The Everyday C. S. Lewis

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"One is sometimes (not often) glad not to be a great theologian. One might so easily confuse it with being a good Christian." Thus C. S. Lewis wrote in *Reflections on the Psalms.* Similarly, Lewis' religious writings are full of asides to the effect that he is not a theologian and that what he says is subject to correction by real theologians. In part, of course, let us recognize this for what it is: a smart rhetorical strategy that gets the reader on his side over against the presumably elitist theologians. But there is a worrisome sense in which Lewis' readers might be all too ready to hear such a message, all too ready to suppose that the faith is simple and clear, that theologians are largely in the business of making complicated what ought not be.

That is a temptation whose seductions we should resist. And indeed, in writing of "the everyday C. S. Lewis," I am not suggesting that Lewis' reflection is done at an everyday or unsophisticated level, but, rather, that he reflects religiously upon what is ordinary and everyday. Indeed, to the degree that Lewis is often characterized as a "popular" religious thinker, I am inclined to think the characterization misleading, and in part, I fear, a result of a peculiar academic prejudice against anyone who writes clearly and is widely read. Lewis' readers actually get a rather heavy dose of serious religious reflection, though generally in quite alluring literary style.

Nevertheless, theology is and must remain an elite activity. It is not, in fact, aimed at the masses. And there is a sense in which we might better say that Lewis' writing is "religious" rather than "theological." This sense is one that he would himself, I believe, affirm. He makes such a distinction, for example, in the incomplete, posthumously published essay "The Language of Religion." There he develops a distinction between ordinary language ("It was very cold") and two other kinds of language, each of which transforms ordinary language in the interest of certain purposes. Scientific language ("The temperature was -5 degrees Fahrenheit") seeks language that has a certain kind of precision lacking in our ordinary speech—a precision that we can quantify and test, that can be used to settle disputes about how cold it actually is. But this scientific language does not itself give us any sense of how a very cold day "feels," a sense of its "quality." If I have spent my entire life in a tropical climate, and you tell me that it is -5 degrees Fahrenheit where you live, such language will not help me feel what it's like to be there.

Ordinary language might do a little better in communicating this "feel." "Your ears will tingle." "It will hurt just to breathe." But poetic language exists in large part to try to improve ordinary language on just this point: to convey the quality, the feel, of experience. Lewis uses Keats' poem as illustration: "Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold; The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass, And silent was the flock in wooly fold: Numb'd were the Beadsman's fingers." This language cannot be quantified or tested, but it may, Lewis suggests, convey information that can be given in no other way. Perhaps it may even convey the quality of experiences we ourselves have never had.

Religious talk, like all talk, begins with ordinary language, but, depending on our purposes, it may quickly turn in directions more like the scientific or the poetic. Theological language, as Lewis describes it, is, strictly speaking, an alteration rather like the scientific. It seeks a precision that is needed and useful for clarifying uncertain or disputed points and for settling disagreements. As such, it is absolutely

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necessary. Elitist in a certain sense, it is, nonetheless, not to be belittled. Indeed, its precision can be a thing of beauty. But one thing it cannot do: it cannot by itself convey understanding of what in its very nature transcends our ordinary experience. For that we need language that is religious but not, in this sense, theological—language more like the poetic. To say "God is the Father of lights" is such language—religious, though not exactly theological.

A good bit of Lewis' success can, I think, be attributed to the fact that he actually writes relatively little "theology" in this technical sense. Clearly, he's read a good bit of it and been instructed by it—he does not in any sense belittle it—but he tends to seek language that captures and communicates the quality, the feel, of living and thinking as a Christian. As Austin Farrer put it: "[Lewis'] real power was not proof; it was depiction. There lived in his writings a Christian universe that could be both thought and felt, in which he was at home and in which he made his reader feel at home." That is the universe I want to explore. It illumines the everyday, so that we may find in it shafts of the divine glory that point to God, so that we may sense the eternal significance of ordinary life.

