



Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 4 - That Hideous Strength

Pete Lowman

Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled is a lightly edited version of Pete Lowman's doctoral thesis. Links to each part will be enabled as they are published.

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Part 4 - C.S. LEWIS' THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH

That Hideous Strength will require somewhat less extensive treatment than its predecessor in Lewis' trilogy. The reason is that it is a different kind of book.

When he was writing the opening of *Voyage to Venus*, Lewis tried his hand briefly at depicting the struggle between the powers of light and darkness in the terrestrial arena; and he makes Ransom say that possibly 'the isolation of our world, the siege, was beginning to draw to an end... The two sides... have begun to appear much more clearly, much less mixed, here on Earth, in our own human affairs.'^[1] And in *That Hideous Strength* demonic evil becomes

manifest, through a massive organization for scientific planning named the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments. This organization, unfortunately, is headed up by men who have 'seen through' traditional moral categories as nothing more than a system of conditioning such as they themselves are intending to operate. A successful attempt to keep alive the head of an executed criminal brings them into contact with supra-physical intelligences called 'macrobes', who soon come to dominate NICE's planning at the highest levels. Their efforts are opposed by a small Company, mostly made up of Christians and led by Ransom. Matters come to a head as both sides discover that the ancient magician Merlin is not dead, but rather in an age-long coma. NICE seek to find and awaken him, expecting him to be a powerful ally; however, his loyalty turns out to be to the other side, and after receiving the powers of the *eldils* he destroys the NICE. All this is narrated through the adventures of a young married couple, Jane and Mark Studdock. Jane is unknowingly a clairvoyant; visions of the Head and Merlin bring her into contact with the Company, to which she serves as a vital source of information. Mark, a young sociologist, is in the meantime being drawn into the NICE, and then into the inner circle of initiates, but finally rejects what he sees and is rescued by Merlin. The marital problems of the Studdocks serve as a sub-plot to the book.

There is general agreement that *That Hideous Strength* shows the influence of Lewis' friend Charles Williams. Williams' own 'spiritual thrillers' are set on Earth, albeit an Earth where figures like Prester John or Simon Magus can suddenly make an appearance in twentieth-century society. In Williams' novel *The Place of the Lion*, as in *That Hideous Strength*, angelic powers come down into the world of men; but the results are harmful and at the end the 'guard that protected earth was set again; the interposition of the Mercy veiled the destroying energies from the weakness of Man.'^[2] Williams and Lewis also shared an interest in the Arthurian myth that Lewis employs extensively in *That Hideous Strength*. This may be demonstrated by quotation from *Arthurian Torso* (1948), a book containing an essay by Williams on the topic, and a lengthy commentary by Lewis on Williams' Arthurian poems. In these poems, as in *That Hideous Strength*, there is an opposition between an ideal 'Logres' and 'mere

Britain', and 'Logres' is embodied in a 'Company', led by Taliessin in Williams and by Ransom as 'the Pendragon' (ie Arthurian monarch) in Lewis. Williams presents Merlin as the 'last figure of sacred magic, of magic before magic even in art became impermissible'[3] – exactly the role he plays in Lewis. And when Lewis summarises Williams' description of the assault on the Roman Empire with the words 'the barbarian wizards are dragging from old graves "the poor, long dead, long buried, decomposing shapes of humanity"'[4], it is hard to avoid a sense of a link with NICE's disinterring of Merlin. Lewis' shift to a terrestrial setting, then, was made in the context of influences that were themselves by no means 'realistic' in orientation. Hence it is not entirely surprising that in its treatment of supernaturalism *That Hideous Strength* would seem to have considerably less of a realistic intention than *Voyage to Venus*, set away in Perelandra.

(i) Realism in the Opening

The book certainly begins in a realistic enough manner:

"Matrimony was ordained, thirdly", said Jane Studdock to herself, "for the mutual society, help, and comfort that the one ought to have of the other." She had not been to church since her schooldays until she went there six months ago to be married, and the words of the service had stuck in her mind.

This opening paragraph raises several themes that will be important in the book: the meaning of marriage (the next two paragraphs show that Jane's marriage has proved a failure); Jane's attitude to Christianity; and Christianity as a source of stock responses to life of an unexpectedly abiding kind. These are areas that call for realistic treatment. But supernaturalistic fantasy content soon appears too. It is important to note what *kind* of supernatural Lewis wishes to present right at the beginning: neither angels nor demons, rather a clairvoyant dream that is confirmed by the following day's paper.[5] This is perhaps more the supernaturalism of Williams' 'spiritual thrillers' than that of the mainstream of Christian belief.

