most effectively: "The bright pupil thus remains democratically fettered to his own age-group throughout his school career, and a boy who would be capable of tackling Aeschylus or Dante sits listening to his coaeval's attempts to spell out A CAT SAT ON THE MAT" ("Screwtape Proposes" 294). As a result, says Screwtape, the demons will no longer need to ruin humanity because humanity will pave their own roads to Hell.

The results should, perhaps, speak for themselves. The NCLB certainly demonstrates some positive statistics according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Since 1971, the overall student average for reading increased by 13 points for children age 9 in 2012, including highs of 36, 25, and 17 point increases for 9-year-old Blacks, Hispanics, and males, respectively. Math scores, similarly, show a 25-point increase overall with categorical lows of a 24-point increase among females and as high as a 36-point increase among Blacks. Ironically, however, by one's junior year at 17 years old, even with categorical increases among Blacks (30 points in reading, 18 points in math) and Hispanics (21 points in reading, 17 points in math), the overall performance average shows no significant change in score since 1971 ("Summary of Major Findings"). Statistically, then, the NCLB makes significant reductions in the performance gap, as the program sets out to do, particularly at young ages; on the other hand, the statistics also suggest a lack of overall improvement in the educational system. That is, the overall average performance shows no significant difference by age seventeen—which means that, where some categories improved such as Blacks and Hispanics, other numbers must have decreased in order to maintain the same overall average. In short, the achievement gaps may have closed for recognized minorities, but, when the results are totaled, the rate of students who can spell "A CAT SAT ON THE MAT" in 1971 is the same in 2012.

But, one may suggest, the NCLB included funding for gifted and advanced placement programs. Once tested into these programs, a student is, then, given time in a location apart from the standard classroom, but these programs are not what they seem. Gifted programs include "summer programs, mentoring programs, service learning programs, and cooperative programs involving business, industry, and education" and the "Implementing [of] innovative strategies, such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and service learning" (V.D.6.5464.b.3-4). Key to the gifted program is the mentoring, tutoring, and cooperative aspect, in that students may, in their gifted programs, only receive the opportunity to help other students with what they know rather than to expand their knowledge into new areas, to move beyond spelling "A CAT SAT ON THE MAT" to reading Aeschylus and Dante. These students, who may benefit from an advanced placement program, may find the same disappointment from this latter program. Under the 1700s section of the NCLB provisions, the purposes of the advanced placement program, known as the "Access to High Standards Act," repeats the same language of the rest of the NCLB in the purposes: e.g., "increase the number of students who participate," "to increase the availability and broaden the range of schools," "to demonstrate that larger and more diverse groups of students can participate," and "to provide greater access" (I.G.1702). The student with high aptitude, then, finds little provision for her abilities in the NCLB, even in sections which appear to support her talents and abilities.

This mentality, however, does not end with the NCLB. Through the guise of Screwtape, Lewis perceives a necessary step in order to implement

1 It may be worth mentioning that the GEAR UP program can be found simply by going to the homepage of the No Child Left Behind program website. The two programs are clearly part of the same educational approach.

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I'm as good as you into education, beginning with the economic liquidation of the Middle Class via taxation and rising costs of private education (294). The NCLB changed faces in 2009 under the Obama administration, but much of it remained alongside additions of the Academic Competitiveness Grant and the National SMART (Science and Math Access to Retain Talent) Program. These funds demanded the student have participated in "rigorous" courses—a term utilized also in the 1998 GEAR UP program. Even ten years later, respondents at higher-ed institutions had difficulty understanding what was meant by the term in order to award funds to students (*Academic Competitiveness and SMART Grant Programs* 41). To top it off, these grants that supposedly function on competitiveness, the ACG and National SMART Program boasted 282,300 first-time, first-year students would have been eligible for funding had the program existed in 2003, double of those who would have qualified in the 1995-96 academic year. Doubling the recipients is an unusual means of creating competitiveness. Additionally, the award statistics depend solely on college preparation-based curriculums, meaning the program does not rely on student performance so much as school participation in the program. In fact, the grant programs exclude student populations from calculations who did not attend a participating school. Of further note, according to these grants, competition and intelligence only occur in the maths and sciences, for these grant programs do not exist outside of those fields.

Government, as we can see from its acts, grants, and programs, effectively steers education to its aims—often, as has been demonstrated, in the spirit of *I'm as good as you*. Consequently, all public education becomes state education, controlled by the democratic ideal of equality. This new democracy, what Screwtape contextualizes as the *diabolic sense*, will sustain a "morally flaccid" nation with undisciplined youth, arrogance built upon ignorance, and emotional weakness due to "lifelong pampering. And that is what Hell wishes every democratic people to be" (295). Through such measures, true democracy will be crushed in the face of diabolic democracy and its *I'm as good as you* equality. Such an equality-based education cannot teach traditional virtues, values, or ethics—none of these are part of an equality-based system. Lewis is clear in positing that where absolute equality could exist, obedience does not—which begs the question if such equality may be achieved when it resists the obedience necessary to create it: "The man who cannot conceive a joyful and loyal obedience on the one hand, nor an unembarrassed and noble acceptance of that obedience on the other, the man who has never even wanted to kneel or to bow, is a prosaic barbarian" ("Equality" 18). Being civilized—or, if one prefers different verbage, *moral*, *modern*, *democratic*, or *enlightened*—appears, in modern education, to be very near the barbarism which refuses to recognize the unavoidable hierarchies even within the framework of equality in education. In an age of utility, barbarians do not need literacy; in an age of literacy, barbarians are still needed for their utility.