I

In his famous and powerful work *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard describes the "knight of faith" who has made the double movement of infinite resignation and of faith. Having given up the sense that anything is his possession to claim, having surrendered all for the sake of an immediate relation to God, the knight of faith nevertheless trusts that God will give it back—not in some future life, but in the here and now, in the finite realm. And, as a result, although he has made the first movement of infinite resignation, he is also able to savor the everyday. Kierkegaard describes him this way:

> Here he is. The acquaintance is struck, I am introduced. The moment I first set eyes on him I thrust him away, jump back, clasp my hands together and say half aloud: "Good God! Is this the person, is it really him? He looks just like a tax-gatherer." . . . I examine him from top to toe, in case there should be some crack through which the infinite peeped out. No! He is solid through and through. . . . One detects nothing of the strangeness and superiority that mark the knight of the infinite. This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things. . . . He delights in everything he sees. . . .

The knight of faith is therefore, as Kierkegaard puts it, able "to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely."

That characterization—to express the sublime in the pedestrian—is an apt description of something that makes Lewis' religious writing so effective. "[O]nly supernaturalists really see Nature," Lewis says.

> You must go a little away from her, and then turn round, and look back. Then at last the true landscape will become visible. . . . Come out, look back, and then you will see . . . this astonishing cataract of bears, babies, and bananas: this immoderate deluge of atoms, orchids, oranges, cancers, canaries, fleas, gases, tornadoes, and toads. How could you have ever thought this was the ultimate reality? . . . She is herself. Offer her neither worship nor contempt.

The ordinary pleasures of life—both those simply given to us in nature and those derived from culture—play a large role in Lewis' thinking and account for much of the power of his writing.

He can make domesticity seem enticing—as when Peter, Susan, and Lucy share a meal with the Beavers. And, indeed, the best times in Narnia are not the times we read of in the stories, the times when momentous events are occurring. The good times are those when nothing "important" happens, when life goes on in its ordinary, everyday way. Similarly, Lewis finds—surely not by accident—that "cheerful moderation" is an important characteristic in the novels of Jane Austen. "She has, or at least all her favorite characters have, a hearty relish for what would now be regarded as very modest pleasures. A ball, a dinner party, books, conversation, a drive to see a great house ten miles away. . . ." He celebrates the appreciation of "middle things" that he finds in the writings of Joseph Addison. Granting that Addison does not stir one's soul as some writers do, Lewis nonetheless finds a kind of strength and goodness in Addison's affirmation of "the common ground of daily life." "If I were to live in a man's house for a whole twelve-month, I think I should be more curious about the quality of his small beer than about that of his wine; more curious about his bread and butter and beef than about either."

And few readers of *Surprised by Joy* are likely to forget Lewis' description of what was for him a "normal day" during the time he was living with and being tutored by Kirkpatrick.

> [I]f I could please myself I would always live as I lived there. I would choose always to breakfast at exactly eight and to be at my desk by nine, there to read or write till one. If a good cup of tea or coffee could be brought me about eleven, so much the better. A step or so out of doors for a pint of beer would not do quite so well; for a man does not want to drink alone and if you meet a friend in the taproom the break is likely

> to be extended beyond its ten minutes. At one precisely lunch should be on the table; and by two at the latest I would be on the road. Not, except at rare intervals, with a friend. Walking and talking are two very great pleasures, but it is a mistake to combine them. Our own noise blots out the sounds and silences of the outdoor world; and talking leads almost inevitably to smoking, and then farewell to nature as far as one of our senses is concerned. . . . The return from the walk, and the arrival of tea, should be exactly coincident, and not later than a quarter past four. Tea should be taken in solitude, . . . [f]or eating and reading are two pleasures that combine admirably. Of course not all books are suitable for mealtime reading. It would be a kind of blasphemy to read poetry at table. What one wants is a gossipy, formless book which can be opened anywhere. . . . At five a man should be at work again, and at it till seven. Then, at the evening meal and after, comes the time for talk, or, failing that, for lighter reading; and unless you are making a night of it with your cronies . . . there is no reason why you should ever be in bed later than eleven.

