



Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 5 - Till We Have Faces

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.

[Part 7: A Few Conclusions](#)

The last fantasy we shall consider is Lewis' *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, which is a reworking of the story of Cupid and Psyche. It concerns two sisters, Orual and Psyche, daughters of the King of the semi-barbaric country of Glome. Psyche is beautiful, indeed so beautiful that she begins to be worshipped as a goddess; after being betrayed by a third sister, Redival, she is left on a mountainside as a human sacrifice to the 'Shadowbrute', a monster which is also believed to be the son of Ungit, Glome's equivalent of Aphrodite. [1]

Orual, the book's narrator, is the oldest of the sisters. She is ugly, but deeply attached to Psyche, and when Psyche is sacrificed she determines to follow and bury her. But on the mountain she finds Psyche herself, declaring that the Shadowbrute is the god of the westwind and that he has taken her for his bride – while forbidding her to see his face. When Psyche shows Orual her supposed palace, however, Orual can see nothing, and decides that Psyche is deceived, having fallen prey either to a demon or an outlaw. By threatening to kill herself, Orual forces Psyche to light a lamp at her husband's side; at that point the mountain valley where Psyche has been living is wrecked and Psyche goes wandering into exile. Orual sees a vision of

the god of the westwind pronouncing judgement on her that she too 'will be Psyche'.

She returns to Glome, and eventually becomes its Queen – and a very just and successful Queen at that. She has, however, a quarrel against the gods, in that they have judged her, making both her and Psyche wretched, whereas if only they had shown her Psyche's palace clearly, 'I would have walked aright'. [2] Finally, in a neighbouring country, she finds a shrine to Psyche; but in the shrine's sacred story, Orual's own actions are ascribed simply to jealousy.

Furious, she determines to write 'the case against' the gods. [3] Her 'case' forms the first section of the book, comprising 259 of its 320 pages. In Part Two, it emerges that the labour of writing the book has enabled Orual to see another side to the story and to realise just how far her own love has been a tyrannically selfish possessiveness.

She seeks to change herself. The attempt is unsuccessful. Eventually, she has a vision in which she receives the opportunity to present her denunciation of the gods; the effect is to make her see her own egoism. In a final vision she is given the beauty of Psyche and is received by the god. She returns to waking consciousness, adds the final chapters to the book and dies four days later.

(i) Posing the Question

One way of summarising the book's subject-matter is to see it as the story of the difficulties faced by a woman in a world where the gods do not speak clearly. 'Only the gods know', Orual comments at one point, '... and the gods do not tell.' [5] The complaint of her book is directly concerned with the silence and ambivalence of the gods; the second part is in effect her summary of the gods' response, the response that can only come when she has finally realised what it is she has been attempting to say. Fifteen pages from the close comes the passage containing the phrase that is the book's title:

I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? [6]

It is not inappropriate, then, to say that the book is about, or parallels, the question of the silence of God, of how it can be that the divine revelation is not clear. [7] For Lewis, as a Christian apologist, knew that although the evidence for Christianity – the subject-matter of such books as *Mere Christianity* – might to him seem blindingly clear, yet to others this was not the case. Indeed, sometimes people might yearn for a direct word from heaven, and it would not come. There was a hiddenness about God. Why should this be so? The issues in *Till We Have Faces* are analogous to these.

And they are highlighted from the very first sentence.

I am old now and have not much to fear from the anger of gods. I have neither husband nor child, nor hardly a friend, through whom they can hurt me. My body, this lean carrion that still has to be washed and fed and have clothes hung about it daily with so many changes, they may kill as soon as they please. The succession is provided for. My crown passes to my nephew.

Being, for all these reasons, free from fear, I will write in this book what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods... But there is no judge between gods and men, and the god of the mountain will not answer me. [8]

This is a very different book from the science fiction trilogy.

The gods are obviously not the trilogy's planetary angels; and Orual is a character of far greater depth than Jane Studdock of *That Hideous Strength*. Where Jane was described – with sorrow, pity, or scorn – from the outside, Lewis is clearly able to penetrate right inside the mind of his later heroine. And one thing he shows us, without any obtrusive comment, is that her view of the gods is at least questionable: her conception of their possibilities of action does not extend to their doing anything as drastic as disrupting the succession to her throne.

In the next few pages the reader is introduced to the two main influences on Orual's early life. One is her teacher, a Greek known as the Fox, who seeks to train her in the values of classical

culture. He and his philosophy represent much that is admirable. 'I loved the Fox ... more than anyone I had yet known', Orual records, and tells of his cheerfulness as a slave, his humility and his wide-ranging interest in the language, culture, history and botany of Glome. [13]

But Lewis hints at something inadequate in all this. The name 'Fox' represents a question-mark; and the Fox himself demonstrates that his rationalism does not really mesh with his love of mythic literature. He tells Orual the story of Aphrodite and Anchises, then adds hastily, 'Not that this ever really happened... It's only lies of poets, lies of poets, child.' But Orual knows that it is such poems as these, and not the ones he praises most (such as 'Virtue, sought by men with travail and toil') that bring 'the real lilt ... into his voice.' [14] The Fox is portrayed lovingly, but his enlightened philosophy has an insufficiency about it. Nonetheless, he is a far more rounded figure than the representatives of error in the earlier books (eg. Weston or Wither); where he is inconsistent, it is because he is more human than his ideas. (And, at the end, he is redeemed.)