CSL Quotation

"The New Testament writers speak as if Christ's achievement in rising from the dead was the first event of its kind in the whole history of the universe. He is the "first fruits," the "pioneer of life." He has forced open a door that has been locked since the death of the first man. He has met, fought, and beaten the King of Death. Everything is different because He has done so. This is the beginning of the New Creation: a new chapter in cosmic history has opened."

C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*

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Conclusions

The esteemed objectivity and equality eventually lead back to the utility of educational pragmatism, this time not on an individual level, like earlier reforms, but a corporate level. In 1963, Newsom, et al. argued that English and humanities are not taught appropriately because they are taught as ends in themselves rather than as integrative into other disciplines (152). In U. S. education under the Obama administration, the 1963 Newsom, et al. philosophy entered the United States with the Common Core. The Common Core has come alongside the NCLB as another means of preparing students for success in "college, career, and life," now with forty-three out of fifty states having adopted the standards. The Common Core's "research and evidence based" and "clear, understandable, and consistent" standards that align with college and career expectations, based on "rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills," present a new concern for education, even if they are built on current standards and informed by other nations' educational success (*Common Core State Standards Initiative*). Even that "Reading, writing, speaking, and listening should span the school day from K-12 as integral parts of every subject" sounds appealing, but the Common Core is not yet removed from Lewis' warnings. In many states, physical education, arts courses (e.g., painting, photography, and culinary), and other disciplines which would not typically require a language arts component are now being evaluated on "consistent," "research and evidence based" standards with an unidentified criteria for "rigorous content." The clearest focus of the Common Core is that it returns to educational pragmatism: "Rather than focusing solely on the skills of reading and writing, the ELA/literacy standards highlight the growing complexity of the texts students must read to be ready for the demands of college, career, and life" (*Common Core State Standards Initiative*). Such pragmatism and integration of language arts into other areas devalue language arts as a field of its own. English departments in colleges and universities across the country have shrunk or eliminated literary studies from the list of majors and, accordingly, the departments who taught the majors. The need for competency in composition is necessary as an *integrative* study, but disciplines such as these, after suffering integration into other disciplines, have nearly disappeared and have been declared unconventional in their own right. Lewis' concern for a lack of examinations to award scholarships in English has come true and will only develop further under the educational pragmatism of the Common Core.

Educational focus, socio-political demands, and equality-based curriculum now create a highly problematic educational system in the U. S. and England. Where the candy-coated desires of some students are satisfied in education, the savory, rich studies that may come with some difficulty are sacrificed to the gods of pragmatism and integration. Where some students are perhaps better fit for an occupation which does not require a strong post-secondary education, socio-political agendas shape a curriculum which propagandizes further education and, furthermore, an equality-based education fitted for the average student. When one student may aspire to intellectual greatness, he is limited by goals to achieve an arbitrary national average by the *I'm as good as you* principle. Ultimately, Lewis' warnings to avoid educational pragmatism, equality as a driving principle, and inadequate cultural emphasis on select studies such as literature; his call to recognize that people are equal but diverse; and his encouragement to facilitate the intellectual gifts of the few all went unheard or unheeded. Perhaps, had Lewis' voice been heard and understood, some of the catastrophes in teaching, testing, and cultivation may have prevented the current state of education both in England and the U. S.

# # #

(Works Cited appear on page 8)

Zachary A. Rhone holds a PhD in Literature and Criticism and teaches at Alfred University, Houghton College, and Indiana Wesleyan University. He has spoken at numerous conferences and published on the work of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald. His forthcoming book, tentatively titled *The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald,* is due to be published by The Kent State University Press in late 2016. He lives in Western New York with his wife and cat.

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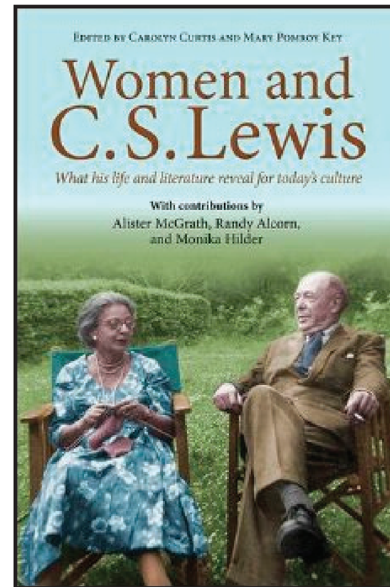
A Review by Louis Markos



Woman and C. S. Lewis is a fine collection, but it makes me sad: not sad because of what is written in it, but because it had to be written at all. Alas, there are a number of critics out there—the authors of *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* among them—who accuse Lewis of being not only a sexist but a misogynist. Such an accusation would be bad enough at any time, but it is even worse in our modern age where we have been programmed to believe that sins against equality are far worse than sins against morality.