Still, such a supernaturalism can be integrated with the book's realistic concerns:

The moment she saw the picture, she remembered her dream; not only the dream but the time after she had crept out of bed and sat waiting for the morning, afraid to put on the light for fear Mark should wake up and fuss, yet feeling offended by the sound of his regular breathing. He was an excellent sleeper. Only one thing ever seemed able to keep him awake after he had gone to bed, and even that did not keep him awake for long.[6]

Jane's ambivalent motives are well expressed: it is fear as much as affection that prevents her switching the light on. Yet in Lewis' description there is, perhaps, too intrusive an authorial commentary:

By work she meant her doctorate thesis on Donne. She still believed that if she got out all her note-books and editions and really sat down to the job she could force herself back into her lost enthusiasm for the subject.[7]

'She still believed' are the words of an author who knows better than the character, who knows exactly what the character is doing. Jane, unlike Ransom in the earlier books, is being observed from the outside – or worse still, manipulated from the outside to do the right thing at the right time. There is a weakness in Lewis' realism here.

Realism is also Lewis' concern in the next section, which begins with Mark going to a meeting in Bracton College, 'founded in 1300 for the support of ten learned men whose duties were to pray for the soul of Henry de Bracton and study the laws of England', and now possessing forty Fellows 'of whom only six study Law and of whom none, perhaps, prays for the soul of Bracton.'[8] (The reference to prayer places the academic system in a spiritual context; in a world in which it is possible to pray or not to pray, the university has become secularised.) Mark is one of the 'insiders' in the 'modern' Bracton:

He was beginning to find his feet. If he had felt any doubt on that point (which he did not) it would have been laid to rest when he found himself meeting Curry just outside the post office, and seen (sic) how natural Curry found it that they should walk to College together and discuss the agenda for the meeting... You would never have

guessed from the tone of Studdock's reply what intense pleasure he derived from Curry's use of the pronoun 'we'. So very recently he had been an outsider, watching the proceedings of what he then called "Curry and his gang" with awe and with little understanding. Now he was inside, and the gang was "we" or "the progressive element in College". It had happened quite suddenly and was still sweet in the mouth.[9]

This is fairly shrewd writing; although '(which he did not)' betrays the extent to which Lewis is describing a kind of person he dislikes. The same animus is rather too marked when Lewis gets down to describing college politics:

They wanted a site for the building which would worthily house this remarkable organisation. The N.I.C.E. was the first-fruit of that constructive fusion between the state and the laboratory on which so many thoughtful people base their hopes of a better world. It was to be free from all the tiresome restraints – "red tape" was the word its supporters used – which have hitherto hampered research in this country. It was also largely free from the restraints of economy.[10]

'Worthily', 'remarkable', 'constructive', 'thoughtful', 'tiresome': Lewis' sarcasm shows his hand, parodying the attitude he hates before his readers have had the opportunity to judge for themselves. Still, his picture of the university's 'Progressive Element' fixing the sale of Bragdon Wood (which contains Merlin's Well) is effective. Curry, the sub-warden, conveniently produces letters from a society for the preservation of ancient monuments who have been somewhat too inquisitive about the Wood's welfare; another from a group of Spiritualists wanting to investigate supposed psychic phenomena in the Wood; and a third from a firm wanting to make a film of the Spiritualists doing so. Having made the Wood appear a source of annoyance, the 'Progressive Element' then make clear that the upkeep of the Wood and the increase of junior fellows' stipends are mutually exclusive. Curry follows this with a report that NICE want to purchase, not the Wood, but 'the area coloured pink on the plan which, with the Warden's permission, I will now pass round the table'[11] – leaving, indeed, a section of the Wood at least sixteen feet wide in the College's hands. The 1945 version adds, 'There was no deception for the Fellows had the plan to look at with their

own eyes. It was a small-scale plan and not perhaps perfectly accurate – only meant to give one a general idea.' (There are some other fine touches that have surprisingly been omitted in the abridged version: Lord Feverstone apparently leading the opposition to the 'progressives'; the narrator's 'I would not like to accuse a man in Curry's position of misreading a letter: but his reading of this letter was certainly not such as to gloss over any defects in the tone of the original composition'; and the Bursar's delivery in which each 'sentence was a model of lucidity: and if his hearers found the gist of his whole statement less clear than the parts that may have been their own fault.'[12])

All this is excellent – and based, it would seem, on Lewis' recollections of the manipulation of college politics at Magdalen College in Oxford.[13] Lewis' own sympathies, of course, lie clearly with the 'few real "Die-hards"' who wish to save the Wood from NICE but are outmanoeuvred. Two sentences cut from the 1955 edition make this clear. The aged Jewel, one of the 'Die-hards', rises to speak:

Men turned round to gaze at, and some to admire, the clear-cut, half-childish face and the white hair which had become more conspicuous as the long room grew darker. But only those close to him could hear what he said.[14]

There are two striking notes here: the Anglo-Saxon note that Tolkien found so congenial, of heroism in the gathering darkness – 'Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose, more proud the spirit as our power lessens!'[15]; or of Aragorn at the last battle – 'His eyes gleamed like stars that shine the brighter as the night deepens'.[16] But one senses also the note of pessimism that emerges occasionally in the very cavalier quality of Lewis' rearguard action against much of 'modernity': what if this is *not* the end, what if apocalyptic deliverance does not come? Is there nothing more to hope for than Jewel growing old and being shouted down (as here) or (later in the book) Hingest bravely fighting for his life, one man against three – 'Then it was rather horrible, but rather fine... Of course they got him in the end'?[17] In fictional terms, Lewis' assault on the college politicians aiming to build 'a better world' has enough realism and seriousness about it to make it important to know what he can offer as a

constructive alternative. It is questionable whether Ransom's Christian Company is equally compelling as a counterbalance, or whether – like Dickens' good characters – it is merely a stronghold of the past. And the fact that, as we shall see, Lewis' Christian supernatural in this book is deliberately distanced into fantasy and away from realistic experience (unlike that of *Voyage to Venus*) seems, from this standpoint, a weakness.