The paganism of Glome that the Fox finds nonsensical is likewise represented as paradoxical. It has something in it deeper than the Fox allows:

The Fox had taught me to think – at any rate to speak – of the Priest as a mere schemer and a politic man who put into the mouth of Ungit whatever might most increase his own power and lands or most harm his enemies. I saw it was not so. He was sure of Ungit. Looking at him as he sat with the dagger pricking him and his blind eyes unwinking, fixed on the King, and his face like an eagle's face, I was sure too. Our real enemy was not a mortal. The room was full of spirits, and the horror of holiness. [15]

Besides this, the Fox's logic-chopping seems a little paltry. Psyche remarks:

The Fox hasn't the whole truth. Oh, he has much of it. It'd be dark as a dungeon within me but for his teaching. And yet... I can't say it properly. He calls the whole world a city. But what's a city built on? There's earth beneath. And outside the wall? Doesn't all the food come from there as well as all the dangers? ... things growing and rotting,

strengthening and poisoning, things shining wet. [16]

Just like the House of Ungit, concludes Psyche. It is a Lawrentian note, and it summarises the enigma posed by Ungit: this goddess that the Priest worships with human sacrifice is a force both of fertility and destruction.

But destructive and alien the cult of Ungit can assuredly be:

I had a fear of that Priest which was quite different from my fear of my father. I think that what frightened me (in those early days) was the holiness of the smell that hung about him – a temple-smell of blood (mostly pigeons' blood, but he had sacrificed men too) and burned fat and singed hair and wine and stale incense. It is the Ungit smell. Perhaps I was afraid of his clothes too; all the skins they were made of, and the dried bladders, and the great mask shaped like a bird's head which hung on his chest. It looked as if there were a bird growing out of his body. [17]

It is unpleasant, and the horror is driven sharply home when the Priest demands Orual's beloved sister for a human sacrifice. Here and in several other instances Lewis is giving a new meaning to the word 'holy'. [19] Just as in the trilogy, the supernatural is made more striking, more concrete, by appearing alien and repugnant. And it is not something that can be simply discarded, as the Fox wishes. When the old Priest dies and is replaced by an 'enlightened' successor who hellenizes the cult under the Fox's influence, Orual notes that:

He would never be terrible like the old Priest. He was only Arnom, with whom I had driven a very good bargain yesterday; there was no feeling that Ungit came into the room with him. And that started strange thoughts in my mind. [20]

And by an enigmatic coincidence, the sacrifice of Psyche is followed by the rains it was intended to bring. [26] comes also to embody the silence of the gods who will not speak clearly; that silence (in this case manifested in the confusion of human religion) appears sadistic and heartless, and yet, the book as a whole suggests, can be seen in quite a different light.

And at this point it becomes clear how the debate between the Priest and the Fox is an analogy of the problem presented by the plurality of religions in the real world. 'Holy places are dark places', asserts the Priest when the two conflict. 'It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood.' [27] Yet the advantage of the Greek wisdom that is 'clear and thin' is plain too. Can there be a resolution? Lewis has posed the problem in precisely the terms he uses elsewhere to describe the problem posed by the world religions:

We may salva reverentia divide religions, as we do soups, into 'thick' and 'clear'. By Thick I mean those which have orgies and ecstasies and mysteries and local attachments.... By Clear I mean those which are philosophical, ethical and universalizing.... Now if there is a true religion it must be both Thick and Clear; for the true God must have made both the child and the man, both the savage and the citizen, both the head and the belly. And the only two religions that fulfil this condition are Hinduism and Christianity.

But Hinduism fulfils it imperfectly... Christianity really breaks down the middle wall of the partition... That is how one knows one has come to the real religion. [28]

Lewis' narrative focuses these issues: the problem of how one is to reconcile the insights of 'thick' and 'clear'; of what truth might lie behind the strength and horror of the 'thick'; and the supernaturalistic question beyond these, of how to regard the divine silence – or hiddenness – that causes and is expressed in this enigma.

(ii) Orual: the Questioner of the Gods' Silence

The triumph of *Till We Have Faces* is in good measure the triumph of the presentation of Orual. As we read her narrative we are conscious of an alert mind recalling, sorting, recording:

One asked if she should bring Batta to me. I told that one, with bitter words, to hold her tongue, and if I had had the strength I would have hit her; which would have been ill done, for she was a good girl. (I have always been fortunate with my women since first I had them to myself and out of the reach of Batta's meddling.) [29]

And her femininity is conveyed in a way that (to this masculine reader) has a ring of credibility:

The Fox ... had forgotten all his wiles ... simply because things such as the Priest had been saying put him beyond all patience. (I have noticed that all men, not only Greek men, if they have clear wits and ready tongues, will do the same.) [30]

There are other fine touches; the slow, carefully-traced development of her love for Bardia [33] in this book, as against *That Hideous Strength*, supernaturalism and psychological realism go together; there are few if any passages where the realism of presentation falters.

