The Light of Holiness: some comments on Morris by C. S. Lewis

by Lionel Adey

Though one of the century's most productive and versatile writers, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) remains an enigmatic figure. His religious writings are read avidly by one audience, his chivalric romances read with little less enthusiasm by another (while older children devour the Tolkien books). Among academics he is either venerated as the progenitor of a race of historically-minded medievalists—although his own work on medieval literature has been largely superseded—or else regarded with affectionate amusement as the man who dared abolish the Renaissance, or even hated for being defiantly Establishment and of the past, medieval or romantic. His academic reputation bids fair to rise again, phoenix-like, as the implications become apparent of his work on metaphor and the changing connotations of words. Thus the various segments of his vast output have created quite different impressions in the minds of wholly separate groups of readers. His critical comments upon Morris, in a great mass of correspondence awaiting publication, go some way toward resolving apparent contradictions in their author.

I

The remarks mostly occur within some 225 letters written over fifty years (1914–63) to Arthur Greeves, a boyhood friend who remained in Ulster, where Lewis grew up. The friendship is fully discussed in Lewis's partial autobiography Surprised by Joy. The Greeves letters may conveniently be divided into

NB—The footnotes for this article are grouped at the end of it.
three groups: (1) Nos. 1–92, four-page weekly letters from the house of Lewis’s tutor in Surrey (1915–16), from Oxford (1916–17 and 1918–21) with briefer and more sporadic correspondence during the period of Army service in France (1917–18); (2) Nos. 95–173, letters of varying length and frequency between 1926 and the end of 1933, charting the stages of Lewis’s early academic career, his dawning friendships with Christian dons such as J. R. R. Tolkien and his gradual adoption of orthodox Christianity; (3) Nos. 174–224, briefer and more occasional letters, becoming more frequent at critical points in the author’s life.

The friendship began when the two discovered a common interest in Norse mythology. At first they read modern redactions of the sagas and heard records of music by Wagner, who remained Lewis’s favourite composer. Soon Lewis began to sample translations from the Icelandic. He tried to like Sigurd the Volsung, but could not enjoy the metre. After seeing The Well at the World’s End in Greeves’s bookcase, he bought a copy and was ‘completely ravished’ (Letter No. 24). During his early adolescence, dreamlike states entranced him. One was sensucht, romantic desire for a joy and a love unearthly and therefore unattainable:

The land where I shall never be,
The love that I shall never see...

The other state was ‘pure Northerness,’ a recurring vision of mountains, dark firs and severe winters. (Some constitutional factor predisposed him always to detest heat and feel happiest during cold winters). As he writes in Surprised by Joy:

Like so many new steps it [The Well at the World’s End] appeared to be partly a revival – ‘Knights in Armour’ returning from a very early period of my childhood. After that I read all the Morris I could get, Jason, The Earthly Paradise, the prose romances. The growth of the new delight is marked by my sudden realisation, almost with a sense of disloyalty, that the letters William Morris were coming to have at least as potent a magic in them as Wagner.

Primarily the archaic romances interested him, for never in letters does he mention News from Nowhere, the socialist tracts or the pre-Raphaelite writings and artefacts. Though always
appreciative of good printing and binding, he dislikes the *Kelmscott Chaucer*. One letter (No. 34) eloquently expresses his early sympathy with socialism, showing a surprising insight into the factory worker’s conditions. Though Lewis might have been writing under the influence of Morris, the remarks may be regarded as the outpouring of a generous spirit rather than as indicative of any political consciousness. However, he shared Morris’ ecological conservatism and hatred of industry.

During late adolescence and young manhood the theological romances of George Macdonald took first place in his imagination. Continuing to reflect on what the Morris tales and Northern mythology had meant to him, he came to regard ‘Northernness’ as a sedimentary image of the preceding state of ‘Joy’. The romances had acted as *praeparatio evangelica* for the Christian’s awareness of the eternal world and the Otherness of God. The years 1929–31 constituted a watershed in his life. Within him a sometimes militant rationalist had co-existed with a romantic dreamer. Hatred of the God of Puritanism had been matched only by antipathy to a dominant father. In these critical years, he became reconciled to the memory of his father (who died in 1929), embraced the Christian faith, settled in the house where he was to remain for thirty years, and took a Wordsworthian or Hopkins-like delight in his natural surroundings. A reading of *Love is Enough* convinced him that Morris had momentarily become aware of the source of *sensucht*, or unappeasable longing for a joy not of this world. Afterwards, he refers but twice to Morris in letters. Nevertheless, the Morris tales patently influenced Lewis in writing the *Narnia* fantasies and perhaps also the planetary romances.