(ii) The 'Non-Realistic' Supernatural

One of the first instances of this problem comes when Jane has her vision of Merlin's awakening. She dreams she is in the tomb with his corpse:

If only someone would come quickly and let her out. And immediately she had a picture of someone, someone bearded but also divinely young, someone golden and strong and warm coming with a mighty earth-shaking tread into that black place. At this point she woke.[18]

Who exactly this might be is not made clear. But it is a portrayal unlike (and much more human than) Lewis' depictions of *eldils*; hence, 'Maleldil the Young' ('someone... divinely young') seems the most likely. But then what a desperately perfunctory picture of deity! Ransom's encounter even with the King of Perelandra left him shattered[19]; Jane, in contrast, wakes up with little more than exciting news – about 'the corpse'. [20] There is no sense of the 'When I saw Him, I fell at His feet as though dead' of the Book of Revelation, or of Isaiah's 'Woe is me! For I am lost ... for my eyes have seen the King!' In neither of the other books of the trilogy does Ransom have an actual vision of deity. Lewis seems to toss in, just in passing, something which (if he did it at all) should arguably have been a climax for Jane and for the whole book, even for the whole trilogy.

And it is so vague: 'golden and strong and warm' is imprecise and not at all numinous. And alas, it soon turns out that Ransom (or Mr Fisher-King as he is now rather unnecessarily renamed, with an eye on the Grail myth) has turned into something like his Master. Jane goes to meet him, and 'her world was unmade':

All the light in the room seemed to run towards

the gold hair and the gold beard of the wounded man.

Of course he was not a boy – how could she have thought so? The fresh skin on his cheeks and hands had suggested the idea. But no boy could have so full a beard. And no boy could be so strong. It was manifest that the grip of those hands would be inescapable, and imagination suggested that those arms and shoulders could support the whole house... Pain came and went in his face: sudden jabs of sickening pain. But as lightning goes through the darkness and the darkness closes up again and shows no trace, so the tranquillity of his countenance swallowed up each shock of torture.[21]

Ransom's time on Perelandra has had a rather marked effect. But the distancing into myth is deliberate. The role of realistic consciousness that Ransom played in *Voyage to Venus* now belongs to Mark and Jane (not without some loss; Ransom was enough like Lewis and his friends to have a good deal of depth). Lewis has reserved Ransom for an attempt at presenting something which would never normally appear in modern fiction; and despite the desperate lack of concreteness in the paragraph just quoted (which renders the pain, in particular, too stylized to be meaningful), he does manage to convey something in the following sentences:

She had long since forgotten the imagined Arthur of her childhood – and the imagined Solomon too. Solomon... for the first time in many years the bright solar blend of king and lover and magician which hangs about that name stole back upon her mind. For the first time in all those years she tasted the word King itself with all its linked associations of battle, marriage, priesthood, mercy, and power.

Lewis has indeed restored a most un-modern archetype for his readers' imaginations. It is not in the least realistic, of course. But that is not a criticism; merely a statement of what Lewis is seeking – this time successfully – to do.

At the end of the interview, Jane suddenly finds herself thinking of, or rather experiencing, 'hugeness'. It is her first encounter with an *eldil*:

The whole room was a tiny place, a mouse's hole, and it seemed to her to be tilted aslant – as though the insupportable mass and splendour of this formless hugeness had knocked it askew. She heard the Director's voice.

"Quick," he said gently, "these are my Masters. You must leave me now. This is no place for us small ones, but I am inured. Go!"[22]

Again, there is a significant difference from *Voyage to Venus*, where 'Lewis' found the presence of an *eldil* disturbing, even horrifying, but not dwarfing quite in this way. In that book, the aim was to create a sense of confrontation and hence of imaginative freshness and a kind of realism; here, the purpose is rather the sense of something utterly great, great beyond platitude, beyond all normal human experience. The same is true of the later scene when all the planetary *eldils* come together to take over the body of Merlin for his work of judgement and destruction:

Quick agitation seized them: a kind of boiling and bubbling in mind and heart which shook their bodies also. It went to a rhythm of such fierce speed that they feared their sanity must be shaken into a thousand fragments. And then it seemed that this had actually happened. But it did not matter; for all the fragments – needle-pointed desires, brisk merriments, lynx-eyed thoughts – went rolling to and fro like glittering drops and reunited themselves. It was well that both men had some knowledge of poetry... For the lord of Meaning himself, the herald, the messenger, the slayer of Argus, was with them: the angel that spins nearest the sun, Viritribia, whom men call Mercury and Thoth....