It would be nice if lovers and scholars of C. S. Lewis could simply ignore such slander, but the fact is that there are many people today who will avoid reading Lewis because they are frightened away by charges of sexism. So what to do about the charges? Well, the wrong way to handle it, I would argue, is to follow in the footsteps of Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen's *A Sword between the Sexes?: C. S. Lewis and the Gender Debates*.

I find Van Leeuwen's subtle suggestion that the older Lewis was moving toward an egalitarian (as opposed to a complementarian) position of the sexes to constitute a far greater slander than the charges of sexism levelled by J. K. Rowling and Phillip Pullman. If there was one thing Lewis was certain of, it was that God made us male and female and that there were therefore essential differences between the sexes—or, to put it in bolder terms, that it is not just our bodies but our souls that are masculine and feminine.

Lewis even offers one of the greatest descriptions and defenses of the essential, God-made differences between the sexes when, toward the end of *Perelandra*, he allows us to contemplate the innate, foundational, ineradicable differences between the masculine and the feminine that lie at the core of the guardian spirits of Mars and Venus: differences that lie far deeper than society or biology or language. That is not to say that Lewis ascribed to a rigid division of all tasks: in *That Hideous Strength*, the men and women of the Society of Saint Anne's participate equally in the housework. But it does mean that he would have utterly rejected the modern notion—one taught almost as frequently in Christian sociology and psychology classes as in secular ones—that gender is a social construct rather than something innate and essential.

#

Given the dangerous precedent set by Van Leeuwen's book, I was greatly relieved to find that none of the contributors to *Women and C. S. Lewis* attempted to mold Lewis into something he was not. Edited by veteran journalist Carolyn Curtis and Mary Pomroy Key, Director of Special Programs for the C. S. Lewis Foundation, *Women and C. S. Lewis: What his life and literature reveal for today's culture* mounts a genial, accessible, irenic defense of Lewis that combines personal testimony with close analyses of Lewis' life and works.

The cumulative effect of the two dozen or so, mostly brief essays that make up this highly readable collection is to lay to rest the charges of sexism and to allow Lewis to emerge as a man who had a high respect both for women and for femininity. This goal is achieved in great part by paying close attention to the women who influenced Lewis' life and to the female characters he created in his fiction.

Even those who have read a number of biographies of Lewis will learn a great deal from Crystal Hurd's opening essay on Lewis' mother, Flora. Hurd, who holds a PhD in educational leadership, presents Flora to us as a woman of great learning and great faith whose legacy remained with Lewis throughout his life. She argues, quite persuasively, that "as Lewis matured, he seemed more attracted to women modeled like his mother—loving, intelligent, sensitive, observant" (39).

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That was certainly the case with the woman he married, Joy Davidman Gresham, whose forceful personality and high intelligence is commented on by many of the contributors. Indeed, Don King, Professor of English at Montreat College, notes how revealing it is that Lewis chose to marry, not the more traditionally feminine Ruth Pitter, but the more assertive Joy. Joy, King suggests, "'won' Lewis because of her passionate, aggressive, 'winner-take-all' attitude toward romantic love, while Pitter 'lost' Lewis because of her dispassionate, reserved, 'you-must-win-me' attitude toward romantic love" (65).

Joy proved a worthy sparring partner, and Lewis was pleased, rather than intimidated, by her razor sharp intellect and wit. The same was the case, as a number of contributors show, with his friendship with Dorothy Sayers. Though they often disagreed on spiritual and aesthetic matters, the two remained friends, and Lewis expressed nothing but respect for her finely-honed mind and creative zest. Lewis showed the same respect in teaching his female students and mentoring the girls and women that God put in his path. And when Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe got the better of him at an Oxford Socratic Club debate, Lewis admitted his defeat and changed chapter three of *Miracles* to accommodate Anscombe's criticism.

Even the infamous Mrs. Moore, who made Lewis' life so difficult, exerted a positive impact on his spiritual growth. As Paul McCusker, a scriptwriter who has dramatized a number of Lewis' works for Focus on the Family Radio, wisely notes, it was "during his time with Mrs. Moore . . . [that] Lewis came to believe that women often serve as initiators for men to rise to nobler ambitions, drawing men away from selfishness to do their duty in service to others" (48). Lyle Dorsett, Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism at Beeson Divinity School and former Curator of the Wade Center, surprisingly finds that Joy had a similar impact upon Lewis and his brother: Joy and her sons forced them "outside of themselves, precisely what these self-centered bachelors needed" (62).