Orual is presented as a girl who is made very conscious (by her father) of her ugliness; yet she has a deep affection for her beautiful sister. [34] The nature of this affection is central to the book. The key episode in this respect is Orual's last meeting with Psyche before the Great Offering. Orual finds Psyche far more cheerful than she anticipated:

All she was saying seemed to me so light, so far away from our sorrow. I felt we ought not to be talking that way, not now. What I thought it would be better to talk of, I did not know... "I believe you are not afraid at all," said I; almost, though I had not meant it to sound so, as if I were rebuking her for it. [35]

There is a kind of possessive egoism here; Orual cannot bear Psyche either being taken from her or being stronger than her. She has come to Psyche's prison to play a particular role, and it is only when Psyche thinks about her real fear (that the Shadowbrute is merely a fable, and the person sacrificed merely dies where they are left of hunger and thirst) that Orual can carry it out:

And now she did weep and now she was a child again. What could I do but fondle and weep with her? But this is a great shame to write; there was now (for me) a kind of sweetness in our misery for the first time. This was what I had come to her in her prison to do. [36]

Orual records this self-analysis, and the companion awareness that when Psyche was not

weeping 'I felt (and this horribly) that I was losing her already... She was (how long had she been, and I not to know?) out of my reach', because 'Since I write this book against the gods, it is just that I should put into it whatever can be said against myself.' [37]

Two points emerge. Firstly, Orual is not merely a moral *exemplum* of egoism masked as love, but is capable of a radical honesty. This reappears throughout the narrative [38], giving the reader a sense of the depths and ambiguities of Orual's character, though not, of course, the idea that Orual understands herself entirely. (Lewis is guarded from that absurdity by Orual's realisation in Part Two that her self-assessments of Part One were inadequate.) This radically honest questioning of the gods, herself and her experience is not what finally brings her to the knowledge of the gods; she only arrives at denunciation of the gods by the end of Part One. But when it is coupled with the revelatory visions that follow the completion of her book, and when she has been willing to face the full implications of those visions, then she can understand the truth.

Secondly, the issue between her and Psyche is Lewis' old theme of Desire. Orual observes that:

Perhaps it was a sort of pride in me ... not to blind her eyes, not to hide terrible things; or a bitter impulse in anguish itself to say, and to keep on saying, the worst. [39]

This too might be called 'realism'; but to Lewis, 'to say, and to keep on saying, the worst' is not realism but despair, a pessimism of an unfortunately self-fulfilling kind. [40] It presupposes that there is no supernatural ordering that is in some way working for the best, even in the darkest times. Psyche, in contrast, has a faith and a hope resembling the biblical variety. She can face the facts ('Anyway, it means death... How can I be the ransom for all Glome unless I die?'), but believes that there could be some sort of joy beyond. ('We don't understand. There must be so much that neither the Priest nor the Fox knows.') This hope is based on Psyche's experience of Desire:

I have always ... had a kind of longing for death.... It was when I was happiest that I longed most... Do you remember? The colour and the smell, and

looking across at the Grey Mountain in the distance? And because it was so beautiful, it set me longing, always longing. Somewhere else there must be more of it. Everything seemed to be saying, Psyche come! But I couldn't (not yet) come... I felt like a bird in a cage when the other birds of its kind are flying home... If only you could believe it. Sister! No, listen. Do not let grief shut up your ears and harden your heart... The sweetest thing in all my life has been the longing – to reach the Mountain, to find the place where all the beauty came from – ... Do you think it all meant nothing, all the longing? The longing for home? [41]

It is one of Lewis' best evocations of Desire. But Orual's possessive love closes her mind to this liberation: 'What can these things be except the cowardly murder they seem?' [43]) Orual, however, is rejecting Desire, rejecting the foretaste of the gods, and so going the long way round.

(iii) The Cruelty of the Gods

The question raised by the Great Offering is obviously acute to anyone not possessed of Psyche's assured faith: Why are the gods allowing this? Orual's answer is simple: 'The gods are real, and viler than the vilest man.' [47]; in other words, Orual's memories of Psyche are the foothold of Desire in her personality. It is her loyalty to that memory, jumbled up though it is with anger and selfishness, that the gods will use to lead her on; and that is grace, not cruelty.

But for the time being the gods seem merely loathsome. Orual sees Psyche dressed for the Offering and can only respond:

The gods are cleverer than we and can always think of some vileness it never entered our heads to fear... It is, in its way, admirable, this divine skill. It was not enough for the gods to kill her, they must make her father the murderer. It was not enough to take her from me, they must take her from me three times over, tear my heart out three times. [48]

Thus Lewis sets up the problem. And the reader surely must share Orual's feelings about the horror of human sacrifice. Can there possibly be anything worthwhile among such bigotry,

savagery and folly?

After the Offering, the gods will not leave Orual alone. She becomes sick and delirious. 'Now mark yet again the cruelty of the gods': one thread runs through all her fantasies, that Psyche is her enemy – 'always wrong, hatred, mockery, and my determination to be avenged.' [50] The dreams also focus Orual's hatred for her father (Psyche resembles him in some of them) and her sexual frustration (Psyche stealing her lovers is a repeated theme). This presentation of psychological complexity again meshes in with the supernaturalism of the book. It is the beginning of Lewis' answer to the question about the silence of the gods; even such apparent evils as Orual's sickness and her hateful dreams may be a part of an answer, hinting at the possibility of seeing things otherwise than they appear to Orual.