And now it came. It was fiery, sharp, bright, and ruthless, ready to kill, ready to die, outspeeding light; it was Charity, not as mortals imagine it, not even as it has been humanised for them since the Incarnation of the Word, but the trans-lunary virtue, fallen upon them direct from the Third Heaven, unmitigated. They were blinded, scorched.

They thought it would burn their bones. They could not bear that it should continue. They could not bear that it should cease. So Perelandra... came and was with them in the room....

Saturn, whose name in the heavens is Lurga, stood in the Blue Room. His spirit lay upon the house, or even on the whole earth, with a cold pressure such as might flatten the very orb of Tellus to a wafer. Matched against the lead-like burden of his antiquity, the other gods themselves perhaps felt young and ephemeral... Ransom and Merlin suffered a sensation of unendurable cold: and all that was strength in Lurga became sorrow as it entered them.[23]

In these passages Lewis surely succeeds in creating a memorable evocation of non-human, supra-human, states; and in one respect, given the connotations of personality and (as it were) moral qualities that he integrates into the conception, there is a sense that 'This is what celestial beings might be like'. Minor imaginative touches such as Lewis' remark that there are seven *eldilic* sexes, five of them alien to mankind, and that Jupiter's *eldil* had been 'by fatal but not inexplicable misprision, confused with his Maker – so little did they dream by how many degrees the stair even of created being rises above him', serve to give an idea of vast, unknown but wonderful expanses opening up, stretching far beyond human vision. But still, the supernaturalism Lewis is creating in this book remains distant from the realm of the everyday.

This obviously goes for Merlin too. It even goes for the nearest thing to an expression of providence, which occurs when MacPhee, the Company's resident Scottish agnostic, challenges Ransom's leadership. Ransom responds by denying that he himself had brought the Company together, and enquires whether anybody thought he had consciously selected them. No one does.

You never chose me. I never chose you. Even the great Oyeresu whom I serve never chose me. I came into their worlds by what seemed, at first, a chance; as you came to me – as the very animals in this house first came to it. You and I have not started or devised this: it has descended on us. It is, no doubt, an organisation: but we are not the organisers.[24]

Here, at the very point where Ransom retrospectively declares providence to have been at work in the everyday, Lewis distinguishes his narrative action from the normal process of

providence operating through prayerful decision-making. The presence of the supernatural excludes ordinary human action rather than collaborating with it; and the book's supernaturalism remains distanced from ordinary experience.

The same is true of the operations of supernatural evil. Wither, the NICE Deputy Director, has (for reasons that are never explained) learned how to go into certain trances where he can travel outside his physical body in multiple wraith-forms. It is not really clear how this came about, nor does it contribute much to the plot, but it is disturbing in itself:

Mark... thought he was looking into the face of a corpse.... He was not unconscious, for his eyes rested momentarily on Mark and then looked away. "I beg your pardon, sir," began Mark, and then stopped. The Deputy Director was not listening. What looked out of those pale, watery eyes was, in a sense, infinity – the shapeless and the interminable....

When at last Mr. Wither spoke, his eyes were fixed on some remote point beyond the window.

"I know who it is," said Wither. "Your name is Studdock. You had better have stayed outside. Go away." [25]

Again, this is imaginatively striking (especially the sense of dislocation from normal human sensory experience in 'I know who it is' used to someone familiar). But it is far removed from the everyday.

Lewis' central image of evil is taken from Olaf Stapledon, an earlier science fiction writer whom he both admired and strongly disagreed with. It is Alcasan's Head, the forerunner of 'a new species – the Chosen Heads who never die'[26], separated from its body and kept alive artificially. This image is given multiple, related meanings. Firstly, it stands for the rational processes operating in supposedly 'objective' separation from the moral law. As Lewis says in the 1955 Preface, he is making the same point here as he did in his essay *The Abolition of Man*; and in the latter book he describes thinkers who move in that direction as 'men without chests... The head rules the belly through the chest – the seat ... of emotions organized by trained habit into stable

sentiments.'[27] Secondly, Lewis is using the amputated Head to stand for a rationalism that cuts itself adrift from or is hostile to 'Nature'. [28] And a third variant appears when NICE initiate, Frost, compares humanity to an animal no longer needing a large body for nutrition and locomotive organs: 'The masses are therefore to disappear. The body is to become all head. The human race is to become all Technocracy' – and so sixteen major wars are scheduled for the twentieth century.[29]

