6-15-1977

Reviews

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Abstract
C.S. Lewis, the Shape of His Faith and Thought. Paul L. Holmer. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.


Additional Keywords
Thadara Ottobris; Bonnie GoodKnight
Soap and Sunlight

Putting the matter succinctly, this is a very good book. Holmer is a theologian, who teaches at the Divinity School of Yale University. He has written a very clearly expressed study of what he calls the 'grammar of Christianity.' He says he is "shaping," "forming," etc., and in a peculiar way the very form of his literary career begins to limn that wisdom for us." "Grammar," "morphology," etc., are important in theology. Holmer is telling us, in this litany of synonyms, that Lewis's faith, thought, and life were (to borrow a phrase of Dorothy L. Sayers') "all of a piece."

Holmer says that Lewis never promulgated a theory, but rather, exhibited a way. "There is a certain shape of thought, a 'way' and a 'how,' of thinking and addressing a wide variety of issues that saves him from having to construct everything in a schoolish manner." (p. 14) This is as true of Lewis's treatment of literature as it is of his treatment of religion. "The logic and sense of myths, fantasies, epics, gospels, and allegories are often only to be formed from within... thus, no theory about them, no personal critical evaluation, no historical account of their origins, in short, nothing save the involvement appropriate to each is going to help very much." (p. 14) The same involvement from within is demonstrated — presented, made visible — in Lewis's descriptions of the religious life. These are his novels and stories, and they are all about the same subject: human life. That is, they are about the human relationship with reality, which includes the world, other humans, and God. As Holmer puts it, "the self is a relation, not a thing." (p. 86)

The ways these relations function is expressed by Holmer as follows:

... to have relished, laughed, cried, enjoyed a host of specific things is what adds up after a while. Then we can transpose upward and think about the person for whom the difference between good and evil is not momentous, whose conscience is inoperative, who does not care whether cruelty toward others obtains, and who sees little in whether he is right or wrong, then we surely begin to see, once more, that a personality is at stake. In the latter case, there is no moral pathos, we have the nadir of personality, and the death of self. This is the state of damnation. (pp. 82-83)

He explains: "Lewis's literature is one long essay in showing us how these little things do finally make up our lives. In bold it might be said that it is not moral theories that save their proponents but, it is how quickly and thoroughly the small tasks are taken up." (p. 83)

The state of damnation has been expressed by Lewis in describing Milton's Satan: "the fall from general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and then to a toad, and finally to a snake — such is the progression of Satan." (C. S. Lewis, Preface to Paradise Lost, London: The Bodley Head, 1938 1951, p. 136). Again, he describes the state in terms of his own mythology, as the Oyarsa of Malacandra (Mars) speaks: "Once we knew the Oyarsa of your world -- he was brighter and greater than I -- and then we did not call it Thulcan-dra [Earth]. It is the longest of all stories and the bitterest. I had to write it as I was bent. (C. S. Lewis, Out of the Silent Planet, London: The Bodley Head, 1938 1951, p. 136).

But these quotations about evil are in the end, rather beside the point. At the heart of the Universe as Lewis presents it, there lies an absolutely shaping revelation: Holmer phrases it this way: "Morality is not a fever or a heightened and artificial kind of consciousness at all." (p. 77) That is, "The perfection, beauty, goodness, and worth are already part of reality -- .." Lewis presents this understanding most powerfully, perhaps, in his description of Mark Studdock's infernal initiation in That Hideous Strength, when Mark discovers:

As the desert first teaches men to love water, or as absence first reveals affections, there rose up against this background of the sour and the crooked some kind of vision of the sweet and the straight. Something else -- something he vaguely called the "Normal" -- apparently existed. He had never thought about it before. But there it was -- solid, massive, with a shape of its own, almost like something you could touch, or feel, or fall in love with. It was all mixed up with Jane and fried eggs and soap and sunlight and the rocks cawing at Cure Hardy and the thought that, somehow, outside, daylight was going on at that moment, He was not thinking in moral terms at all, or else (what is much the same thing) he was having his first deeply moral experience. (C. S. Lewis, That Hideous Strength, London: The Bodley Head, 1945 1960, pp. 395-370)

The diabolical scheme to cleanse Mark of all subjectivity has backfired: "At that precise moment where Satan... meets something real, laughter must arise, just as steam must when water meets fire." This is a quote from Lewis's Preface to Paradise Lost, where he adds, "[Milton] believed everything detestable to be, in the long run, ridiculous; and mere Christianity commits every Christian to believing that 'the Devil is (in the long run) an ass.'" (Lewis 1942:95) The result is, in the end, inevitable, for as "Mr. Williams has reminded us in unforgettable words... 'Hell is inaccurate'..." (Lewis 1942:97).