And of the refusal to see them otherwise; or, indeed, to see at all. For it is possible to seek a defence against the gods: not to do so would be an act of trust in them and in their hidden nature and purposes. Orual complains that:

There is no escape from them into sleep or madness, for they can pursue you into them with dreams... The nearest thing we have to a defence against them (but there is no real defence) is to be very wide awake and sober and hard at work, to hear no music, never to look at earth or sky, and (above all) to love no one. [51]

When she goes up the Mountain to bury Psyche, this defensiveness is put to the test:

I came on a sad errand. Now, flung at me like frolic or insolence, there came as if it were a voice – no words, but if you made it into words it would be, 'Why should your heart not dance?' It's the measure of my folly that my heart almost answered, Why not?... The sight of the huge world put mad ideas into me; as if I could wander away, wander for ever, see strange and beautiful things, one after the other to the world's end. [52]

Her resistance to this 'attack' of Desire is explicitly a rejection and distrust of the gods (and their world); she would be a fool, she says, if she let them deceive her, if

a mere burst of fair weather, and fresh grass after a long drought, and health after sickness, could make me friends again with this god-haunted, plague-breeding, decaying, tyrannous world... The gods never send us this invitation to delight so readily or so strongly as when they are preparing some new agony... I ruled myself. Did they think I was nothing but a pipe to be played on as their moment's fancy chose? [53]

Here, Orual's entire attitude is controlled by the assumption that nothing good can be expected from the gods. Thus, while the gods themselves are apparently remaining silent, the incidents that are occurring are revelatory in that they draw out her attitudes to the gods. And what follows offers a further such choice. Orual reaches the place of the Offering – and there is Psyche, still alive and glowing with health. It is the fulfilment of Desire – or else it is what Orual's 'complaint' indicates, the next twist of the gods' torture. Psyche's own response to Orual's arrival is precisely the question Orual faced on the journey up: 'Why should our hearts not dance?' [54]

(iv) The Alternatives on the Mountain

In Psyche, Lewis presents the believer. Psyche tells Orual how, while she was bound on the mountain, her initial childish dreams of the 'gold and amber palace' – her 'mythology', in one sense disappeared and were replaced by a faith (that seems the appropriate noun); something 'very hard to put into words', that reconciled the approaches of the Fox and the Priest. 'It was shapeless, but you could just hold on to it; or just let it hold on to you.' (Orual, of course, has refused to let anything 'hold on' to her; she has 'ruled herself'.) Something greater follows. The weather changes; and 'I knew quite well that the gods really are, and that I was bringing the rain... The wind got wilder and wilder.... And then – at last – for a moment – I saw him.... The god of the wind: Westwind himself.'

It is only for 'a lightning flash', but that is enough to give her faith for whatever bizarre events may follow. (Not so Orual, who has her own split-second of vision later.) And then she is swept away through the air and set down in the god's house. There she learns she is to be 'the bride of the god.' [56] According to her own account, anyway. There is just one problem. Orual, the

'realist', has lived the rejection of Desire, and, in the manner of fantasy, the spiritual difference between them is objectified in physical terms: Orual cannot see the god's house at all.

It is a critical moment, and Lewis handles it superbly:

And now we are coming to that part of my history on which my charge against the gods chiefly rests; and therefore I must try at any cost to write what is wholly true. Yet it is hard to know perfectly what I was thinking while those huge, silent minutes went past... Anyway, my whole heart leaped to shut the door against something monstrously amiss; not to be endured. And to keep it shut. Perhaps I was fighting not to be mad myself.

But what I said when I got my breath (and I know my voice came out in a whisper) was simply, "We must go away at once. This is a terrible place."

Was I believing in her invisible palace? A Greek will laugh at the thought. But it's different in Glome. There the gods are too close to us... No door could be kept shut. Yes, that was it; not plain belief, but infinite misgiving – the whole world (Psyche with it) slipping out of my hands. [57]

The emphasis on Orual's painstaking truthfulness, and the fact that her account is intended as a criticism of the gods rather than as a confession, make the flaws that appear in her own character in this passage seem credible. She is predisposed at some very deep level against what Psyche is telling her. For a moment – just before it becomes plain that she cannot see the palace – she accepts it; but once Psyche's judgement is set against hers, she assumes Psyche to be mad. Something is 'utterly amiss'. It is not a purely intellectual issue; as in the Bible, unbelief is at its absolute roots a matter of the will rather than the intellect, a problem of deliberate independence rather than of a lack of dexterity in solving cosmological puzzles. 'My whole heart leaped to shut the door', says Orual. She has grounds for 'infinite misgiving' indeed; if there are gods – worse, gods who do not always make themselves plain – then the whole world is in very truth out of her hands; indeed, was never in her hands at all. 'How did I know whether she really saw invisible things or spoke in madness? Either way,

something hateful and strange had begun.' [58]

Lewis then introduces the challenges to Orual's perception of the world. Orual seizes Psyche, but finds her 'stronger than I ever dreamt she could be' [59]; Lewis does not emphasise this strength, but it is obvious that it would be a fact hard to explain in any other way but Psyche's. Then there is Psyche's own trustworthiness:

She was as certain of her palace as of the plainest thing... This valley was indeed a dreadful place; full of the divine, sacred, no place for mortals. There might be a hundred things in it that I could not see.... A sickening discord, a rasping together of two worlds, like the two bits of a broken bone. [60]

The attitude that Lewis evokes with that excellent simile is obviously the direct opposite to Psyche the believer's joyous acceptance of the presence of the mysterious otherworld; to Orual, that presence is something unwanted. But Psyche and Orual are not 'goodie' and 'baddie'; Psyche is quite capable of losing her temper in this scene, and indeed of a 'sharp, suspicious' look that Orual has never seen her wear before. [62] These things enable her reader to continue to identify with Orual's experience; and thus, in the long run, with the 'widening of the world' that she undergoes.