References to demonic powers are integrated into this very easily. In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis insists that those who deny the absolute moral law can finally have no categories whatever with which to make decisions except their own desires, and hence are open to evil. He also suggests that the magician and the scientist can be comparable in their desire to control by knowledge[30]; and in *The Screwtape Letters* the demons' goal is to produce 'our perfect work, the Materialist Magician' who will use and even worship 'Forces' while denying the existence of 'spirits'. [31] From there it is a straightforward step to the idea in *That Hideous Strength* that the whole philosophical development that has led to this situation was in some degree 'subtly manoeuvred' by 'dark contrivers', until the combination of scientific control with reawakened magic made 'hell... at last incarnate'[32]. Here, Lewis is creating a 'supernaturalistic realism' by raising philosophical issues and then suggesting that these too are an arena for spiritual warfare. The effect of the demonic 'macrobes' on history has been massive, Frost tells Studdock: 'The real causes of all the principal events are quite unknown to the historians.' [33] This is, of course, very much the point that Lewis makes throughout *The Screwtape Letters*.

And yet, where the macrobes actually make their influence felt in the *action* of *That Hideous Strength* – and Lewis is wise to use them seldom and to tell us very little about them – the effect is striking, but (as with the *eldils*) an experience remote from the everyday world: 'Frost... had chosen this time for this stage in Mark's initiation partly in obedience to an unexplained impulse (such impulses grew more frequent with him every day).' [34] In Lewis' treatment of the evil supernatural, then, he is still using the powers of the Christian cosmology, and discussing the

issues that he believed to exist in the real universe. But his characters' experience remains 'extreme'; it is deliberately distanced from the 'normal' spirituality of the ordinary believer.

(iii) The 'Non-Realistic' Apocalypse

It is in accordance with this distancing that, when good and evil finally came to grips in the apocalyptic judgement on the NICE, the human beings on the side of 'good' play scarcely any part. This section is a retelling of the story of the divine judgement on the tower of Babel referred to by Lewis in the book's epigraph, a comparable instance of human power extending beyond 'that limitation... which mercy had imposed ...as a protection'[35]. Merlin comes to the NICE in answer to an advertisement for an interpreter, and by *eldilic* power turns their communication with one another into total nonsense; and then an attack by wild animals plus an earthquake complete the Institute's destruction. Lewis makes great play of the Babel episode. The NICE Director speaks of something being 'as gross an anachronism as to trust to calvary for salvation in modern war', meaning to say 'cavalry' but accidentally stating a credo; Frost sends a message to Miss Hardcastle as the chaos worsens – 'Blunt frippers intantly to pointed bdelluroid. Purgent. Cost.' Meaning, presumably, 'Urgent. Frost'; but what is happening is indeed 'purgent', the 'cost' of NICE's misdeeds.[36] There is much that is effective in this section: the smell at the NICE banquet after bedlam has broken out – 'the smell of the shooting mixed with the sticky compound of blood and port and Madeira'[37]; Frost committing suicide under the control of the 'macrobes', being allowed at the last minute to see his error, until 'With one supreme effort he flung himself back into his illusion'[38]; three other NICE leaders, their minds likewise taken over, engaging in ritual murder punctuated by chants before the Head, in a powerful and horrific scene.[39]

All this is a vivid picture of judgement and hell upon earth ('The valley seemed to have turned into Hell', notes Feverstone[40]). But Ransom and his Company have little to do with it; they are aware only of fierce heat and light and they spend the time preparing for Ransom's farewell meal. (Having let Merlin loose, Ransom's task on Earth is over.) Obviously Lewis intends to give a sense

of the directness of divine judgement, the 'sudden, violent end imposed from without: an extinguisher popped on to the candle, a brick flung at the gramophone, a curtain rung down on the play – "Halt!"'.[41]

(Precisely because such an idea conflicts with the 'favourite modern mythology' of unending progress, he says, it should be 'made more frequently the subject of meditation'.[42]) But the price he pays is the presentation of divine action as radically separate from human action in a way very different from the 'co-working' of God and man of which the New Testament speaks[43] – and which Ransom experiences in *Voyage to Venus*. Merlin's deeds are done because he is 'one in the saddle of whose soul rode Mercury himself'[44], rather than someone 'filled with the Spirit' like Samson or the apostles in the scenes of judgement in the book of Judges or the Acts. With human action so clearly swept aside, the sceptical MacPhee's question deserves more than the brief answer it receives: 'I'd be greatly obliged if anyone would tell me what we *have* done – always apart from feeding the pigs and raising some very decent vegetables.'[45] Sorting Merlin out and sending him in the right direction seems the only answer. True, they have 'obeyed and waited'[46]; but it is not clear why they had to be brought together as a mystical Company entrusted with the secrets of Atlantis and outer space, if that was all they were to do.

And if Lewis wished to give an imaginative experience of eschatology[47], of the 'descent' of the heavenly powers, then he has chosen a strategy with inherent disadvantages. The reader has indeed had a chance to see what an apocalypse might be like; but it is tangled up with much that is very deliberately non-real. At the close, for example, Ransom goes off to be with King Arthur in a paradise, in Avalon, or rather 'Aphallin'[48] – on Venus; and he goes to paradise in a spaceship, or at least a 'vessel'[49]. Here, the spiritual reality is left objectified in very mechanical terms to the very end; and one wonders whether this does not hinder Lewis' apologetic purpose.