Such a life Lewis himself describes as "almost entirely selfish" but certainly not "self-centered." "[F]or in such a life my mind would be directed toward a thousand things, not one of which is myself." Lewis, of course, understands that an "almost entirely selfish" approach to life cannot really be recommended. He simply understands its attraction, and he sees that it may, in fact, be better in some respects than a life which seems less selfish.

> One of the happiest men and most pleasing companions I have ever known was intensely selfish. On the other hand I have known people capable of real sacrifice whose lives were nevertheless a misery to themselves and to others, because self-concern and self-pity filled all their thoughts. Either condition will destroy the soul in the end. But till the end give me the man who takes the best of everything (even at my expense) and then talks of other things, rather than the man who serves me and talks of himself, and whose very kindnesses are a continual reproach, a continual demand for pity, gratitude, and admiration.

In an epitaph he once composed, Lewis made the same point a little more playfully:

> Erected by her sorrowing brothers
> In memory of Martha Clay.
> Here lies one who lived for others;
> Now she has peace. And so have they.

Thus, Lewis has a keen delight in the ordinary and the everyday. But I think this appreciation for the everyday goes yet a little further than simple delight—which, taken by itself after all, might be chiefly a matter of temperament. The deeper point is that the ordinary is the stuff of most of our lives most of the time. It is, therefore, where we most often find our callings, our opportunities for faithfulness, and our temptations.

Something like that is the point of Lewis' sermon "Learning in War-Time," a sermon preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on the evening of Sunday, October 22, 1939—when people in England had a genuine crisis, very much out of the ordinary, on their hands. Even such a moment of crisis does not, Lewis suggests, alter the fundamental situation in which we always find ourselves. For every moment of life is lived in the presence of the Eternal, in every moment of life we are "advancing either to Heaven or to Hell," and those high stakes are played out in the most mundane of decisions.

Lewis' ability to see that, and help us to see it, is part of the enduring power of *The Screwtape Letters.* Screwtape knows how much the ordinary and the everyday count for in our spiritual life. He knows, for example, of a human being who was once "defended from strong temptations to social ambition by a still stronger taste for tripe and onions." He knows that Wormwood has blundered badly when he permits his "patient" to read a book simply because he enjoys it, or to take a walk through country he enjoys. He knows that, when it comes to separating a human being from God, the ordinary can also be Wormwood's greatest ally. The important choices in life seldom present themselves in extraordinary appearance. "It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

This sense that eternal issues are at stake in the mundane choices of our everyday life helps, I think, to account for the fact that, in this country, Lewis has been so popular among evangelical Protestants. An analysis of the theological structure of his religious writings would, I am convinced, show clearly that this structure is more adequately described (to paint in broad strokes) as "Catholic" than as "Protestant." Faith as trust does not play a large role in his depiction of the Christian life. That life is not conceived primarily as a turn from consciousness of sin to the proclamation of grace. Instead, it is conceived as a journey, a process of perfection, and Jesus is the way toward that goal. From start to finish this journey is, to be sure, the work of grace, but that grace is primarily the power to finish the journey, not simply a pardoning word of forgiveness. The end of this journey

is the beatific vision—to see God and to rest in God—and that vision is granted only to those who are perfected, to the pure in heart.

In good Aristotelian fashion, therefore, Lewis thinks of all the ordinary decisions of life as forming our character, as turning us into people who either do or do not wish to gaze forever upon the face of God. When "night falls on Narnia" and we get the great scene of final judgment, all the inhabitants of that world have no choice about one thing. All must march past Aslan and look upon him. Some see there the face they have always longed to see, which they have learned to love, and they enter Aslan's world. Others see there a face they can only hate, for that is the sort of person they have become. They go off into nothingness. Every choice counts. Every choice contributes to determining what we ultimately love.