Then the gods step in again. Was it madness or not? Which was true? Which would be worse? I was at that very moment when, if they meant us well, the gods would speak. Mark what they did instead. It began to rain. It was only a light rain, but it changed everything for me... If that wise Greek who is to read this book doubts that this turned my mind right round, let him ask his mother or wife. The moment I saw her, my child whom I had cared for all her life, sitting there in the rain as if it meant no more to her than it does to cattle, the notion that her palace and her god could be anything but madness was at once unbelievable... I saw in a flash that I must choose one opinion or the other; and in the same flash knew which I had chosen. [63]

To Orual, writing when all is lost, this seems another instance of the gods' calumny. But once again it admits another explanation: what the rain does is to compel the expression of her mental

attitude in a definite decision. Orual attempts to take Psyche away by force, and fails. Psyche is by far the stronger ("Of course," thought I, "they say mad people have double strength" [65]

But that night, before she leaves the valley, the problem is forced on her again. She thinks she catches a momentary glimpse of the god's palace, 'wall within wall, pillar and arch and architrave, acres of it, a labyrinthine beauty' – and just as she is going to it to beg forgiveness, it vanishes, leaving only a 'tiny space of time' in which Orual sees some swirlings of mist that could have resembled towers.

That moment when I either saw or thought I saw the House – does it tell against the gods or against me?... What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle?... If they had an honest intention to guide us, why is their guidance not plain? Psyche could speak plain when she was three; do you tell me the gods have not yet come so far? [66]

The gods break their silence only in ways that do not remove their hiddenness. Or, perhaps, that continue to force Orual into choices; for it is noticeable that once the vision has disappeared she does not go to 'ask forgiveness' as she had intended. These enigmas can be seen as cruelty – or alternatively as stimuli that cause Orual to 'break her silence', to express her deepest self.

(v) The Point of Decision

To some of the book's characters Psyche's situation is no enigma at all. Orual's guide up the Mountain is the soldier Bardia, an ordinary believer in the religion of Glome (and one through whom Lewis distinguishes it from Psyche's disturbingly total devotion: 'I think the less Bardia meddles with the gods, the less they'll meddle with Bardia.' [70]

Accordingly, Orual turns to the gods again:

Then I did a thing which I think few have done. I spoke to the gods; myself, alone, in such words as came to me, not in a temple, without a sacrifice. I stretched myself face downward on the floor and called upon them with my whole heart... I promised anything they might ask of me, if only they would send me a sign. They gave me

none.... When I rose up again the fire had sunk a little lower, and the rain drummed on as before. [71]

Thus the gods' indifference seems proven. But of course the question is begged: Orual is demanding a sign immediately, and when that is not forthcoming she concludes that she is 'left utterly to myself.' She ignores the alternative possibility, that the gods' silence might have some purpose in her life which is not completed yet. Just so she explained Psyche's strength away, and set aside the vision in the mist. The thought comes to her that 'Anything might be true. You are among marvels that you do not understand. Carefully, carefully.' She stifles it. [72] In all of these things a pattern is emerging; possibly the gods' silence is as much a matter of nothing being heard as of nothing being said.

And this becomes obvious when Orual returns to the Mountain, convinced of the one point that Bardia and the Fox agreed on, that Psyche's lover is evil and that Psyche must be rescued. Psyche meets her: 'The King has been no hindrance to you, has he? Salute me for a prophetess!' Orual is momentarily startled: 'I had forgotten her foretelling. But I put it aside to be thought of later... I must not, now of all times, begin doubting and pondering again.' [73] Looked at one way this is resolute; looked at another, it is foolhardy. The reader recalls – though Orual does not – the prayer for a sign; Orual has predetermined how (or when) any answer to her prayer should come, so when a possible 'sign' appears she turns her back on it.

Above all, Orual trusts her own logic. 'Nothing that's beautiful hides its face. Nothing that's honest hides its name.' [77]

Thus the issue of faith and unbelief facing the hiddenness of the divine comes to its climax. Lewis retains the psychological realism, as Orual fantasises about Psyche realising that Orual was right all along, and

creeping through the darkness and sending a sort of whispered call... And I would be half-way over it in an instant. This time it would be I who helped her at the ford. She would be all weeping and dismayed as I folded her in my arms and comforted her. [78]

Jane Studdock's flaws were something on a slab, exposed for our observation; Orual's flaws we recognise from experience. Wisely, Lewis also gives Orual her doubts about her whole scheme, and a 'terrible longing to unsay all my words.' Her heartbreak is also as real and as human as her egoism and her distrust of the gods: 'My tears broke out again... "Oh, Psyche, Psyche... you loved me once... come back."' [80], of putting loyalty to another human being above loyalty to God, rather than putting God first and trusting Him to look after the consequences. (In *Fictional Absence*, the companion study to this, we examine how this issue arises – with opposite choices being made as a result – in both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*.) At the same time the reference to 'paying the price' make her a redemptive 'scapegoat', in the biblical sense. That all these elements should be present together in this drama of the conflicting claims of human and divine love is a tribute to Lewis' skill.

The judgement, when it comes, is real too. Psyche's light shines, longer than Orual had expected. 'Then the stillness broke.' There is a 'great voice', and then the sound of weeping; and the mountain valley is wrecked. Even this Orual takes for a good sign: 'I was right. Psyche had roused some dreadful thing.' They might both die, but at least Psyche would die 'disenchanted' (*sic*), 'reconciled to me.' The illusion is not permitted to last. There comes 'as if it were lightning that endured... In the centre of the light was something like a man.' The figure is utterly beautiful, but he 'rejected, denied, answered, and (worst of all) he knew, all I had thought, done or been.' And without anger, in a voice 'unmoved and sweet; like a bird singing on the branch above a hanged man' – the alienness of the supernatural that was manifested earlier in Lewis' reinterpretation of 'holiness' – he declares that Psyche is going into exile, and Orual 'shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche.' [81] The figure disappears, and Orual hears Psyche's despairing weeping dying away in the distance. Whatever purpose the gods' silence may have had is over; Psyche is ruined, and Orual returns home expecting to be struck down or turned into an animal. It does not happen: still the gods' actions are not as expected, still they do not speak clearly.

