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## Reviews

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### Reviews

#### Abstract

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

*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*. G.K. Chesterton. Reviewed by George Colvin.

#### Additional Keywords

Thadara Ottobris; Bg Callahan

# REVIEWS

## Soap and Sunlight

Paul L. Holmer, *C. S. Lewis, the Shape of His Faith and Thought*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 116 pp., \$3.95.

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 [Lewis's] thought . . . that morphology . . . apparent in theological and Christian matters . . . a shaping of reflection that goes on also in his understanding of what literature is and does, of his grasp of our common human nature . . . in the view he provides of the moral life." He states, "In a peculiar way, the very form of his literary career begins to limn that wisdom for us." "Grammar," "morphology," "shaping," "form": 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 construe 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, where 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: "From here to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and thence a thing that peers in at bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake -- such is the progress of Satan." (C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, London: Oxford University Press, 1942 [1960], p. 99). 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 Thulcandra [Earth]. It is the longest of all stories and the bitterest. He became bent." (C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, London: The Bodley Head, 1938 1951, p. 136).

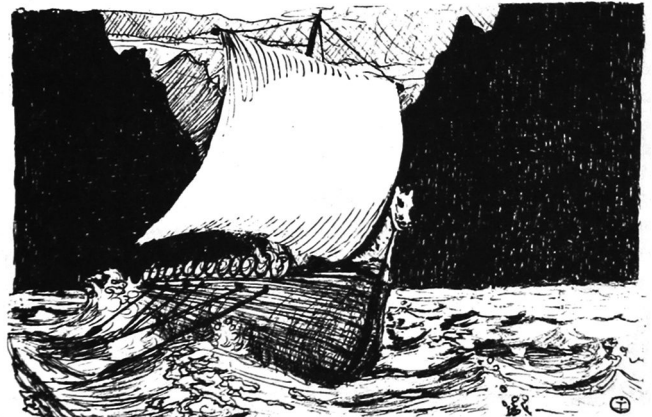
But these quotations about evil are in the end, rather beside the point. At the heart of the Universe as Lewis presents it, there lies an absolutely shaping revelation: Holmer phrases it this way: "Morality is not a fever or a heightened and artificial kind of consciousness at all." (p. 77) That is, "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 affection, 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 eat, or fall in love with. It was all mixed up with Jane and fried eggs and soap and sunlight and the rooks cawing at Cure Hardy and the thought that, somewhere 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. 369-370)

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 sublimely 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



## Pointed Fun by Chesterton

*The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London: The Bodley Head, 1904; New York: John Lane Co., 1909 [has map]), by G. K. Chesterton.

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. In any case, 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 G. K. 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 panoply: 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 sobersides are certain businessmen who have for some years been planning a really practical project: a road through London to increase trade. It happens, however, that this road must go through the small district of Notting Hill, and that is a problem. For though King Auberon intended this medievalism as a joke, becoming funnier the more seriously it was acted out, the new provost of Notting Hill, a young man named Adam Wayne, takes it very seriously indeed. He becomes a Notting Hill patriot. Under no conditions will Wayne permit this road to be driven through an inch of Notting Hill's sacred soil; and he eventually gathers all Notting Hill behind him in this.

At this point, the sober businessmen-provosts decide that the King, who will not move against Wayne, is ineffective, and that Wayne is clearly mad. They push Auberon aside and muster their forces to take Notting Hill and its "capital," a place called Pump Street, by force. The majority of the rest of *The Napoleon* is an account, often through the eyes of King Auberon (who turns war correspondent) of the various campaigns against Notting Hill. Chesterton lays out these maneuvers very well indeed, though to realize them properly one should have available the map of the area printed in, for example, the 1909 edition noted above. The ingenuity of the warfare is seen

in Notting Hill's first stroke of defense: Wayne's second-in-command, General Turnbull, on the day war begins sends out 40 London boys with half-crowns (5 altogether) to bring 40 horse-drawn hansom cabs to the front gate of Notting Hill, where, *presto!* the cabs became barricade material, the drivers become recruits (or prisoners), and the horses provide Notting Hill with a fine force of cavalry mounts.

(It is not really surprising that Chesterton laid out the campaigns well to the last detail. *The Napoleon* was actually conceived in Chesterton's boyhood, when he was wandering about the Kensington area and wondering how he would defend it if he were a medieval general. This is the general area in which *The Napoleon* is set; and Pump Street itself is modeled on a little street that Chesterton describes in his *Autobiography* having observed on this ramble.)

The situation 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. One says to another, while planning strategy:

"My friend, the whole territorial kingdom of Adam Wayne extends to about nine streets, with barricades at the end of them. But the spiritual kingdom of Adam Wayne extends, God knows where -- it extends to this office at any rate. The red-haired madman whom any two doctors would lock up is filling this room with his roaring, unreasonable voice."

Chesterton'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, as 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 secular brotherhood, and do not permit him that "local habitation and a name" without which men are indeed homeless.

-- by George Colvin