II

After recording his enjoyment of *The Well at the World’s End*, Lewis first discusses Morris in conjunction with Malory. The *Morte d’Arthur* is ‘the greatest thing I’ve ever read.’ Of the two authors ‘one is genuine, the other (Morris) delightful’. No irony can be intended, for on reading *The Roots of the Mountains*, he admits to disappointment at its being ‘not unearthly’ but its ‘beautiful old English...means so much to me’ (Letter 18). While being coached in Classics for Oxford entrance, he had much freedom both to read and to wander in the woods around the aptly-named village of Great Bookham.
Having been an unhappy alien at Malvern College, resentful of the lack of privacy, the anti-intellectualism and eternal games-playing, he loved the solitary student’s life. The letters rarely mention the war, but afford many glimpses of him discovering a lake, or a woodland cottage reminding him of German folklore, or re-reading Malory and favourite episodes in Morris. His salutation for Greeves at this time was ‘Dear Galahad’. The environments of the Burgstead folk, or of the wanderers in The Well at the World’s End cannot have been utterly at odds with his own, in a remote wooded area as yet unspoilt by the automobile and creeping suburbia. If the Burgstead had the charm of the English countryside he was exploring, the blend of medieval setting and Northern gods and festivals in The Roots must have struck a chord in his inner consciousness. So must the code of honour of the warriors and the struggle between the handsome heroes and the ugly and Dusky Men from the surrounding forest. His imagination had otherwise been nourished by Wagner, the sagas, Celtic romance, Malory and chivalric legend. His escape if any must have been not from a place, but from a singularly unlovely time.

Mackail’s Life, read at about this time, disappointed him, particularly in its account of Morris’s character. The temper, rather than the unhappy marriage (about which Mackail is rather vague) seem to have been responsible, for he thinks his own temper ‘not quite so bad’ (Letter 35).

His current estimate of Morris appears from an attempt to interest Greeves in Milton, who has ‘everything you can get [from the other poets] only better ... as voluptuous as Keats, as romantic as Morris, as grand as Wagner, as weird as Poe’ (Letter 13). In the following year (1917), he mentions beginning The Earthly Paradise and after his call to Army service records without comment his reading of the Alfred Noyes Life.

The next mention comes after his return to Oxford in a piquant rebuke of a don who had shown an ‘absolute lack of a historical sense’ by requiring students to translate Homer in the style of Pope, rather than that of Chaucer or Morris (Letter 75). In the Somerset gorges, he experienced an ‘enormous silence’ recalling the Well, (Letter 77) and in 1919 reading The Water of the Wondrous Isles brought back ‘the old thrill’ of witches and wanderers (Letter 82).

Two years later he paid two memorable calls upon Yeats, then living in Oxford. Though awed and repelled by the preternatural
atmosphere of the poet's rooms and the talk of the occult, he was relieved to find Yeats 'an enthousiastic [sic] admirer' of the Morris prose romances, (Letter 92) a fact hardly surprising, since the bulk of them had been written but twenty years earlier.\^11

He made no attempt to account for his love of Morris until the psychological, religious and domestic settling-down of 1929–31. By then, his remarks show the influence of his own change of view. He has just read Love is Enough for the first time, recommends Mackail's critical account,\^12 then says:

[Morris] is the most essentially pagan of all poets. The beauty of the actual world, the vague longings which it excites, the inevitable failure to satisfy these longings and over all the haunting sense of time and change making the world heartbreakingly beautiful just because it slips away...of what those longings really pointed to, of the reason why beauty made us homesick, of the reality behind, I thought he had no inkling. And for that reason his poetry always seemed to me dangerous and apt to lead to sensuality...[Love is Enough] shows us he is at bottom aware of the real symbolic import of all the longing and even of earthly love itself...[The speeches of the character Love] are a clear statement of eternal values...an understanding of something beyond pleasure and pain...For the first and last time, the light of holiness shines through Morris's romanticism, not destroying but perfecting it (Letter 128).

This judgement calls for some comment, since the poem has been dismissed by some critics, notably Philip Henderson, who calls it 'one of Morris's most enervated works.'\^13a Moreover, Lewis's interpretation, substantially that of May Morris, would not pass without question.\^14

In describing the poem as 'a typical Morris story of a kingdom abandoned to seek a fair lady seen in a dream,' (Letter 128) Lewis avoids the 'personal heresy'\^15 of passing beyond an author's theme to biographical reference, while unconsciously exposing a key motive of his own. Surprised by Joy includes a poignant account of his mother's long final illness, during which her presence became ever more spectral and evanescent. In an earlier letter to Greeves (Letter 26) he expresses the not uncommon inner awareness of the ideal woman he hopes to meet.