(vi) Orual Hides her Face

Psyche's part in the book is now over; she only reappears, briefly, in a vision at the close. She has existed in the book primarily as a counterpart to Orual; now she exists as something that – whatever it is – Orual must become. That is, indeed, a new enigma: Orual now knows (or thinks she knows) that 'the gods are and that they hated me' [85]

But first of all Orual returns home to the Fox's shrewd questioning. She is uncomfortable, having misquoted the Fox in her attempts to convince Psyche. 'I had taken off ... the veil I had worn all day. Now I greatly wished I had it on.' [88] But above all, it functions as a crucial symbol.

For this book is called *Till We Have Faces*; it is about why the gods are silent, or rather, why we cannot see or hear them. 'How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?' [90] Earlier, she had recorded that the only ways to escape this confrontation were through hard work and shunning music, natural beauty, and love. So in the section where she begins wearing the veil, we watch her trying to escape into her work of queenship.

She burns everything of Psyche's from the period of the last year, arranges Psyche's room as it was 'before our sorrows began ... when she was ... still mine' (*sic*), and locks and seals it. 'And, as well as I could, I locked a door in my mind.' She refuses to discuss Psyche with the Fox, turning her attention rather to learning everything he can teach her about the sciences, and everything Bardia can teach her about fencing: 'by learning, fighting, and labouring, to drive all the Woman out of me.' [92]

In this process it becomes plain that the fate of Orual's true self is bound up with the memory of Psyche. 'One part of me ... said, "Orual dies if she ceases to love Psyche." But the other said, "Let Orual die. She would never have made a queen."' [95] Forgetting Psyche and becoming submerged in her queenship are the twin aspects of her 'veil'.

Yet even in the midst of her queenship, she can still dream 'the impossible fool's dream' of having Bardia as her husband and being in labour with

Psyche. [97]

Her achievements mount up: 'I did and I did and I did – what does it matter what I did?' – for, once out of the 'bustle and skill and glory of queenship', she is 'alone with myself; that is, with a nothingness.' [98] Her submergence in her work has led to success; but the refusal to confront the memory of Psyche and the gods means that Orual's own self is dying.

(vii) The Recovery of a 'Face'

Eventually, after the long years of the veil, the action moves on again. Orual goes on a journey outside Glome, and to her surprise finds a shrine to the goddess Istra – which is Psyche's other name. The temple priest tells her Istra's story, but to Orual's outrage it is altered, saying that Psyche's sisters could see her palace and determined to ruin her merely out of jealousy. Orual has no doubt that this is the gods' doing: in no way but through divine revelation could the story of Psyche's palace have become known. But

it's a story belonging to a different world, a world in which the gods show themselves clearly and don't torment men with glimpses, nor unveil to one what they hide from another, nor ask you to believe what contradicts your eyes and ears and nose and tongue and fingers. In such a world... I would have walked aright. The gods themselves would have been able to find no fault in me. [99]

Here Orual's self-righteousness stands out, but so does the problem posed by the gods' silence and their ambivalent actions. Is that not the cause of all the difficulties? She decides to do 'what had never perhaps been done in the world before', to write the case against the gods. [100] Part One of the book is the record of this 'case', and ends with Orual expecting the same direct act of judgement from the gods that she mistakenly foresaw after the destruction of Psyche's palace:

Let them answer my charge if they can. It may well be that, instead of answering, they'll strike me mad or leprous or turn me into beast, bird or tree. But will not all the world then know (and the gods will know it knows) that this is because they have no answer? [101]

Quite so: and therefore, if the gods have an

answer, they will not speak it through a direct but unexplained judgement. Part Two of the book is concerned with the ways in which the answer comes. It begins in the very process of Orual's writing down her accusation. Even in Part One, Orual remarks that

I was recalling every passage of the true story, dragging up terrors, humiliations, struggles, and anguish that I had not thought of for years, letting Orual wake and speak, digging her almost out of a grave, out of the walled well. [102]

The real Orual is coming back to life. At the beginning of Part Two she goes further:

Let no one lightly set about such a work.... I found I must set down (for I was speaking as before judges and must not lie) passions and thoughts of my own which I had clean forgotten.... The change which the writing wrought in me... was only a beginning; only to prepare me for the gods' surgery. They used my own pen to probe my wound. [103]

As it turns out, it is Orual's willingness to face her own weaknesses and (thoroughly realistic) self-gratifying fantasies ('I am ashamed to write all these follies' [105]), that is to prove the foothold of grace. The love of truth is at the very least love of a divine attribute. In one sense this is Lewis' old confidence, expressed most clearly in *Miracles*, in the ability of divinely-given Reason, relentlessly followed through to the very end, to attain to truth; although, in *Till We Have Faces*, it clearly has to be met by divine revelation. Orual, like Habakkuk or Job, is posing anguished questions to heaven; and where there is an honest question, Lewis believes, there will, in heaven's own time and way, be an honest answer. To desire to speak to the gods is to desire to 'have a face'; in writing her book Orual has begun to lay aside her 'veil'.

Not that Orual's assessment is thereby vindicated. There is still the absurdity of 'I must write it all quickly before the gods found some way to silence me' [107] The gods' 'answer' tackles this issue, not by direct revelation, but by the juxtaposition of events.

