

MERE LEWIS

BY JAMES COMO

Thirty years after his death, C. S. Lewis remains a Celebrity Author: the complacent professor who churned out winsome children's fiction and quotable religious apologetics. That image, confirmed by the recent celluloid treatment, Shadowlands, trivializes the weight and worth of Lewis's achievement, as well as the struggle behind it.

It was the practice of Clive Staples Lewis, while at Magdalen College, Oxford, during the 1940s, to have friends, students, and colleagues to dinner parties. Amid much drinking and even more revelry, Lewis would sometimes perform an astonishing parlor trick. Upon being told how terrible it was to remember nothing, he would reply that it was worse to forget nothing, as was the case with

everything he read. Of course, this declaration would be met with incredulity and demands that he put up or shut up. And so he would solicit a series of numbers from the most skeptical guest, which he then would apply to a bookcase, a shelf within that case, and a book upon that shelf. The guest would then fetch the specified volume (which could be in any one of several languages), open to a page of his own choosing, read aloud

from that page, and stop where he pleased. Lewis would then quote the rest of that page from memory. Like some supremely gifted performer—a DiMaggio, or a Spencer Tracy—he made it all look easy.

In its astonishing ease, this feat of memory is emblematic of the facility that many people have come to associate with Lewis's life, work, and even his religious convictions. Precisely because of this facility, he has come to be seen as a trivializing Pollyanna, tremendously gifted but of little ultimate consequence as a writer and thinker. The hit movie *Shadowlands* (about Lewis's late marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham) seems to have perfectly captured this celebrity image by presenting him as a sort of "human tea cozy," as one reviewer aptly put it.

To be sure, as icon and phrase-maker Lewis has had considerable appeal. He has been cited by churchmen of the utmost authority (John Paul II and Billy Graham) and by powerful political leaders (Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and George Bush, who borrowed "a thousand points of light" directly from *The Magician's Nephew*). Writers from highbrow critic Wayne Booth to children's author Madeleine L'Engle imitate him. Others use his motifs in their work (the notion of "longing" appears in Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*) or make allusions to him (Robertson Davies in *The Manticore*, Tom Wolfe in *Bonfire of the Vanities*). Most of his 50-odd books have been continuously in print since first publication, the Narnia series alone selling in the millions-per-year range in several different languages worldwide. A patently uneven industry of anecdotal memoirs, biographies (three in the last seven years, the best being *Jack: C.S. Lewis and His Times*, by George Sayer, who knew Lewis well), and especially commentary continues to flourish. And a number of societies devoted to the study of his life and the appreciation of his work thrive both in the United

States and in England.

For all his popularity—or, more likely, because of it—Lewis has been vastly underestimated. One reason for this may be that he produced no Grand Theories or intricate methodologies. He never wrote what is formally known as systematic theology. In fact, he claimed to be no theologian at all, and he explicitly disavowed—indeed, shuddered at—the notion that his thought might be construed as "original." Far more significant, though, was his rhetorical opportunism. No venue was too modest, no reader too unlearned, no idea too unremarkable to be spared his gifts, if those gifts, however deployed, might profit the reader. Ironically, though this desire and ability to be accessible and adaptive, almost to the point of humility, was integral to Lewis's genius, it is also what has so often elicited charges of triviality and shallowness.

This scholar, storyteller, and philosopher deserves a more discerning appraisal. His intellectual output, to begin with, was huge and various—so much so that it beggars the capacity of most readers. In addition to his books, he saw to print more than 200 short pieces and nearly 80 poems, excluding those in the cycle *Spirits in Bondage* (1919). His essays range from critical, historical, and theoretical to religious, philosophical, and cultural. Devoted readers of his Narnia chronicles for children may not have read, or even know of, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), surely Lewis's second best-known work and the one that earned him a place on the cover of *Time* in 1947. Lewis the scholar is likely unknown to the readers of his Ransom trilogy of space fantasies. Those who know *Mere Christianity* (1952), based on the wartime BBC radio talks that made his voice the second most recognized in Britain (after Churchill's), probably will not have read either the subtle *Problem of Pain* (1940) or the short analytical essays and the sermons. Still fewer will have read Lewis's lyrical poetry. And almost no one is aware of his long narrative poems.