(iv) 'Supernaturalistic Realism' in the Conversion Scenes

The relation of the book's supernaturalism to

'normal' spiritual experience is perhaps closest in the experiences of the characters who undergo conversion, Mark and Jane Studdock. The agnostic MacPhee – who could be a crucial figure, as the sole non-Christian in Ransom's entourage – stays an agnostic to the last, blissfully and improbably unconvinced even by Merlin's arrival or the earthquake; but he is less a character with real spiritual experiences than a narrative symbol of agnosticism. His function is plain in the final chapter, where he is the only character without a mate when Venus descends ('I'll away down to my office and cast some accounts. There'd better be one man about the place keep his head'), swearing 'In the name of Hell', but nonetheless giving a moving, quasi-Shakespearean farewell to Ransom: 'What you and I have seen together... but no matter for that. You... you and I... but there are the ladies crying. I'm away this minute. Why would a man want to lengthen it?'[50]

Mark is a figure of a kind Lewis disliked: 'He was a man of straw, a glib examinee in subjects that require no exact knowledge... Mark liked to be liked. There was a good deal of the spaniel in him'[51]. It is not surprising, therefore, that he functions better as a medium for satire than as a character whose spiritual experiences can be penetrated into. His development tends to be described from the outside: 'There were no moral considerations at this moment in Mark's mind. He looked back on his life, not with shame but with a kind of disgust at its dreariness. He saw himself as a little boy in short trousers'[52]. The stages by which Mark is weaned away from the NICE are not entirely clear, although evidently it is the danger of death at the hands of the NICE that makes him see the folly of his ways. After he has learnt from Frost about the 'macrobes', however, he grapples with:

desire (salt, black, ravenous, unanswerable desire)... These creatures of which Frost had spoken – and he did not doubt now that they were locally present with him in the cell – breathed death on the human race and on all joy. Not despite this but because of this, the terrible gravitation sucked and tugged and fascinated him towards them.[53]

Interestingly, this fascination for the occult is clearly intended as realism: Lewis describes precisely the same experience in his autobiography.[54] Mark is awakened from it by

the reminder that he faces death – and the realisation that he had forgotten this makes him conscious that under the influence of fascination regarding the 'macrobes':

he had sustained some sort of attack, and that he had put up no resistance.... The very moment you tried to be good, the universe let you down. That was what you got for your pains.

The cynics, then, were right. But at this thought, he stopped sharply. Some flavour that came with it had given him pause. Was this the other mood beginning again? Oh, not that, at any price! He clenched his hands... "Oh, don't, don't let me go back into it!" he said; and then louder, "Don't, don't!" All that could be called himself went into that cry; and the dreadful consciousness of having played his last card began to turn slowly into a sort of peace.... The cell, also, seemed to be somehow emptied and purged, as if it, too, were tired after conflicts it had witnessed – emptied like a sky after rain, tired like a child after weeping. He fell asleep.[55]

The strength of this passage is that, in the context of Frost's revelations to Mark about the existence of the 'macrobes', it gives to Mark's struggles and changes of thinking a dimension of spiritual warfare, without in any way having to describe the 'macrobes' or indicate the manner in which they are penetrating his thoughts. It is not even necessary to specify how Mark's quasi-prayer in some way relieves the assault. (Mark himself would not attribute it to the Christian God: he is not presented as a believer in subsequent interviews with Frost. Nor – although this is a fantasy in which spiritual forces are objectified – does Lewis give any indication of how grace is operative in Mark's subsequent reconsiderations, operative even in the stronghold of the NICE.) The final sentences quoted above seem to contain a deliberate verbal ambiguity in the word 'emptied': the connotations that the following phrases hold of being emptied of struggle seem to imply the cell also being emptied of those forces, formerly 'locally present', with which he was struggling. But Lewis does not spell it out. The supernaturalism here is presented with some delicacy.

Lewis' presentation of Jane's conversion has a similar balance. It comes after a vision of Venus;

not the Perelandran *eldil* this time, but her fallen earthly equivalent which, though not entirely evil, is very much a force of chaos and disorder. This appearance is linked by Ransom to the chaos of Jane's marriage as someone who is neither a virgin nor a 'Christian wife', someone who has not made a surrender to the ultimate masculine, Maleldil Himself. 'There is no escape... You had better agree with your adversary quickly.' Jane makes the convergence with terrestrial categories: 'You mean I shall have to become a Christian?'[56] She goes out to think it over:

Still she thought that "Religion" was a kind of exhalation or a cloud of incense, something steaming up from specially gifted souls towards a receptive heaven. Then, quite sharply, it occurred to her that the Director never talked about Religion, nor did the Dimbles nor Camilla. They talked about God. They had no pictures in their mind of some mist steaming upward: rather of strong, skilful hands thrust down to make and mend, perhaps even to destroy. Supposing one were a thing after all – a thing designed and invented by Someone Else and valued for qualities quite different from what one had decided to regard as one's true self?[57]

Suddenly there is a convergence with 'normal, realistic' spiritual experience; many Christians would read this as an accurate description of the difference – or one of the differences – between 'religion' and Christianity, and the issues it raises for Jane are the claims that a God must have on anyone in the real world. They have flowed naturally out of the fantastic Venus episode because that too was concerned with the same issue, Jane's wish to be her own possession: 'Pride', Ransom terms it.[58] And it is not merely a matter of abstractions:

Then, at one particular corner of the gooseberry patch, the change came.