Protestant readers may, I believe, be especially drawn to this picture because, though they might not articulate the matter this way, it supplies something that is often missing from standard Protestant talk of forgiveness and faith, pardon and trust. Lewis' picture suggests that our actions are important not only because they hurt or harm the neighbor, but also because—under grace—they form and shape the persons we are. There are, to be sure, some theological dangers embedded in such a vision of the Christian life, but in Lewis' hands we can also see its power and its allure.

If we ask ourselves, therefore, what accounts for the success Lewis' writings have clearly had in reaching a wide range of readers and in shaping a religiously informed vision of life, his appreciation of the everyday cannot be overlooked. His notion of the everyday comes, of course, with a distinctively British flavor, but that does not seem to have created insurmountable obstacles for his readers. It is not just that he appreciates the everyday, however; it is also that he understands and evokes its significance for our moral and spiritual life. In ordinary pleasures, shafts of the divine glory, God touches our lives to draw us to himself. In *Surprised by Joy* Lewis tells his own life story as one whose underlying theme is *Sehnsucht*—the longing for joy. As Augustine said that our restless hearts could find the rest they desire only in God, so Lewis suggests that the ordinary goods and pleasures of life draw us beyond themselves and beyond ourselves to the only One who is Goodness itself.

But, as Augustine also said in a passage that Lewis places as an epigraph at the start of the last chapter of *Surprised by Joy*, "It is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge . . . and another to tread the road that leads to it." The ordinary and the everyday count immensely in our moral and spiritual life. In them God touches us to call us to himself. That means also, however, that the stakes there are very high, that seemingly minor decisions may help to shape a person who one day will say—with a tone of utter finality—either "*my* will be done," or "*thy* will be done." God calls to us in the pleasures of everyday life, but we can miss the message. We can refuse to let ourselves be called out beyond the ordinary, we can try to hang on to the everyday—ignoring what is terrible and mysterious about it. Then the manna that we have tried to save rots, the pleasures fade, and we are left with something less than the everyday: with only ourselves. Something like that, surely, is the picture Lewis paints in *The Great Divorce*. The choice is, finally and simply, between heaven and hell. But the choice is made, and eternal issues determined, in our everyday decisions and actions. Every moment of life is momentous—touched by and equidistant from the Eternal.

II

This is, I have suggested, part of the religious power of Lewis' vision of human life. But there is still more. If we take it only this far, in fact, we probably miss the most penetrating and compelling aspects of his thought. For the God who meets us in the ordinary and the everyday in order to call us to himself is not simply a God who makes us happy. To be sure, he will do that—will make us happier than we can even imagine. But Lewis offers no "feel good" religion, no books about how to live the abundant life. If there is a biblical theme that pervades all his writing it surely is: only the one who loses his life for Jesus' sake will find it. The ordinary pleasures of life give us just an inkling of what true pleasure must be, and Lewis is a master at using them to depict the happiness God will one day bestow on those who love him. But "it is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded ridge . . . and another to tread the road that leads to it." And the road that leads to it may be painful indeed.

The Christian life hurts. God hurts. That's what Lewis really has to say, and it is, I think, the deepest reason for the power of his writing. "[T]he Divine Nature wounds and perhaps destroys us merely by being what it is," Orual reflects in *Till We Have Faces*. This theme—that God hurts—is perhaps most pronounced in some of Lewis' last works—especially in *Till We Have Faces, A Grief Observed,* and *The Four Loves*. And it is perhaps not insignificant that each of these three works, in different ways, was influenced by Lewis' acquaintance with and, finally, marriage to Joy Davidman Gresham. But, in fact, this theme was present in Lewis' writing almost from the very beginning. Near the end of *The Pilgrim's Regress,* John, the pilgrim who has finally made his way back to Mother Church, sings a song about "the tether and pang of the particular." It may not be great poetry. Despite Lewis' aspirations to be known as an epic poet, it turned out that his talent was for prose. Nevertheless, this very early poem makes clear how the turn (or re-turn) to God wounds our nature.

Passing today by a cottage, I shed tears
When I remembered how once I had dwelled there
With my mortal friends who are dead. Years
Little had healed the wound that was laid bare.