True, the Inklings was an all-male society—contrary to legend, Sayers never attended a meeting—but Lewis can hardly be faulted for desiring time alone with his male friends, where they could discuss things they might not discuss in mixed company. And besides, as McCusker sagely reminds us, "because some of the Inklings were married men, it would have been considered questionable, if not reckless, to include women in that environment. Prudence and misogyny should not be confused" (51).

#

Women and C. S. Lewis offers numerous articles taking up the female characters that appear in *Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Space* (or Ransom) *Trilogy*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Till We Have Faces*. Together with the contributors, I find it almost inconceivable that readers of Lewis' fiction would conclude that he was a sexist. Thus, while Joy Jordan-Lake, winner of the Christy-Award for *Blue Hole Back Home*, reminds us that Lewis uses a woman (Sarah Smith) in *The Great Divorce* to represent "ultimate freedom—from material, sensual or intellectual obsessions, or from earthly concerns over fame or fortune" (125), David Downing, R. W. Schlosser Professor of English at Elizabethtown College, reminds us that, in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, "Lewis chose to personify all three things he was defending—Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism—as female characters" (127).

And the same goes for the second two installments of *The Space Trilogy*, where the Venusian Eve takes center stage over her male counterpart (*Perelandra*) and where Jane Studdock is ultimately privileged over her husband in spiritual insight (*That Hideous Strength*). For *The Chronicles of Narnia*, where Lucy is the character who is closest to Aslan, where the girls are just as spunky and heroic as the boys, and where the number of male villains (Miraz, Uncle Andrew, Rabadash, Rishda Tarkaan, etc.) outweighs the two evil witches. For *Till We Have Faces*, where Lewis, with the help of Joy, pulls off the amazing literary feat of speaking, convincingly, through the voice of a female character.

Of course, one can accept all of these arguments and still accuse Lewis of sexism on the basis of a single charge: that Susan, in *The Last Battle*, loses her status as a friend of Narnia because she has left behind her childhood and gotten interested in stockings and lipstick. Although Lewis nowhere equates this with Susan losing her salvation and although Susan's crime is not growing up but her rejection of the dual realms of faith and imagination, critics of Lewis have been especially venomous in attacking this scene and using it to blacken Lewis' reputation.

In the conclusion to her introductory essay, Curtis argues that "people trying to discredit Lewis with charges like sexism are really attacking him

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for his effectiveness in explaining the life of faith" (20). Sadly, neither she nor any of the contributors press this point home in relation to what happens to Susan. The non-believers and theologically liberal Christians who get angry about Susan are more often than not angry at the God of orthodox Christianity. Such critics identify personally with Susan and feel a need to defend her (and thus themselves) against that "angry" and "exclusivist" God whom they so desperately want to dismiss. In that sense, they are like the young C. S. Lewis who rebelled against a God who would dare to make demands on him or try to control his thoughts or behaviors. Such people *will* define their own identity no matter the cost: even if that cost means cutting themselves off from God's love, mercy, wonder, and awe.

Space does not permit referencing all the great insights into Lewis' fiction that are offered by the contributors; however, I would like to highlight two. Malcolm Guite, a priest, academic, and songwriter living in Cambridge, makes a persuasive argument that "Lewis was perhaps more at home with the 'feminine' both within himself and in other people than most men of his generation," and then substantiates that claim with this provocative statement: "For all the leadership and authority given to Peter, for all the vivid and undoubted masculinity of Aslan, the figure in *Narnia* who represents the deepest spiritual insights and has the closest intimacy with the divine is not the oldest boy, but the youngest girl" (167).

Monika Hilder, Associate Professor of English at Trinity Western University, makes a similar point but from a different angle. After drawing a fine distinction between the active, self-reliant hero of classical epic and the more passive, humble hero of Judeo-Christian literature, Hilder identifies Lewis as a champion of the latter. "[I]f we read life through classical (not biblical) lenses," she writes, "then we call the active person heroic and the passive person unheroic. And when a writer like Lewis challenges classical convention with a biblical vision, we often miss it and so misread him. We're too busy thinking of self-reliance as heroic, and meekness as weakness. It's not Lewis who's sexist: it's us" (177).

#

Women and C. S. Lewis is a first-rate collection that succeeds in what it sets out to do. But I wish it had been bolder—and bolder in precisely the way that Hilder is bold in the above quote. Too many of the contributors are satisfied to *defend* Lewis from sexism and leave it at that, rather than blaze ahead to affirm—and champion—what Lewis can *teach* us about gender. Is it possible that Lewis was right about so many things that flew in the face of popular opinion and yet wrong when it came to the sexes? Was he right to resist naturalism, skepticism, and totalitarianism, but not right to resist anti-essentialist feminists who would deconstruct all innate gender distinctions? After all, the idea that we are finally products of our socio-economic milieu is not Christian but Marxist.