The summons to military service ended his brief friendship with a girl. In the Army, he became rather ascetic with regard to sex and after his return avoided entanglements. Academic work must have absorbed most of his energies and he took in the mother of a dead comrade to keep house. For all his early
predilection for the 'unearthly' and his definition, subscribed to by Tolkien, of 'romance' as 'containing a hint at least of another world,' he had the Johnsonian need for reassurance of a physical world 'actually there'.

A major concern of the long poem *Dymer* (1926) is the nightmare of solipsism. Underlying his appreciation of *Love is Enough*, therefore, are a need for actuality, a sense of loss, a thirst experienced since childhood for a joy fleetingly glimpsed, and an almost lifelong immersion in Norse, Celtic and classical myth. Now that long conversations with Tolkien, Dyson, Barfield and others had shown him how superficial had been his former materialism, with its dead, mechanical Nature, had convinced him that pagan myths of dying and rising deities were heralds of the Christian revelation, what could be more natural than to suppose Morris to have been on the brink of making the same discoveries? Indeed, Morris' oft-quoted consoling words to a bereaved friend offer some warrant for the supposition:

I entreat you... to think that life is not made for nothing, and that the parts of it fit one into another in some way; and that the world goes on, beautiful and strange and dreadful and worshipful.

Since Lewis offers no assessment of the poetic qualities of *Love is Enough*, whether he over-rated it need not concern us. Essentially his remarks apply to the author's central meaning and state of mind, as inferred from the speeches of the character Love. Anyone familiar with the Mackail biography must feel some astonishment at his assumption that the poet could ever have been ignorant of the Christian diagnosis of man's nature and discontents. Presumably the interpretation must have been based primarily on such lines as:

Those tales of empty striving, and lost days
Folk tell of sometimes – never lit my fire
Such ruin as this; but Pride and Vain-desire,
My counterfeits and foes, have done the deed.
Beware, Beloved! for they sow the weed
Where I the wheat: they meddle where I leave,
Take what I scorn, cast by what I receive,
Sunder my yoke, yoke that I would dissever,
Pull down the house my hands would build for ever.

The phrase 'the light of holiness' might conceivably apply to Love's speech 'If love be real' before the final scene. From Love's very entry, holding crown and palm-branch, the speech,
like the earlier lines quoted above, is soaked in New Testament imagery.

A remark on *The Wood Beyond the World* shows how Lewis's return to Christianity had flung a bridge across the chasm formerly dividing the dreamer from the exact and penetrating reasoner. He praises the tale, particularly its portrayal of love, as ‘real paganism at its best, which is the next best thing to Christianity,’ as compared with the ‘nonsense’ of Swinburne and Huxley¹⁹ (Letter 159).

Lewis's final, and clearest expression of his view of Morris comes in a letter to Owen Barfield in 1937:

‘Curiously comfortless stuff in the background’ is the criticism of a sensible man just emerging from the popular errors about Morris. Not so curiously, nor quite in the background—that particular discomfort is the main theme of all his best work, the thing he was born to say. The formula is ‘Returning to what seems an ideal world to find yourself all the more face to face with gravest reality without ever drawing a pessimistic conclusion but fully maintaining that heroic action in, or amelioration of, a temporal life is an absolute duty though the disease of temporality is incurable.’ Not quite what you expected, but just what the essential Morris is. ‘Defeat and victory are the same in the sense that victory will open your eyes only to a deeper defeat: so fight on.’ In fact he is the final statement of good Paganism: a faithful account of what things are and always must be to the natural man. Cf. what are in comparison the ravings of Hardy on the one hand and optimistic Communists on the other. But the *Earthly Paradise* after that first story is inferior work. Try Jason, House of the Wolfings, Roots of the Mts., Well at the World's End.²⁰

III

The present vogue for fantasy and widespread aversion to industrial technology may well have created a climate favourable to a revival of interest in the Morris prose romances. Apart from their intrinsic charm, why should they have so gripped the imagination of the young Lewis? Some obvious reasons include loneliness when separated from his elder brother, a need for fantasy to fill the inner vacuum left by his mother's death and a lack of communication with his father. His first delight in these tales belongs to adolescence and wartime. Like the *Morte d'Arthur*, they satisfied a congenital desire to look back from the sordid present to ages of chivalry, heroism, magic and the supernatural.

With Morris, in fact, he had much in common. Both came
from prosperous families and reacted against the Establishment Puritanism in which they had been brought up. Both encountered and were more favourably impressed by High Anglicanism while at school and by Catholicism in France. Both were unhappy at public schools, both blossomed as classical scholars under excellent private tutors. Neither found happiness in marital love, for the Morris-Rossetti imbroglio has become a byword, while Lewis patiently endured the company of a crotchety mother-surrogate and a daughter with whom he had little in common and in his fifties enjoyed a happy but tragically brief marriage of convenience. In this connection, it is interesting that he never mentions *The Defence of Guenevere*, which one would have expected him to compare with Malory's version. Could it not be that the Arthur-Guenevere-Lancelot triangle, so fraught with meaning for Morris, signified little to Lewis, compared with the wandering hero's search for the lost woman? 