Out, little spear that stabs, I, fool, believed
I had outgrown the local, unique sting,
I had transmuted away (I was deceived)
Into love universal the lov'd thing.

But Thou, Lord, surely knewest Thine own plan
When the angelic indifferences with no bar
Universally loved but Thou gav'st man
The tether and pang of the particular.

Which, like a chemic drop, infinitesimal,
Plashed into pure water, changing the whole,
Embodies and embitters and turns all
Spirit's sweet water to astringent soul.

That we, though small, may quiver with fire's same
Substantial form as Thou—not reflect merely,
As lunar angel, back to thee, cold flame.
Gods we are, Thou hast said: and we pay dearly.

Rather abstractly put, perhaps, but to the point. Lewis put flesh and bones on this abstraction in *The Magician's Nephew,* where Digory is forced to choose between obedience to Aslan's command and an action that may save the life of his dying mother. And, although the poem from *Pilgrim's Regress* surely betrays the influence of philosophical idealism on Lewis' thought, it also shows certain Christian assumptions about what it means to be human. We are created as both finite and free—made from the dust of the ground, tied to particular times and places, but also made for something more, a something more that is finally God.

Thus, the poem recognizes our finitude: We are not angels who love only universally, simply reflecting back the divine love. We also love particularly, with the tether and pang of the particular. We never outgrow "the local, unique sting," nor transmute it into universal love alone. Yet, we are also free, made for God. We must therefore learn how to love more universally—and, ultimately, how to love God, who is by no means ours alone. We live with this duality of our being, with our hearts both tied to what is local and unique and drawn toward the universal. Living within that tension, as the poem puts it, "we pay dearly."

The movie *Shadowlands* got it right, therefore, in a conversation it imagines between Lewis and Joy. During the period when her illness is in remission, Joy and Jack are on a trip and, taking shelter from the rain, suddenly find themselves talking about what lies ahead. Jack expresses his fear, fear of the pain he will feel when he loses her. To which Joy responds: "The pain then is a part of the pleasure now. That's the deal." The pleasure now is grounded in a particular commitment of the heart, and such a commitment makes us vulnerable. It sets us up to be hurt. But we can avoid that pain only by refusing right now to give our heart to anyone whom we might one day lose. We can, that is, avoid future pain only by retreating entirely into the self, by caring about nothing outside the self. But that, of course, would be hell—a retreat into the "ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration upon self" that Lewis calls "the mark of Hell."

Even in his stories for children, Lewis does not hesitate to emphasize the appropriateness and necessity of suffering. When, in *The Last Battle,* "night falls on Narnia" and Aslan pulls down the curtain on Narnian history, the children who are friends of Narnia find themselves in Aslan's world—an even more wonderful place to be. But Lucy begins to cry at the thought of what they have left behind. "What Lucy!" Peter says. "You're not *crying*? With Aslan ahead, and all of us here?" To which Tirian, last of the kings of Narnia, who has come into Aslan's world with the children, replies. "Sirs, the ladies do well to weep. See I do so myself. I have seen my mother's death. What world but Narnia have I ever known? It were no virtue, but gre[illegible] discourtesy, if we did not mourn." Likewise, expr[illegible]ssing and reflecting upon his own very deep per[illegible]onal anguish in *A Grief Observed,* Lewis writes [illegible]hat what he wants in his bereavement is to contin[illegible]e to live his marriage "well and faithfully" in and thr[illegible]ugh his loss. "We were one flesh. Now that it has be[illegible]n cut in two, we don't want to pretend that it is whole and complete."