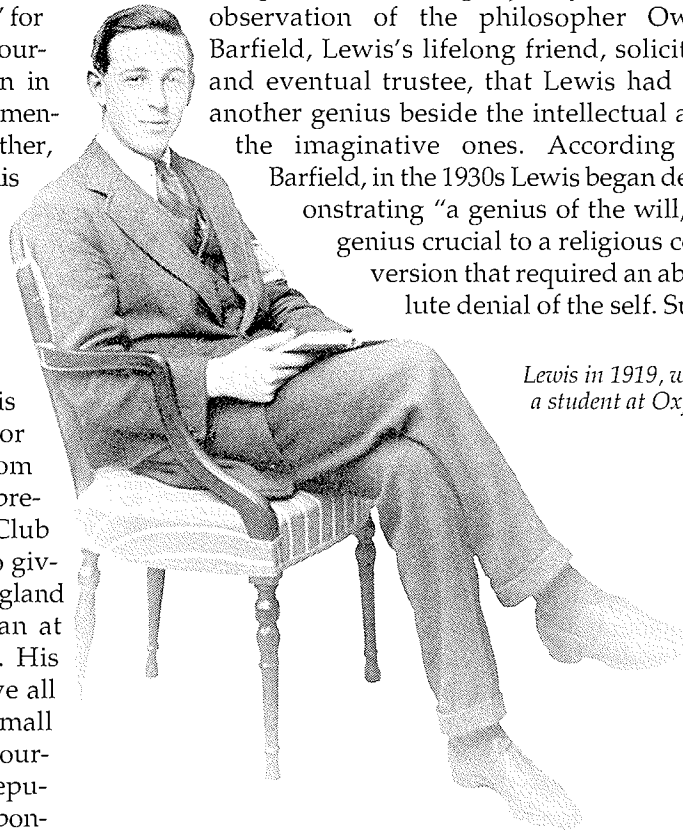
James Como teaches rhetoric and public communication at York College (CUNY), and edited C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table, and Other Reminiscences (1979). Copyright © 1994 by James Como.

As it is known conventionally, Lewis's biography seems simple enough. He was born in Belfast in 1898; his mother, Flora, died nearly 10 years later. When he was not yet 19 he arrived at University College, Oxford, fluent in Greek, Latin, and French, only to find himself in the trenches of World War I soon thereafter. In 1919, wounded but not disabled (he would carry shrapnel in his chest all his life), and having distinguished himself by capturing a few dozen German soldiers, he returned to the university and took a rare triple first in classics, philosophy, and English literature. He won a permanent fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1925, by which time he had been, in his words, "a blaspheming atheist" for nearly 15 years. Although his journey toward conversion began in these years, it did not gain momentum until the death of his father, Albert, in 1929. But even then, this "most reluctant convert in England" became simply a believer in God. Two years later he became a Christian, and remained a professing Anglican for the rest of his life.

For the next 15 years Lewis would be more active as author (18 books) and speaker—from broadcasting over the BBC to presiding at the Oxford Socratic Club (which he helped to found) to giving talks at bases all around England for the Royal Air Force—than at any other period in his life. His many great friendships, above all those nurtured within the small circle known as the Inklings, flourished, as did his worldwide reputation and burdensome correspondence (2,000 letters per week at its crest). In 1952, he met and would later court and marry Joy Davidman. In the meantime Lewis moved to Magdalene College, Cambridge, as its first professor of Medieval and Renaissance English Literature. After the

publication of still other books and Joy's death in 1960, and now virtually alone with his beloved older brother and dearest friend, Warren ("Warnie"), he began a slow physical decline. Even so, he completed five more books during this period, including the supremely readable *Experiment in Criticism* and *A Grief Observed* (both 1961). In 1963 ill health forced his retirement; his death on November 22 of that year went virtually unnoticed throughout most of the world, at least until the shock of John F. Kennedy's assassination subsided.

Now, for all its striking achievements and some unlikely spikes, this life is not complicated—nothing to justify the curious observation of the philosopher Owen Barfield, Lewis's lifelong friend, solicitor, and eventual trustee, that Lewis had yet another genius beside the intellectual and the imaginative ones. According to Barfield, in the 1930s Lewis began demonstrating "a genius of the will," a genius crucial to a religious conversion that required an absolute denial of the self. Such



Lewis in 1919, when a student at Oxford

a denial in the case of Lewis would be especially difficult in light of his inclination toward self-indulgence. "What I think is true," Barfield wrote in the introduction to *Light on C.S. Lewis* (1965), "is that at a certain stage in his life [Lewis] deliber-

ately ceased to take any interest in himself except as a kind of spiritual alumnus taking his moral finals." This stage also marks the beginning of what must be called his public ministry, for within a year of his conversion he would publish his first Christian work, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), an allegorical autobiography so severe and unsparing in its assault on 20th-century idols that he would later regret its "uncharitable temper." Only a second, and closer, look at his early life can suggest what he converted from.