What awaited her there was serious to the degree of sorrow and beyond. There was no form nor sound. The mould under the bushes, the moss on the path, and the little brick border were not visibly changed. But they were changed. A boundary had been crossed. She had come into a world, or into a Person, or into the presence of a Person. Something expectant, patient, inexorable, met her with no veil or protection between. In the

closeness of that contact she perceived at once that the Director's words had been entirely misleading. This demand which now pressed upon her was not, even by analogy, like any other demand. It was the origin of all right demands and contained them... The name me was the name of a being whose existence she had never suspected, a being that did not yet fully exist but which was demanded. It was a person (not the person she had thought) yet also a thing – a made thing, made to please Another and in Him to please all others – a thing being made at this very moment, without its choice, in a shape it had never dreamed of... Words take too long. To be aware of all this and to know that it had already gone made one single experience.[59]

This passes muster as a 'realistic' description of Christian 'conversion' as some people might experience the encounter. At the same time, the passage does not quite have the directness that exists in the scene in *Voyage to Venus* where Ransom debates with the Darkness. No doubt the amount of mythology built into *That Hideous Strength* serves to hamper such a reading experience, since one more 'presence' may just be one more myth; though the suggestion that Ransom's words had been 'misleading' builds in a sense of separateness between that part of the narrative and this. There is still a problem with the narrative appearing external – these are not Jane's thoughts, but her author's report. But there is the same delicacy in the use of the supernatural that we noted in the account of Mark's crisis. The 'presence' described is real, not symbolic, but is handled with the absolute minimum of description. Hence – in contrast, especially, to Venus ten pages earlier, who received a full description – it does not appear mythological. And the sense of convergence with realism may be said to extend even to the immediate introduction of something like the 'macrobes':

Her hand closed on nothing but a memory, and as it closed, without an instant's pause, the voices of those who have not joy rose howling and chattering from every corner of her being.

"Take care. Draw back. Keep your head. Don't commit yourself," they said. And then more subtly, from another quarter, "You have had a religious experience. This is very interesting. Not everyone does. How much better you will now understand the seventeenth-century poets!"[60]

This, of course, is the tone of the devils of *The Screwtape Letters*. Compared with the rest of *That Hideous Strength*, these 'temptations' sound very much like subjective phenomena; yet their position in a book containing so much that is supernatural does a little to impel the reader towards conceiving such forces as having some objective existence. And that too is a 'baptism of the imagination' of a kind.

Jane's conversion is as close as Lewis comes to 'supernatural realism'. In general, his earthly setting does not really signify an intention to show supernatural causality functioning in earthly affairs, although there is not an *absolute* dichotomy between a supernatural realism and what he is doing. This book is much farther than *Voyage to Venus* from 'everyday spiritual experience', and it is best read as a 'fabulation', or, to use Lewis' own phrase from the Preface, a 'tall story'. It is full of bizarre grotesqueries, plays of the intellect, strikingly imaginative scenes; it is weak on real people (Ransom, and virtually all of the NICE members, are not especially 'realistic', and Mark and Jane are viewed externally most of the time), and the fact that Merlin and Mercury handle the climax so emphatically without any human aid removes narrative tension. Hence it cannot serve as a general model of supernatural causality in realistic fiction.

And also, perhaps, its 'fabulation' character creates a problem of a different kind. Some Christian readers may well be uneasy with the way in which Lewis uses the invocation of the Trinity as part of Ransom's methods for dealing with Merlin.[61] In *Voyage to Venus*, the references to the crucifixion don't seem blasphemous because they are being used for a serious purpose, giving a vital illustrative sidelight on the issue of self-sacrifice that faces Ransom. Here, however, the invocation can appear to be merely thrown in (and unnecessarily) to give a little extra flavour. To some readers this may seem rather sacrilegious; God's Name is too holy to be reduced to something resembling an *abracadabra* in a thriller. It is too much like what the Old Testament calls 'taking the Lord's name in vain'; the context is not a suitable setting and debases something sacred. There is, perhaps, a warning here for any would-be Christian fantasist: that if they wish to introduce the deepest content

of their faith into their fiction, the rest of their material must provide a worthy surrounding.