Though Hilder does not necessarily agree with all of Lewis' positions on gender, she does at least give Lewis the benefit of the doubt in several areas where

FUTURE MEETINGS

May 13 — "Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*: The Work of an Inkling?"
with John Ryle Kezel

June 10 — "Pleasing God and Future Reward: Augustine and Lewis on Right Motivation"
with Kevin Offner

July 8 — "From the Floor"
with John Morrison

Aug 12 — No Meeting

Sept. 9 — Discussion of *Reflections on the Psalms*
moderated by Barbara Zelenko

We meet at 7:30 in the Parish House of The Church of the Ascension at 12 West 11th Street, Manhattan. Call 1 (212) 254-8620 after noon on the meeting day if there is a question of possible cancellation. On the block of the Parish House, on-street parking is legal all day (alternate side rules apply). On some nearby blocks, parking becomes legal at 6:00. Nearby subway stations are at 14th Street and 6th Avenue (F train) and 14th Street Union Square (many trains 4, 5, 6, N, R, L, Q). The Strand Bookstore, dealing in second hand books, is nearby. ALL ARE WELCOME.

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he differs from modern feminism. Thus, she highlights the fact that Lewis, "like [feminist founding-mother Mary] Wollstonecraft and others throughout the ages, believed that the home is the most important place in the world. It's for domestic work that all other forms of work exist—to support the home" (182). A man who believes this certainly does not deserve to be labeled as a sexist; it is rather, I would argue, the modern feminist who insists on "freeing" women from domestic "drudgery" who deserves the sexist label.

Just as Hilder casts Lewis' celebration of the domestic sphere in a positive light, so she does the same for Lewis' defense of an all-male priesthood: a defense that does not rest (as most evangelical defenses do) on the epistles of Paul, but on the persistent biblical imagery that casts God/Jesus in masculine terms and mankind/the church in feminine terms. "Lewis," Hilder concludes, "refused to give up on the gender metaphor because he insisted we are not exchangeable neuters. To read equality as sameness is to reduce the human being to a political animal—the requirement of any totalitarian state . . . We are, Lewis insists, eternal beings engaged in a cosmic dance in which the grand ideas of gender are somehow intrinsic" (184).

Kathy Keller, who corresponded with Lewis when she was a child and who co-founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan with her husband, Tim Keller, also takes an offensive (rather than defensive) look at Lewis' position on the priesthood. Keller, who believes "that God gave us a good gift when he created complementary gender roles in the church for men and women" (209), offers the following reflection on Lewis' views:

> In Lewis' "Priestesses in the Church?", he made the point that we monkey about with gender roles at our peril. What did God mean to accomplish by making us male and female? Why not some unisex being? Or hermaphrodites? Or why didn't God make us able to choose for ourselves whether to generate or incubate life? Why assign different roles? Deep mysteries of revelation hang on our gender and on playing our assigned roles. (214)

This sense of awe and thankfulness in the face of God's decision to make us male and female also echoes through what is surely the most personal of the essays: Mary Poplin's "From feminist to mere Christian." Poplin, a professor in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University, shares the struggle she went through when she encountered Lewis' defense of biblical headship in *Mere Christianity*: "It was like many battles fought and won by God in the adult convert—an initial resistance gives way first to a willingness to study and pray, then comes an ever-so-dim recognition of truth . . . If we keep going, the longing for more truth takes complete control of the fear and douses the fiery desire to conform to the social norms of our contemporary fellows" (195).

Unexpectedly, Poplin shows that her own journey out of feminist power politics was shared by the woman who would become Lewis' wife. Poplin quotes these feisty, Lewis-like lines from Joy's *Smoke on the Mountain*: "The ardent feminist, who smashes her own home in the name of equal rights for women . . . [sic] what started, perhaps, as a genuine move toward virtue has decayed into an excuse for self-righteousness and self-importance and personal power: a disguise for the beast in the heart" (197).

Though I wish more of the contributors to *Women and C. S. Lewis* had been as bold as Hilder, Keller, and Poplin, all display a love and respect for Lewis that is palpable. Their combined voices decisively clear Lewis of the charge of sexism without converting him into something he was not. Lewis did not leave us that option; he never intended to.

# # #

Louis Markos (www.Loumarkos.com), Professor in English and Scholar in Residence at Houston Baptist University, holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities; his books include *Lewis Agonistes*, *Restoring Beauty: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in the Writings of C. S. Lewis*, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*, and *From A to Z to Narnia with C. S. Lewis*.

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Report of the January 8, 2015 Meeting

The first meeting of 2016 of the New York C.S. Lewis Society was held on January 8th. The meeting was called to order by Eric Wurthmann. The CSL reading for the month was given by Clara Sarrocco. It was from C.S. Lewis's *The Weight of Glory and other Addresses* – the section "On Forgiveness." In it Lewis writes that forgiveness is measured by our own willingness to forgive others. "We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves."