Orual recalls as she writes her opening pages how close she had once been to the third sister, Redival ('And I thought, how terribly she changed'

[110] Bardia's wife replies that she loved Bardia too much to intervene – even though Bardia was, on one level, being destroyed. Again, the implication is obvious, although unmentioned: what if the gods were doing the same?

'And now these divine Surgeons had me tied down and were at work.' [114]

The gods have spoken again, but again it is ambiguous, and no explanation comes. 'To expect further utterance is like asking for an apple from a tree that fruited the day the world was made', says Orual. (It is tempting to interpret this as linking the silence of the gods with the rebellion against God of the Genesis Fall.) Orual is left to work at the meaning of their utterance. At the symbolic level, the narrative contains signs of hope. When she goes out to drown herself it is without her veil, 'for the first time in many years' [116] That in turn may well be why the following pages are full of revelatory visions: the gods' voice has not changed, but Orual's new-found humility means she is able to hear.

Orual wonders if the reference to death means the death of her vices, and seeks to change her personality, 'the gods helping'. But she discovers that she is incapable of doing so. [117] (Lewis' autobiography presents this discovery as one of the last 'moves' in his own conversion.) Worse, she begins to fear that 'they would not help.... A terrible, sheer thought, huge as a cliff, towered up before me' – Bunyan's dread from *Grace Abounding*, the horrific possibility of being one of those that the gods will not choose. Orual has a despairing dream of being sent to collect the Golden Fleece, suffering the pain of encountering the rams that guard it and then watching another woman collect the prize. This incident says something further about the wrath (and silence) of the gods:

They were not doing it in anger. They rushed over me in their joy... The Divine Nature wounds and perhaps destroys us merely by being what it is. We call it the wrath of the gods; as if the great cataract in Phars were angry with every fly it sweeps down in its green thunder. [118]

Perhaps man is too small for the gods to care about him; perhaps Orual is too trivial for the gods to speak to her.

(viii) Silence Ended: Orual's True Voice

Orual still has one point she is maintaining against the gods: 'I had at least loved Psyche truly. There, if nowhere else, I had the right of it and the gods were in the wrong.' [119]

That is the keynote for the final vision. Lewis uses yet another Greek myth: Orual is sent to bring back the water of death from the dead lands for Ungit. Faced with an impassable mountain-range, she meets an eagle; but the eagle says, 'It is not you that I was sent to help.' [121]

When she comes to read her book, she suddenly realises that what she has is not 'my great book'. She is about to protest, but (another superb dream-like touch) 'already I found myself reading it'. What she reads, in fact, is her true book, in her true voice:

I know what you'll say. You will say the real gods are not at all like Ungit... As if that would heal my wounds! ... Do you think we mortals will find you gods easier to bear if you're beautiful? I tell you that if that's true we'll find you a thousand times worse. For then (I know what beauty does) you'll lure and entice. You'll leave us nothing; nothing that's worth our keeping or your taking ... stolen away by this everlasting calling, calling, calling of the gods. Taken where we can't follow... Oh, you'll say ... that I'd signs enough her palace was real; could have known the truth if I'd wanted. But how could I want to know it? Tell me that. The girl was mine. What right had you to steal her away into your dreadful heights?... If you'd gone the other way to work – if it was my eyes you had opened – you'd soon have seen how I would have shown her and told her and taught her and led her up to my level. But to hear a chit of a girl who had (or ought to have had) no thought in her head that I'd not put there, setting up for a seer and a prophetess and next thing to a goddess... how could anyone endure it?... That there should be gods at all, there's our misery and bitter wrong. There's no room for you and us in the same world... We want to be our own. [122]

Here is the heart of the whole book, the reason why Orual has been unable to hear the gods speak. To this reader, it works; it is possible to believe that this really is Orual's 'true voice'. The

egoism that was willing to listen to the gods, but only if that in turn feeds the ego; the possessiveness; the real pain and loss – this ambivalent combination we have seen throughout the narrative. The refusal to accept the possibility that Psyche's lover was a real god, the deliberate taking of the veil – these have marked Orual's refusal to see. The endpoint of such a refusal is in Orual's speech the creed of hell; 'The one principle of hell is – "I am my own"', said George Macdonald in a line Lewis chose as the epigraph to the penultimate chapter of *Surprised by Joy*. Hell, total independence, is the self-inflicted deafness to God carried to its logical conclusion of total separation from the presence of God. Orual has not yet come finally to that point; but she realises – or, more precisely, 'there was given to me a certainty', a revelation – that this 'was my real voice.'

There was silence in the dark assembly long enough for me to have read my book out yet again. At last the judge spoke.

'Are you answered?' he said.

'Yes, ' said I. [123]

... The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered. Lightly men talk of saying what they mean... When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the centre of your soul for years... you'll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? [124]

The silence of God here is the silence Ransom encountered in his debate with the Darkness on Perelandra; nothing needs to be said. 'The complaint was the answer.' It is the end of a long process on the gods' side; the 'word' has to be 'dug out of us' before we realise what it is we are wanting to say, before a question can be posed that can be answered. Until that point, says Lewis, man is in the same position as the damned of *The Great Divorce*, who will know that they were always in the wilfully self-deifying condition of Hell, but will phrase that awareness in a more self-approving way needing 'translation' into the

'real voice':

In the actual language of the Lost, the words will be different, no doubt. One will say he has always served his country right or wrong; and another that he has sacrificed everything to his Art; and some that they've never been taken in, and some that, thank God, they've always looked after Number One, and nearly all, that, at least they've been true to themselves. [125]

The divine silence is not merely fantasy. Five years after *Till We Have Faces* Lewis wrote the autobiographical *A Grief Observed*, a record of his tortured questionings after the loss of his wife. And at the end of that book there comes a comparable situation to this climax of Orual's questionings about a lost beloved:

When I lay these questions before God I get no answer. But a rather special sort of 'No answer'. It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate, gaze... Can a mortal ask questions which God finds unanswerable? Quite easily, I should think. All nonsense questions are unanswerable. How many hours are there in a mile? Is yellow square or round? [126]

The silence here is not quite the same as in *Till We Have Faces* or *The Great Divorce*, in that it results, not from the moral inability to encounter God, but from the questions asked being nonsense questions. But the point is very similar: sometimes, Lewis is saying, God is silent, not out of lack of love, but because we make communication almost impossible.