Flora Lewis, a loyal communicant in the Church of Ireland, must have been a remarkable woman. She witnessed what might have been a miracle at age 12 when, while visiting a Catholic church in Florence, she saw the eyes of a waxen female saint slowly open and gaze at her; later she earned a bachelor of arts from Queen's College, Belfast, in mathematics and logic. (Her son, incidentally, would prove mathematically useless, failing a simple algebra test required for entrance to Oxford; only because he had volunteered for service in the war was the requirement waived and Lewis admitted.) In *Surprised by Joy* (1955), his spiritual autobiography, Lewis described his mother's indulgent ways and likened her death in his 10th year to a continent's sinking into the sea. Alienation from his father, a solicitor, followed, and Lewis lost his Christian faith.

The university years that followed represented a great gap in what was the published autobiographical record. But Lewis's recently issued diary, *All My Road Before Me* (1991), shows a young man out of sync, working to hold a house yet too young and immature to head it, or even to know what he had gotten into. This strange set of affairs resulted from something that few people knew anything about: The house was presided over by the mother of Lewis's slain army buddy, Paddy Moore. Married but separated, Janie King Moore was an attractive 45-year-old woman when Lewis took up with her in 1919, when he was 20. In its early stages their liaison almost cer-

tainly included a sexual dimension. (This was neither the first nor final incidence of Lewis's curious sexual interests. As an adolescent writing about women, he signed some letters "Philomastix"—"lover of the switch." During his university days he read much Freud and Havelock Ellis; later he would dream of seductive "brown girls"—a purely symbolic, not racial, coloration—and finally allow that he had greatly underestimated the ease of overcoming the sin of lust.) This unusual household would end only with the death of Mrs. Moore at age 78, when Lewis himself was 52.

During this long ménage, Lewis eagerly undertook an endless round of menial chores, which warranted Mrs. Moore's observation that he was as good "as having an extra servant." Christopher Derrick, a pupil of Lewis's and a philosopher and Catholic apologist in his own right, has remarked on this episode and on Lewis's later marriage that they represent in his friend a sort of self-indenturing to certain women. Lewis's great friend J. R. R. Tolkien, as well as his brother and father, took Derrick's notion a step further and argued that Lewis was unable to resist anyone—especially a woman—in need. (During his life, he gave two-thirds of his income to charity.)

Perhaps the conversion was "no sudden plunge into a new life," as his brother Warren described it, "but rather a slow steady convalescence from a deep-seated spiritual illness of long-standing," a sort of neurotic atheism. Lewis might have admitted as much. But he would have insisted that both simple maturation (as Barfield claimed) and convalescence helped occasion the self-abnegation that was the key to his conversion. Thus, for example, he could marry an obnoxious American divorcée without regard to the loss of offended friends, and he could achieve great commercial success as a Christian apologist with no concern for the academic ostracism that inevitably followed. The point is that Lewis chose to surrender to all the self-sacrificing and unself-regarding ironies of Christian belief, no matter the conse-

quences to his self or the dues he had to pay. He did not even believe in the rewards of an afterlife when he first became a Christian; it was not until his fifties that he finally believed his own sins were forgiven. With this willful disregard for—and crucial inattention to—himself, he could seem to those around him a curious mix of enthusiastic affection and quite sheer reticence, while all along he was spiritually “regressing,” becoming the innocent “little child” that Jesus counsels his followers to be.

As for the charge of “wish fulfillment” traditionally leveled against Christianity and against Lewis in particular: If, to paraphrase Lewis, his purpose had been to fulfill wishes or to live as Pollyanna, even a dull man could have thought up something easier than Christianity. And, I would add, Lewis could have contrived a far more convenient life. Pain and grief, like disbelief and doubt, were old acquaintances. In writing about the diabolical Screwtape he said as much:

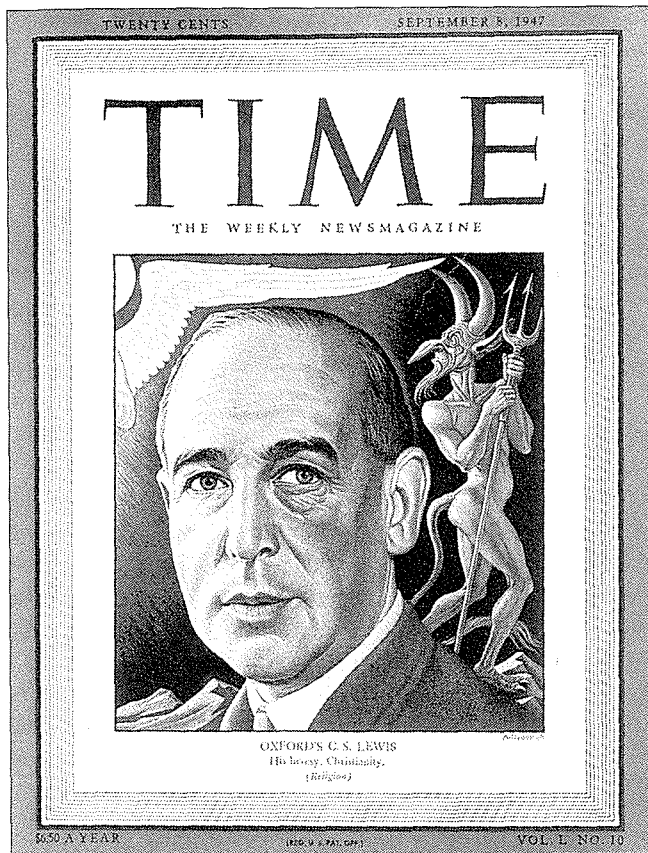
Some have paid me an undeserved compliment by supposing that my *Letters* were the ripe fruit of many years’ study in moral and ascetic theology. They forgot that there is an equally reliable, though less creditable, way of learning how temptation works. “My heart”—I need no other’s—“sheweth me the wickedness of the ungodly.”

His best genius used his pain, grief, doubt, and sin, demonstrating not some shallow facility but a triumph of charity. And the fact that he—not the scavenged, half-understood, misrepresented celebrity—could make it look easy allows it to seem possible for the rest of us.

In his famous 1954 inaugural lecture at Cambridge, Lewis called himself “Old Western Man”—one who could read old texts as a native and see newer ones from the vantage of a long perspective. His learning and critical skills were so prodigious that, in this case I think, facility must be conceded. Consider this mere inventory: He introduced the phrase “personal heresy” into our critical lexicon, arguing that we are wrong to read a book in order to find out about its author,

or to study an author’s life in order to understand his book; to do either is to abort the strictly literary experience, which is what we are after in the first place. He described the medieval foundations of romantic love and charted its literary genealogy, breathing life into a calcified notion of allegory. He defined *Paradise Lost* for a generation, debunking the Satan-as-hero error along the way. (“From hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, then to a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake.”) He revised our understanding of English literature in the 16th century, believably claiming that there was no Renaissance in England and that, if there was, it did not matter. He explained the medieval worldview, so that we can never again consider those ancestors as especially ignorant, superstitious, or irrational. He described precisely those dozen or so concepts (“wit,” “free,” and “simple,” among others) that so ensnare us when we take them for granted, especially when reading old books. And, by the pure force of his enthusiasm, he got more unlikely people to read more old books than ever before. He taught us (in *An Experiment in Criticism*, much before its time in 1961 and now too unassuming for our Age of Methodology) what we do, should do, and must not do when we read. Finally, he “rehabilitated” dozens of authors and shot out of the air as many literary fallacies as there are critical schools. And all of it is resplendently, improbably readable. In *An Experiment in Criticism* he wrote:

Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they undermine the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.



In 1947 C. S. Lewis made the cover of Time magazine, largely as a result of the exorbitant success of *The Screwtape Letters*.

This same commitment to making his ideas accessible motivated the direction taken by his storytelling career. "Any amount of Christianity can now be smuggled in under the guise of fiction," wrote Lewis to his friend Sister Penelope. All of Lewis's fictions are allegorical or "indirect communications," (as Søren Kierkegaard would have called them): *The Great Divorce* (1946), about a bus trip to heaven from what is either hell or purgatory; *The Screwtape Letters*, a correspondence from Uncle Screwtape, a chief devil, to his nephew, Wormwood, an apprentice at work on an earthly "patient"; *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the tale of John the Pilgrim's perilous search for the "landlord" and his return home; even his early short story, "The Man Born Blind," about a man whose sight is restored but who dies in

an attempt to "see light." These and other fictional works have us encounter God as we do in reality. Or, as Lewis put it, "God is everywhere but is everywhere *incognito*."