Eric passed around the sign-in sheet and began the introduction of those present. There were several people attending for the first time. He then asked if there were any announcements. Mary Gehringer indicated that free sample copies of the Bulletin were available for the taking. Clara Sarrocco pointed out that flyers on the table were announcing that Creative Communications (www.creativecommunications.com) was offering a Lenten booklet based on the thoughts of C.S. Lewis – *Mercy, Passion & Joy (Based on the writings of C.S. Lewis),* and flyers also were available for the trip to Northern Ireland and England in August, 2016 accompanied by Will Vaus. He will be the lecturer for our February 8th meeting (Topic: "C.S. Lewis: A Reading Life.")

Eric announced that *The Screwtape Letters* was being performed in January by The Fellowship of Performing Arts, 555 W. 42nd St. NYC (212-563-9261). Also the C.S. Lewis Foundation from Redlands California will be having an East Coast event from July 7th to 10th on *Faith, Freedom & the Public Square* at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Eric further announced that "An Evening with Abigail Santamaria" will take place on Friday, January 29 at 7 PM at the First Baptist Church 265 W 79th St at Broadway, NYC. Abigail Santamaria is the author of *Joy*, the biography of Joy Davidman Lewis. The evening will begin with a talk from the author and will be followed by an audience Q&A. Afterwards light hors d'oeuvres and drinks will be served and an opportunity to purchase a book signed by the author. Eric also reminded everyone that Hillsdale College continues to make available their free on-line course on C. S. Lewis at onlinecourses@hillsdale.edu.

The speaker of this evening was John Morrison. John has been a member of the New York Society since the 1970's. He is an Episcopal priest and a retired high school teacher of English. John has degrees from Dartmouth, Hofstra, SUNY Stony Brook, and the George Mercer School of Theology. He is the author of *To Love Another Person: A Spiritual Journey through* **Les Miserables** (Winged Lion Press). He has spoken about Michael O'Brien at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception, Huntington, Long Island on the topic: "A Too Well-Kept Secret South of the Border." (Podcast available at: http://www.icseminary.edu/index.php/home.) John has also been interviewed by Ignatius Press on "The Urgency of This Present Moment: Learning from C.S. Lewis and Michael O'Brien." The interview can be seen at: http://www.ipnovels.com/blog/2015/12/the-urgency-of-this-present-moment-learning-from-c-s-lewis-and-michael-d-obrien/ or at newsletter@ignatius.com (Michael O'Brien is a Catholic author, artist, and frequent essayist and lecturer on faith and culture. He writes from Canada.)

For this evening John's topic was "C.S. Lewis and Michael O'Brien: Forgiveness as a Gateway to Eternal Life." [Tapes of the lectures are available from Bill McClain for $5.00 for shipping and handling. Email Bill at: wjmcclain645@gmail.com.] During the Q&A numerous attendees brought up the topic of forgiveness in Lewis's writings from the *Ransom Trilogy* to the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Discussion continued over refreshments.

Present at the meeting were:
Eric Wurthmann – John Morrison – Maggie Goodman – Helene DeLorenzo – Celeste Mitchell - Winny Huag – David Kornegay – George Kurian – James Tetreault – Barbara Zelenko – Bill McClain – Lorraine Collazo – Jim Bash – Spencer Edelbaum - Sue Seel – Deborah Hopper – Susan Morrison – Howard Ehrenshaft – Eileen O'Connell – Marilyn Driscoll – Zoe Blake – Cleo Zagrean –Mark O'Sullivan – Susan Wurthmann – Clara Sarrocco - Mary Gehringer – Camille Calilung – Dorothy Fabian – Elizabeth Derham – MacBeth Derham .

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Report of the February 12, 2015 Meeting

On February 12th The New York C.S. Lewis Society held its 450 plus meeting on a night described best by the words of John Keats: "Ah, bitter chill it was!" There may have been twenty-eight pairs of cold hands but no cold hearts as Will Vaus was welcomed from the frozen north of Vermont to a cold New York City evening.

The meeting was called to order by Eric Wurthmann, who introduced himself and then asked everyone else to do likewise. The reading for the meeting was given by Mary Gehringer. Mary read excerpts from *An Experiment in Criticism*, and in keeping with the topic for the evening she read in part: "Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors…." The volunteer for next month's reading was Howard Ehrenshaft. The usual free back bulletin samples were available and Eric gave the telephone number to call in case of inclement weather (212-254-8628). Those who are on the local email list would be notified after noon on that day should a meeting have to be cancelled. Clara Sarrocco reminded everyone that flyers were available giving information about Will Vaus's pilgrimage to Northern Ireland and England in August (www.russhead.com). Flyers are also available for *Mercy Passion & Joy*, a Lenten booklet with quotations from Lewis, from Creative Communications (800-325-9414). Clara further announced that our member from North Carolina, Rev. Samuel Shumate, emailed "…the title of 'The Weight of Glory' comes directly from the King James Version of ll Corinthians 4:17." Eric also announced that the Fellowship for Performing Arts is featuring a one-man show with Max McLean as C.S. Lewis from February 18th to the 21st on "C.S. Lewis: The Most Reluctant Convert" (FPA.com). He then announced upcoming meetings: March 11th – "C.S. Lewis on the Moral Responsibility of the Christian Artist," with Cole Matson – April 8th – "Pilgrim's Progress and Pilgrim's Regress" with Charles Beach. Eric then introduced the speaker for the evening – Will Vaus whose topic was: "C.S. Lewis: A Reading Life."