We could try to avoid t[illegible]his pain by holding on to the beloved—if only in mem[illegible]ry—as if she were ours, our possession. That would, [illegible]f course, be futile, but, still more important, it woul[illegible] be to miss the call of God that comes to us in and through the loved one. It would be to mistake the gift for the Giver. Or we could try to avoid this pain by telling ourselves that there has been no real loss. God's will has been done, and the loved one is now better off. But true though this is from one angle, it does less than justice to that "local, unique sting" that should and does characterize our loves. Lewis puts the point very directly and insightfully, again in *A Grief Observed*:

> If a mother is mourning not for what she has lost but for what her dead child has lost, it is a comfort to believe that the child has not lost the end for which it was created. . . . A comfort to the God-aimed, eternal spirit within her. But not to her motherhood. The specifically maternal happiness must be written off. Never, in any place or time, will she have her son on her knees, or bathe him, or tell him a story, or plan for his future, or see her grandchild.

This theme—of the tension or rivalry between our natural loves and love for God—is given its most systematic treatment by Lewis in *The Four Loves*, a book that deserves, I believe, to be considered a minor classic in Christian ethics. The book is powerful because Lewis does not content himself only with noting the possible rivalry between particular loves and love for God. With each of the loves that he takes up—affection, friendship, and erotic love—he begins where I began above: by depicting for us the sublime within the everyday.

Thus, he finds in each of the natural loves an image of what divine love itself is in part. We see one facet of God's love, for example, in the undiscriminating character of affection. Given familiarity over time, almost anyone can become an object of affection. Hence, this love manifests an implicit openness to the worth of every human being. Friendship, by contrast, is clearly a discriminating love, for we are friends only with certain people whom we have chosen for particular reasons. But, at the same time, friendship is, unlike affection, the least jealous of loves. Our circle of friends will be open to anyone who shares the interest that binds us together, and in that sense friendship is implicitly universal. If affection is jealous but undiscriminating, and friendship is discriminating but not jealous, eros is both discriminating and jealous. How, then, might it image for us divine love? In selfless devotion eros plants "the interests of another in the center of our being. Spontaneously and without effort we have fulfilled the law (towards one person) by loving our neighbor as ourselves. It is an image, a foretaste, of what we must become to all if Love Himself rules in us without a rival."

Lewis' first move is to evoke the beauty and the splendor of the natural loves, the way in which they give pleasure. And surely, part of the hold of this book upon several generations of readers has been its ability to evoke delight—to help us appreciate the beauty of the natural loves and find in them shafts of the divine glory. But Lewis' discussion never stops there. He never forgets that "the Divine Nature wounds and perhaps destroys us merely by being what it is." And so, with each of the loves he notes also its insufficiency—the way in which, even and especially at its very best, it may go wrong. Affection is prone to jealousy and wants to possess the loved one. Still more, it needs to be needed. In affection we desire only the good *we* can give, which is not always the good the loved one needs. The love of friendship is always tempted to exclusivity. Rightly excluding those who do not share our special interests, we may easily take pride in our circle of friends and come to value exclusivity for its own sake. And so powerful, almost godlike, is the claim of eros upon us, that we may do great injustice in its name. Left to itself eros is likely to be fickle and unfaithful, to work harm and havoc in human life.

Therefore, each of the natural loves, beautiful and splendid as they are in themselves, must be transformed by charity, by love of God. They must be taken up into a life directed toward God and be reborn—transformed and perfected as "modes of charity." Lewis' concluding chapter on charity in *The Four Loves*, among the most powerful pieces of his generally powerful prose, is a haunting depiction of the way in which this needed transformation is likely to be painful. We say that the natural loves are transformed and perfected, but that language does not quite capture the truth of our experience. It may sometimes feel more like death—that the natural loves must be put to death so that a new life marked by charity can arise. With just such an idea in mind—namely, that the needed transformation of our natural loves may seem akin to dying—Josef Pieper once recalled that charity has been pictured by Christians as a consuming fire, and that it is therefore "much more than an innocuous piety when Christendom prays, 'Kindle in us the fire of Thy love.'"