The most striking manifestation of Lewis's obliqueness is his use of a first-person narrator—a queen, no less—in the masterpiece *Till We Have Faces* (1956). A retelling (or rather a setting right) of the Cupid and Psyche myth, it is an ostensibly simple study of a brilliant, resentful, and belligerent mind as it comes to confront its own self-serving, bigoted, militantly anti-Divine delusions. The book's themes and motifs are pure Lewis—the poison of possessive love, the dangers of an inflated and unrestrained self, the concrete immanence of the supernatural, among others. The flavor, however, is new in Lewis: The purpose is broadly moral but not explicitly didactic, the structure (especially its concentrically arranged time frames) is far more intricate than that of anything else he wrote, and the psychology of the protagonist

is not only uncharacteristically ugly but ambiguous, too. Queen Orual is in despair, does not know it, but is on the brink of finding it out. In the end, it is she who will be found out, along with the rest of us for whom she is a surrogate.

Even in his children's books, Lewis was able to adumbrate the most complicated Christian themes and make them appealing to his reader. Consider Lewis's most remarkable speech, from *The Silver Chair* (1953), a Narnia book. Puddleglum the Marshwiggle has accompanied two children on a search for a lost prince who has been held captive by the Queen of Underland. The four are finally free, thanks to Puddleglum's heroic action, though still deep

in the queen's cave, when she comes upon them and begins casting a spell to convince them that there are no real trees and stars, nor even a real Aslan, the great lion who sang Narnia into creation. At the point of psychological and spiritual collapse, Puddleglum speaks:

Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia.

There is a textbook here on the Christian notion of faith (as well as on a number of other more esoteric concepts). Trusting in what you once knew to be true, what your reason and even senses showed you to be true, is crucial when that reason and those senses are clouded—by passion, or by the dismal spell cast, say, by the loss of a spouse—crucial if we are to live as God intended. Lewis realized, as Paul Holmer put it in *C.S. Lewis: The Shape of His Faith and Thought* (1976), that how we live “determines what [we] love and finally even know . . . [a] frame of life and mind within which some things become accessible to us.”

Lewis's polemical genius worked as unrelentingly as, but even more single-mindedly than, the scholar and the storyteller to make a great variety of ideas comprehensible to the general reader. Moreover, his essays—from “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment” to “Dangers of National Repentance” to “The Poison of Subjectivism” to “The Necessity of

Chivalry”—could not only shed light upon, but virtually settle, any number of current debates. He would make short work, for example, of an oxymoron such as “the politics of meaning.”

But like Aslan, Lewis was not tame. There are in his work improbable opinions that surprise even his most devoted readers: that young lovers should live together without marriage if the alternative is infidelity; that obscenity and antisodomy laws are useless at best; that a truly Christian economic order would have more than a small bit of socialism in it; that Darwin is useful even if he mistook a metaphor that was already in the air (Keats used a version of evolution in *Hyperion*); and that Freud has much to teach us (though a good deal less than he thought). No one has offered a more astute, trenchant, or profoundly Christian critique of the impact of European civilization upon the New World than Lewis:

The English . . . conceived [colonization] chiefly as a social sewage system, a vent for 'needy' people who now trouble the commonwealth and are daily consumed with the gallows. . . . Nor was the failure [of English exploration] relieved by any high ideal motives. Missionary designs are sometimes paraded in the prospectus of a new venture: but the actual record of early Protestantism in this field seems to be 'blank as death'.

In an essay entitled “Religion and Rock-etry” he expands upon the theme, claiming that “the missionary's holy desire to save souls has not always been kept quite distinct from the arrogant desire, the busybody's itch, to (as he calls it) 'civilize' the (as he calls them) 'natives.' ” And in “The Seeing Eye” he contemplates the possibility of humanity meeting an alien rational species:

I observe how the white man has hitherto treated the black, and how, even among civilized men, the stronger have treated the weaker. . . . I do not doubt that the same story will be repeated. We shall enslave, deceive, exploit, or exterminate.

After his conversion, Lewis explicitly committed his will and his rhetorical genius to his apologetic vocation. In "Christian Apologetics" he defined the scope of that task: "Modern man is to a pagan what a *divorcée* is to a virgin"; that is, "we live in a *post-Christian* world": "A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the Faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct infidels. Great Britain is as much a part of the mission field as China." Among our contemporary biases is the tendency to reverse the ancient attitude and to approach God as the accused; "if God should have a reasonable defense. . . the trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God is in the Dock." In the final analysis, says Lewis, "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance."