Will Vaus was born outside of New York City and grew up in Southern California. He is the son of Jim Vaus, former organized crime wiretapper who came to Christ through the ministry of Billy Graham in 1949. Vaus holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Drama from the University of California at San Diego and a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and has served as a pastor in California, the Carolinas, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. At present he is the Pastor of Stowe Community Church in Stowe, VT. Pastor Vaus is President of Will Vaus Ministries,through which he has creatively communicated the love of Christ around the world since 1988.

Among his books are:

Sheldon Vanauken: The Man Who Received "A Severe Mercy"

C.S. Lewis' Top Ten: Influential Books and Authors, Volumes One & Two

Mere Theology: A Guide to the Thought of C. S. Lewis

My Father Was a Gangster: The Jim Vaus Story

Keys to Growth: Meditations on the Acts of the Apostles

The Hidden Story of Narnia: A Book-By-Book Guide to C. S. Lewis' Spiritual Themes

Speaking of Jack: A C. S. Lewis Discussion Guide

Open Before Christmas: Devotional Thoughts For The Holiday Season

God's Love Letter: Reflections on I John

Pastor Vaus has spoken to the Society on two previous occasions. He then began his presentation by asking who was the Society's longest member present. The honor fell to John Morrison. Pastor Vaus then proceeded to explain that the factor that made C.S. Lewis such a great writer was that he was such a great reader from very early on in his life. He was not only versed in the English canon but also in the classics and authors from other countries. Because of the many difficulties in his life, Lewis took to reading – something that he enjoyed tremendously. Books not only afforded him knowledge but also comfort, and it is what gives us the good fortune of sharing in his great gift. Pastor Vaus listed the many and varied books Lewis read, not once but many times over. When Lewis was in the process of writing OHEL *The Oxford Book of English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* he read every sixteenth century English author at least once. At the end of his lecture Pastor Vaus showed us Lewis's annotated copy of Wordsworth's *Literary Criticism* which was on loan to him by Walter Hooper. It proved of great interest

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Report of the March 11, 2015 Meeting

Although it was several days before the Vernal Equinox, the March 11th meeting of The New York C.S. Lewis Society took place on an almost Spring New York evening. C.S. Lewis's poem *Dymer* (IX, 33) says it best:

The wave of flowers came braking round his feet,
Crocus and bluebell, primrose, daffodil
Shivering with moisture: and the air grew sweet
Within his nostrils, changing heart and will. . . .

The meeting was called to order by Eric Wurthmann and the reading for the evening was given by Howard Ehrenshaft. Howard read from the essay "Christianity and Literature" from Lewis's book of essays, *Christian Reflections*.

Eric once again reminded everyone that in case of inclement weather and the possibility of a meeting cancellation, call the Parish House (212- 254-8620) after 12 noon on the day of the meeting. Those on the email list will receive an email with the information.

The future meetings will be on April 8th with Charles Beach who will speak on "*Pilgrim's Progress* and *Pilgrim's Regress*." The May 13th meeting will be on "Dorothy L.Sayers's *Gaudy Night*: The Work of an Inkling?" with John Ryle Kezel.

Mary Gehringer reminded everyone that free samples of **CSL: The Bulletin of The New York C.S. Lewis Society** are available on the table.

Clara Sarrocco announced that Saturday, March 12, 2016 at 7:30 PM at the NYU Catholic Center (238 Thompson St. New York, NY across from Washington Square Park) there will be a lecture on "The Incarnation and its Implications for Art" by Professor Francesca Murphy from Notre Dame. It is free and open to the public. It is sponsored by the Catholic Artists Society and is part of *The Art of the Beautiful* lecture series 2015-2016. She further reminded everyone that information is available on the table on how to order the pamphlet *Mercy Passion & Joy*, a Lenten booklet with quotations from Lewis, from Creative Communications (800-325-9414).

Eric then introduced the speaker for the evening. Cole Matson is currently the Molloy College BFA Program Coordinator at CAP21 Conservatory and Artist-in-Residence at the Sheen Center for Thought & Culture. He recently completed his PhD at the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. He holds a BA (Hons) in Theology from Oxford and a BFA in Drama from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. He is a former Vice-President of the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society, Review Editor for the *Journal of Inklings Studies*, and Scholar-in-Residence at the Kilns.