(ix) The Breaking of the Gods' Silence

Once the question has been asked aright – once Orual has a face – the gods can answer. The vision continues as Orual is taken through the underworld by the Fox, now aware of the incompleteness of his own rationalism. Orual is now, in her turn, to be accused by the gods. She learns this in a memorable section, encapsulating much of the essence of Christianity:

"I cannot hope for mercy."

"Infinite hopes – and fears – may both be yours. Be sure that, whatever else you get, you will not get justice."

"Are the gods not just?"

"Oh no, child. What would become of us if they were? But come and see." [127]

This, of course, is faith: the faith that the gods know what they are doing. It is also the hope of grace, of undeserved salvation. And it preserves, right to the end, an element of enigma. Lewis has implied that our inability to hear the gods has much to do with our egoism. But there is another aspect: when all is said and done, we are only human. 'Even I, who am dead, do not understand more than a few broken words of their language', the once-rationalistic Fox confesses to Orual. [128] The finite human mind is limited in its capability to understand the divine.

Before the judgement, the Fox shows Orual a series of pictures of what befell Psyche under the judgement of the gods. Psyche comes in despair to the riverbank to drown herself; Orual, seeing the picture, cries out, 'Do not do it' (the gods' words that interrupted her own suicide attempt), and Psyche goes away. Psyche has to sort an immense mass of seeds: she succeeds with the aid of numerous ants. (Orual dreamed of herself as an ant performing this task while she was engaged in the sorting of motives involved in writing her book.) Psyche has to collect the Golden Fleece; she succeeds because 'some intruder' draws away the rams that are guarding it. (Orual was the Intruder, but had thought herself to be 'nothing in their minds' as the rams trampled her.) Psyche and Orual toil across the desert; an eagle comes to help Psyche, and Orual vanishes. 'Another bore nearly all the anguish', summarises the Fox. [129] This is the other side of Orual's love, the reality of love that was mingled with the bitter possessiveness. But also it is the other side of the gods' apparent cruelty: in all her anguish, Orual was doing something better than she could have dreamed.

And finally the gods' enigmatic prophecy is fulfilled. 'You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche.' [131]; and Orual, of course, has seen in herself the ugliness that is part of the ambiguous figure of Ungit. The

vision comes to a climax as Psyche returns to the House she had lost, bringing the casket. And then something else occurs.

You have seen the torches grow pale when men open the shutters and broad summer morning shines in on the feasting-hall? So now... From a glorious and awful deepening of the blue sky above us... or from a deep, doubtful, quaking and surmise in my own heart, I knew that all this had been only a preparation. Some far greater matter was upon us. The voices spoke again..."He is coming," they said. [132]

So the god comes. 'The pillars on the far side of the pool flushed with his approach. I cast down my eyes.' [133] In doing so Orual realises that the impossible has happened: her ugliness is gone, she is Psyche. It is a symbolic transfiguration that could never have been done in a 'realistic' fiction; and, given that Lewis has not forfeited the psychological verisimilitude of Orual's personality, he seems to have retained the advantages of both modes at this juncture.

"You also are Psyche," came a great voice. I looked up then, and it's strange that I dared. But I saw no god, no pillared court. I was in the palace gardens, my foolish book in my hand... I ended my first book with the words, No answer. I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words. Long did I hate you, long did I fear you. I might - [134]

And at that point she dies. Her veil has gone, she has a face and can speak with the gods face to face; and 'before your face' the questions die away. Until that point, says Lewis, until someone is ready to 'face' the Lord Himself, there can only be silence; until Orual can 'know herself and her work', there is only the self-frustration of her earlier reasonings: of 'words, words; to be led out into battle against other words.' It is a climax not without humility from a man with Lewis' reputation as a master of verbal argument and logical apologetics.

There is far more in this book than can be discussed in a brief treatment such as this. The complexity of the interplay between Psyche and

Orual considered as realistic characters in a drama of human vocation, and considered as aspects of the same character in a drama of internal spiritual development, deserves further exploration, particularly in the context of the closing section. Space forbids. But even a superficial examination of *Till We Have Faces* makes clear the depth and complexity that Lewis achieved in this his final novel. The fantasy context enables him to achieve a richness of symbolic complexity that he would probably not have achieved in a 'realistic' novel. But the drama of the silence of the gods, of the enigmatic and apparently cruel occurrences that lead Orual into self-revelatory actions, followed by the long process of the taking and then divinely-stimulated removing of the veil, are at one level a model of the parallel drama in the real world. In this fantasy Lewis attains his most mature expression of supernaturalistic causality; and a great deal more besides. It necessitates and rewards numerous readings.

© 2008 Pete Lowman

References:

[134] *Ibid*, pp.319-320.

© 2008 Pete Lowman