The territory that most engaged Lewis was the concept of personhood. "You can't study people," he said, "you can only get to know them." Personality and our view of it was of particular concern. Recall for a moment Barfield's observation that Lewis willed his own self-disregard, and then consider this declaration of purpose:

I have wanted to . . . expel that quite unchristian worship of the human individual as such which is so rampant. . . . I mean the pestilent notion . . . that each of us starts with a treasure called 'Personality' . . . and that to expand and express this . . . is the main end of life.

This theme of self-centeredness, its dangers and (of course) its antidotes, lies at the center of Lewis's philosophy of human nature. One of his works that is better known than read is *The Abolition of Man* (1943), ostensibly "Reflections on Education with Special Reference to the Teaching of English in the Upper Forms of Schools," or so its subtitle would have us think. In fact it is a diagnosis and a prophecy: When subjectivism is rampantly triumphant and natural law has been, not refuted, but "seen through," we begin to "innovate," first on nature (Lewis was environmentally alert long before the cant began), then on animals (he was also a vehement anti-vivisectionist), and finally on our favorite subject, the Self, which we will "condition" unto extinction. Any eugenicist or "harvester" of human fetal tissue should take note, if not of this book then of its horrifying fictional correlative, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy Tale for Grown-Ups* (1946), the last book of the space fantasy trilogy. In it Lewis both raises to glorious heights and lowers to terrifying depths the idea of geniuses as tutelary spirits, especially the particular "genius" of our century, a totalitarian death wish.

Not shy about depicting evil or its motive, he would have agreed with Edmund Crispin's detective Gervase Fen, who remarked, "I always think that psychology is wrong in imagining that when it has analyzed evil it has somehow disposed of it." But he nowhere uses upon his



Lewis and Joy Davidman Gresham at a ruin in Kamiros, Rhodes, in 1960.

reader the stick of eternal punishment in any way remotely resembling the enervating horror of, say, Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century New England philosopher and divine, whose "Angry God" has his arrows of vengeance poised at our hearts, ready to be made "drunk with our blood" for nothing more than "His mere pleasure." Instead, Lewis tells us (in his 1941 essay "The Weight of Glory") that "all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor" that we will not always be on the wrong side of the door. "Some day, God willing, we shall get in." Lewis thought that nothing could be more pleasurable than salvation. The final page of Lewis's final book, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964), contains a typically delectable image of just that:

Then the new earth and sky, the same yet not the same as these, will rise in us as we have risen in Christ. And once again, after who knows what aeons of silence and the dark, the birds will sing and the waters flow, and lights and shadows move across the hill, and the faces of our friends laugh upon us with amazed recognition.

"Joy," he says, "is the serious business of heaven." But Lewis understood the limits of volubility and of argument, the dangers of verbal facility and intellectual smugness. I believe they frightened him. In *The Great Divorce* (1946), the only passenger on the bus to heaven who stays all the way to the end is the man who does not utter great rhetorical pronouncements. At the end of *Till We Have Faces* the queen writes, in what is her lucid and convincing complaint, "Only words, words; to be led out to battle with other words." And in *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum's great affirmation follows upon his determining action: With his

naked webbed foot he stamped on the fire that is part of the witch's verbal spell. Lewis said he never understood a doctrine less than when he was just done defending it.

Such humility seems ironic coming from "a genius of the will," much the same way his obsession with accessibility seems ironic. But the humility, the will, and the accessibility are all of a piece. Lewis's will was the instrument of his Christian conversion, which occasioned the denial of self. Only then could Lewis be at the disposal of those for whom—owing to his great intellectual, imaginative, and literary gifts—he could do great good. Thus his astounding ability to bring Christianity to so many, precisely what invites the dismissive charge of superficiality, is actually the product of one of the more complex emotional and intellectual processes. What he said about his beloved Edmund Spenser and *The Faerie Queene* can be applied to the scholar, storyteller, and philosopher-apologist:

His work is one, like a growing thing, a tree . . . with branches reaching to heaven and roots to hell. . . . And between these two extremes comes all the multiplicity of human life. . . . To read him is to grow in mental health.

His former pupil Peter Bayley was among the few to attend his funeral. He has since written that "there was one candle on the coffin as it was carried out into the churchyard. It seemed not only appropriate but almost a symbol of the man and his integrity and his absoluteness and his faith that the flame burned so steadily, even in the open air, and seemed so bright, even in the bright sun."

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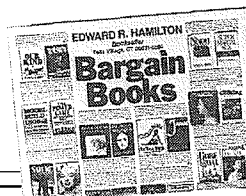
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