Cole Matson's presentation tonight is "Wisdom, Beauty and Incantation: C.S. Lewis on the Moral Responsibility of the Christian Artist." Cole began with ***A Voyage to Arcturus***, a novel by Scottish writer David Lindsay, first published in 1920 which influenced Lewis's *Ransom Trilogy*. Cole quoted from Lewis's letters especially to Ruth Pitter and Sister Penelope, and from Lewis's books and essays such as *An Experiment in Criticism*. Among Cole's many points, he discussed how the Christian must be trained in poetry and how art can be used to bring about changes in a person. Art has a powerful effect on the imagination and on the natural moral law, and both its form and content must be beautiful. (Cole's paper will appear in a future Bulletin.)

In the question and answer period that followed many points were raised: free form poetry, the condition of modern art, did Lewis comment on the poems of Gerard Manly Hopkins, did he have an opinion on Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and/or Graham Green, should Christian art be for edification and should it have a specific Christian message. There was also some discussion on Philip Pullman and David Lindsay in that their works are aesthetically of high quality but the message is morally distorted. One of the final points of discussion related to Wilfred Owen's World War I poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est" and had Lewis, as a veteran of World War I, ever made any references to it especially in light of his essay "Why I am not a Pacifist."

More talk continued over refreshments. Present at the meeting were:

Eric Wurthmann – Mary Gehringer – Maggie Goodman – Helene DeLorenzo –Elyse Hayes – Michael Hayes – Laura Pittenger – George Kurian – Marilyn Driscoll - Mark O'Sullivan – Bill McClain – Debbie Hopper – Douglas Estella – Janet Estella – Barbara Zelenko – Jenna Wearn – Geraldine Hawkins – Zoe Blake – Cole Matson – Paul Snatchko – Michael Marcheran – Luann Jennings – Alexi Sargeant – Timothy Matthew Collins – Anthony Santella – Melissa Curvino – Doris Ju – David Kornegay – Leigh Montanye – David Williams – Clara Sarrocco – John Morrison – Naomi Kuo - Howard Ehrenshaft – Anne Sweeney – Joe Sweeney – Ellen Stedfeld

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Jack and the Bookshelf No. 26

Joseph Conrad's *Chance* (1912/1914)

by Dale Nelson

When Lewis read *Chance* in 1926, its book publication was only 12 years old, there was no academic industry devoted to Conrad, and Conrad had been dead just two years. In Conrad's day, criticism of such recent literature was conducted, not by professors, but by other novelists and by magazine critics. These could be the same person, as in the case of Henry James. James objected to this novel's indirect narrative method as causing needless difficulties for readers.

The story is largely told by Marlow – the same narrator, presumably, who gave us *Heart of Darkness* and other stories more adventurous than *Chance*. The situation in the latter: de Barral is a financial speculator who is sent to prison; his neglected little girl, Flora, is brought up by people who do not care about her, unless as a means to selfish ends; in the misery due to her own experience of mistreatment and to her naïve belief that her father is unjustly imprisoned, Flora, as a young woman, nearly commits suicide by throwing herself into a quarry; it happens that a noble ship's captain on leave encounters her; she accepts his offer of marriage and lives with him on board the *Ferndale*, where a cabin is arranged for Flora's father upon his release from prison; but de Barral is spiteful, possessive of his daughter, and determined to take her from her husband. A tyro officer, Charles Powell, who sympathizes with Flora, is one of Marlow's chief sources for the story.

Today academic readers sometimes object to *Heart of Darkness* as showing a racist placement of evil in an African "Other," but in *Chance* the opposition is largely between shore people whose misunderstanding and selfishness are liable to be reinforced by social convention, and seagoing people who are better able to commune with their souls in the quiet and solitude of shipboard life. The title suggests the contingencies, including unexpected gestures of decency we extend to others, that may bring about life changes.

Having begun Conrad's novel, Lewis wrote in his diary that it was "one of the very best novels I have read." When he finished it, he added, "It is a good book: even great," although he wasn't completely satisfied by the novel's very last pages.

Novelists sometimes write fine books that, however, shouldn't be the first one someone reads by the author. I think that's true of *Little Dorrit* for Dickens and *Chance* for Conrad.

[continued from bottom of page 14]

to all present.

By name, they were:

Eric Wurthmann – Helene DeLorenzo – Doris Ju – Susan Wurthmann – Bill McClain – Marilyn Driscoll – Will Vaus – Robert Trexler – Carrie Octeza – George Kurian – Mark O'Sullivan – Jenna Weart – Jim Bash – Chee Yap – Stuart Clay – Geoffrey Doering – Jon Adler – Lawrence Macala – Howard Ehrenshaft – Linda Ehrenshaft – Dorothy Fabian – Mary Gehringer – Macbeth Derham – Clara Sarrocco – John Martin – David Kornegay - Camille Calihiney – John Morrison

Admiring Lewis' annotated copy of *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*

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