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References:

- [1] *Voyage to Venus* (1943), pp.17-18. All references are to the 1953 Pan edition, henceforth referred to as *VTV*.
- [2] Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion* (1931; Faber edition of 1964), p.205.
- [3] Charles Williams and C.S.Lewis, *Arthurian Torso* (1948), p.73.
- [4] *Ibid*, p.183.
- [5] C.S.Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (1945; revised edition of 1955, published by Pan), p.7. Unless otherwise indicated, all further references are to the shorter 1955 version, henceforth referred to as *1955*. This tends to be considered an improvement on the 1945 edition (henceforth referred to as *1945*), but the case is debatable; the abridging has been rather uneven. Certainly the book is better off for the omission of some of Straik's tirade, for example (1945, pp.93-94; 1955, p.52). But the omission of the Donne quotation in the first section (1945, p.13) hinders our understanding of the passage where it recurs (1945, p.31; 1955, p.18); the original occurrence of Feverstone's jibe that Mark is an 'incurable romantic' (1945, p.135) is dropped in 1955 but nonetheless is quoted in 1955, p.148; and the omission 'better than you' from Miss Hardcastle's 'I know better than you which is going to be most fun' when Mark is deciding whether to stay with NICE seems a pity (1945, p.117; 1955, p.62). The college politics sections are also weakened in the abridgement, as is argued below.
- [6] *Ibid*.
- [7] *Ibid*.
- [8] *Ibid*, p.9.
- [9] *Ibid*, pp.9-10.
- [10] *Ibid*, p.13.
- [11] *Ibid*, pp.14-16.
- [12] 1945, pp.23-28.
- [13] Cf. Green and Hooper, *op.cit.*, p.148.
- [14] 1945, p.28.
- [15] J.R.R. Tolkien, 'The Homecoming of

Heorhtnoth Beorthelm's Son', in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York, 1966), p.17.

[16] *The Lord of the Rings*, p.927.

[17] 1955, p.51.

[18] *Ibid*, p.81.

[19] *VTV*, p.190.

[20] 1955, p.83.

[21] *Ibid*, p.84.

[22] *Ibid*, pp.88-89.

[23] *Ibid*, pp.199-204.

[24] *Ibid*, p.118.

[25] *Ibid*, p.111.

[26] *Ibid*, p.117. The forerunner of the image is the dying or dead Weston's: 'Buried alive. You try to connect things and can't. They take your head off...' (*VTV*, p.157), and – one suspects – the warning to Ransom's sister about evil 'coming to a head'(!) in Britain (1955, p.72).

[27] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (1943; Fount edition of 1978), p.19.

[28] Cf. *ibid*, pp.42-43.

[29] 1955, p.157.

[30] Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, pp.45-47.

[31] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942; Fount edition of 1977), p.39. This is more or less what happened to Weston in *Voyage to Venus*.

[32] 1955, p.121.

[33] Lewis himself largely agreed with this last point; cf. the essay on 'Historicism' included in both *Fern-seed and Elephants* and *Christian Reflections*.

[34] 1955, p.212.

[35] *Ibid*, p.121. In this respect, *That Hideous Strength*, like *Voyage to Venus*, is a retelling of Genesis.

[36] *Ibid*, pp.218, 221.

[37] *Ibid*, p.221.

[38] *Ibid*, p.232.

[39] *Ibid*, pp.227-229.

[40] *Ibid*, p.239.

[41] From the essay on the Second Coming in Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants*, p.72.

[42] *Ibid*, p.77.

[43] Eg. Romans 8:28.

[44] 1955, p.226.

[45] *Ibid*, p.241.

[46] *Ibid*, p.242. Certainly this is Lewis' point in his essay about awaiting the Second Coming, and the phrasing suggests he may have had this passage in mind: 'For what comes is judgement: happy are those whom it finds labouring in their vocations, whether they were merely going out to feed the pigs or laying good plans to deliver

humanity a hundred years hence from some great evil' (*Fern-seed and Elephants*, p.83).

[47] Assuming he does, he has a neat, comic way of preventing it seeming over-portentous. Seven pages from the end, the petty bureaucrat Curry reappears, receiving the news of the earthquake. 'He had not up till then been a religious man. But the word that now instantly came into his mind was "Providential". He'd been within an ace of taking the earlier train: and if he had... It was Providential again that some responsible person should have been spared... Providential – providential' (1955, p.245).

[48] *Ibid*, p.240.

[49] *Ibid*, p.249.

[50] *Ibid*.

[51] *Ibid*, pp.109, 130.

[52] *Ibid*, p.148.

[53] *Ibid*, pp.162-163.

[54] Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, pp.142-143.

[55] 1955, pp.163-164.

[56] *Ibid*, pp.193-194.

[57] *Ibid*, p.196.

[58] *Ibid*, p.194; and cf. Jane's horror at an unexpectedly 'widened' world interfering with her life: 'Windows into huge, dark landscapes were opening on every side and she was powerless to shut them... She didn't want to get drawn in' (1945, p.99).

[59] *Ibid*, pp.196-197.

[60] *Ibid*, p.197.

[61] *Ibid*, p.164.

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