Lewis, as Holmer shows us, is sublime and precisely accurate. His aim is absolute, and he takes aim again and again. We have only to pick up his books and page through them. Holmer's essay is an invitation to do that: his success is that he has himself written a book which does the same thing, inviting us, in the words of Jewel, the Unicorn, on the slopes of the resurrected Narnia, to go "further up and further in."

-- by Nancy-Lou Patterson
It may seem strange to review a book that is out of print, as this fine Chesterton novel is. But this needs little defense to those who understand that the latest is not necessarily the best, and who are willing to work a bit to find things worth finding. For reviewing Chesterton's non-detective fiction almost necessarily means reviewing out-of-print books. Of the 13 works of this type, only 2 remain in print. This is a sad thing. Even when they are a bit dated, Chesterton's fictional works have a robust life to them that rarely can be found in our gray age, along with a witty and readable style.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill was Chesterton's first novel, and has many similarities with his later novels, such as the better known The Man Who Was Thursday. It is pointed: The Napoleon emphasizes Chesterton's medievalism and love of small units, as Thursday shows his love of order and hatred of Impressionism. It has the same plot structure: a wild and improbable romp. It also shows certain of the weak spots in Chesterton's world view.

The Napoleon of Notting Hill exhibits the most directly of all of G.K.C.'s fiction his medi­evalism, about which Przemyslaw Mroczkowski has written in The Medievalism of Chesterton. In The Napoleon, which begins in 1984 and ends in 2004, England's government has been turned over to a king chosen by lot (a touch of Chesterton's love for democracy, that). At this time, the king is an impractical joker named Auberon Quin. One of his fancies is to break London and its suburbs into little districts, each with full medieval panorama: town wall, civic banner, and city guard of halberdiers. (No firearms or other modern weapons mar the scene.) Each of these districts -- Kensington, for example, has four -- is to be governed by a lord high provost, also chosen by lot.

This joke eventually is accepted, though very grudgingly indeed by the serious commonsensical folk who come to head most of the districts, and who object to seeming foolish and to being inconvenienced by, for example, having to go with five heralds, trumpets blowing, to mail a letter, or to take a guard of halberdiers on an omnibus. Among these sober businessmen are certain of the weak spots in Chesterton's world view.

The situations provides G.K.C. with many opportunities to exalt the virtues of the small place that men can love, as opposed to the great anonymous social collectives that no man can feel for -- a point also made by Plato and Rousseau, among others. Indeed, the conventional businessmen opposing Wayne become infected, too, with his sentiments. As they realize their own growing local patriotism, they are almost horrified.

Chesteron's limitations also appear here. It is not, for example, certain that freedom is greater in small units than in large ones. Also, Chesterton seems not to imagine that a civil war might upset municipal services: in the midst of the battle cabs still run on time, drawn by untroubled horses, and the other processes necessary to maintaining life in a modern city are in similar condition. Those who have read of the horror that was Beirut last year would know differently what civil war in a modern city is like. Finally, in others of his books, Chesterton's characters can kill a great deal and in very gory ways without being notably changed by doing so. They end up as the same decent, kindly folk they were when they started. The affair has an air of a Society for Creative Anachronism tournament. That this book was written before England, in the First World War, was solidly impressed with the real horror of battle does not excuse this. Oddly, too, in The Napoleon there is very little mention of religion, and not much hint that Chesterton would gain his principal fame for his work as a Christian apologist.

Even with these problems, The Napoleon of Notting Hill is a well constructed book, and makes a telling point against those who urge on man a universal social brotherhood, and do not permit him that "local habitation and a name" without which men are indeed homeless.

-- by George Colvin