At their very best, therefore, the natural loves fall short. In themselves they are good, but they were never meant to be simply "in themselves"—to be isolated from the God-relation, to be anything other than modes of charity. But in our sin we do isolate and idolize them, refusing to recognize that they are and must remain *creaturely* loves. Because we do so, we can only experience the transformation of our loves as painful. When God redirects them to himself, it hurts. We can, of course, say, with perfect justification, that this redirection is a restoration of them to what they are meant to be. It is a liberation of their true beauty and is in the service of their genuine flourishing. In the Augustinian language that underlies Lewis' treatment in *The Four Loves*, it is the restoring of inordinate love to right order. It is the restoration of harmony between nature and grace.

All true—and truly said. But we cannot always—perhaps not even often—experience this restoration as liberation and fulfillment. For all that is "far away in 'the land of the Trinity,'" and we remain pilgrims on the way. Along the way, nature may often seem wounded by grace. When, in the theological struggles to which the Reformation gave rise, Protestants depicted a nature so thoroughly corrupted by sin that death and rebirth were necessary, Catholics sometimes thought that this demonstrated an insufficient appreciation of the continuing goodness of creation, of its ability to point us to God. And so, Catholics responded by saying that "grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it." That is, over against an image of death and resurrection they set an incarnational image—not a destruction of the natural life and a new birth, but the natural life taken up into and perfected within a graced life.

Lewis, mere Christian that he seeks to be, sees the worth of both pictures of the Christian life—and sees it quite profoundly. As always in his view, the real

truth of things is captured in the Catholic formulation: The natural life is God's good gift; he will not destroy but perfect it. The natural loves are transformed when they become incarnate as modes of charity. But the Protestant formulation captures something very important about the truth of our experience, about what this transformation may feel like. It hurts.

Lewis' most haunting depiction of nature wounded by grace must certainly be one of his least read books, *Till We Have Faces.* Before the story is over, Orual comes to see the harsh truth about her love for Psyche and others. It had been a "gnawing greed." She comes to see that the kingdom of Glome "was a web—I the swollen spider, squat at its center, gorged with men's stolen lives." Yet, her natural loves of affection, friendship, and eros were not mere selfishness. They were, in some ways, the natural loves at their best. As Lewis once put it in a letter to Clyde Kilby, Orual is an example of "human affection in its natural condition, true, tender, suffering, but in the long run tyrannically possessive and ready to turn to hatred when the beloved ceases to be its possession."

Sin builds its throne at the heart of what is best in our nature, and, then, when God draws us toward himself, it may feel the way it felt to Orual when the Divine surgeons went to work on her. What she experienced was loss and suffering—so great, indeed, that she finally cries out: "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." Striving for independence, striving to isolate her natural loves from the only context in which they could ultimately flourish, Orual had been making war on the reality principle of the universe. How can the gods meet us face to face, she finally asks, till we have faces? She had to be broken to be transformed.

I do not believe there is any theme more central to Lewis' vision of human life in relation to God, and I think there are very few indeed who have managed as well as he to invoke simultaneously in readers both an appreciation for and delight in our created life, and a sense of the pain and anguish that come when that life is fully redirected to the One from whom it comes. "To love at all," Lewis wrote in *The Four Loves,* "is to be vulnerable.... The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell." The whole of life, therefore, every ordinary and everyday moment of it, every choice that we make, is charged with the significance of an eternal either/or. Which means, I guess, that no moment is simply ordinary.

Here, I think, we find the truth behind the remarkable staying power of Lewis' writings. He is not really returning theology to the masses. In fact, in the strict sense, he can hardly be said to be writing theology. He gives us something better—the feel, the quality, of a life truly lived before God. He gives us the everyday—in all its splendor, terror, pain, and possibility. And through what is ordinary and everyday he invites us to enter into that "mystical death which is the secret of life." FT

Flathead Lake, Montana

"Christ plays in ten thousand places"—G. M. Hopkins

Lying here on the short grass, I am
a bowl for sunlight.

Silence. A bee. The lip lip of water
over stones. The swish and slap, hollow

under the dock. Down-shore
a man sawing wood.

Christ in the sunshine laughing
through the green translucent wings

of maple seeds. A bird
resting its song on two notes.

Luci Shaw