A psychological parallel lies in the possession by each of a robust, rather dominating temperament, prone to anger, together with a penchant for solitude and a preference for medieval and heroic-age myth or epic poem, rather than contemporary literature. The young Lewis debunked Christian belief as vehemently as Morris, if a good deal more cogently, yet likewise affirmed by his preferences the central importance of myth to the inner life. Neither subscribed to the cult of progress; in their respective times they lamented the aridity and ugliness of the suburbs spreading over the English landscape. Each tried to create his own life-style by settling in a charming old house amid extensive grounds. Though Morris lived in a more secure age, as well as enjoying a more fortunate childhood, Lewis proved able to heal the split in his personality through religious belief and by finding a secure vocation and domestic environment. That each should have died on the threshold of old age seems attributable largely to exhaustion through prolonged overwork and ultimate disappointment. Morris took to romance-writing after the Trafalgar Square fiasco; Lewis turned with some relief to writing the Narnia fantasies after Mrs Moore's death, yet suffered severe setbacks late in life in the denial of promotion at Oxford, and above all in the death of his wife after her apparent recovery from cancer. 

After the defeat in controversy he gave up writing apologetics; once his brief but happy marriage had been cruelly terminated, he wrote no more fiction or
major critical works, but until his health broke down lectured at Cambridge and compiled volumes of past essays.

Naturally, not many of these parallels could have been discernible by Lewis himself, particularly during the first half of his life. Some perhaps help to explain his sympathy for one whose views so differed from his own. To trace in detail any parallels between the Morris romances and his own would be vain labour, for the Narnia and planetary stories were woven from a number of threads, inseparable by the time of writing. The others included the George Macdonald tales, the Biblical Fall and Redemption narratives, the Arthurian stories and also those of some contemporary authors. In some general respects the influence of Morris may be discerned, more especially in the Narnia cycle, written primarily for children. As in *The Roots of the Mountains*, the forces of light overcome those of darkness; as in *The Well at the World's End*, the scenes, localities and characters have symbolic value and the stories likewise feature beast characters, while the action usually consists of a journey by the hero, with magical or supernatural aid, his final victory being marked by revival in Nature. The *Well* differs in having a northern and heroic, rather than Christian and chivalric ethos.

The two writers differed most fundamentally in their characteristic responses to the processes of change, especially as determined by industry, increasing social equality, population growth and the drift from religion. If Morris failed to win the hearts of working-class fellow-socialists, his Marxism was a by-product of a Dickensian compassion for the ill-housed and underpaid, and for fellow-creatures condemned to mechanical drudgery. Essentially *News from Nowhere*, part dream and part blueprint, enshrines a vision of an England free from pollution, over-population, and spiritually degrading work, an England of courteous and gentle craftsmen. However idealistically, it points to a resurgence of medieval courtesy and colour in a terrestrial future. Had Morris lived to experience the recent world-wide awakening to the destructive effects of industrial pollution upon the natural habitat, as well as the increasing interest of the younger generation in handicrafts and organic gardening, he would think he had not written in vain.

Lewis shared Morris' antipathies, yet not his hopes. A kindly employer and among the most unselfish and generous of men, he lost much of his early sympathy with the working-class. Despite
giving away two-thirds of his earnings in small private charities, he was too ardent an individualist to have Morris's faith in causes and movements. Indeed, he detested totalitarian regimes as much for their denial of the human right to privacy as for their cruelties. This aversion to 'the collective' and this need for privacy were congenital. His letters of the Depression years show no awareness of the sufferings of the unemployed, while he complains of the disfiguring spread of small houses around Oxford. Not too much should be made of this, as he believed firmly in the Christian's duty to attend to need personally encountered, rather than to statistics or public causes. Nevertheless, after the Second World War, for all his supposition that a Christian society might be more left-wing and democratic than class-based, some letters to American correspondents include acid remarks about the ruling Labour government, about workers and unions. Anyone remembering the daily difficulties of those years can understand such feelings. In his Cambridge inaugural lecture, *De Descriptione Temporum*, he wittily admits his inability to adapt to a post-Christian, technology-ridden society, in which the literary scholar brought up on the classics has become a 'dinosaur.'

Paradoxically, it was the left-wing Morris who wrote in an archaic style, redolent of Malory and the Authorised Version, while the more conservative Lewis wrote some of the most lucid and forceful of contemporary prose. The very nickname 'space trilogy' often bestowed upon his planetary romances, betokens a capacity to make use of new science-fiction forms. Morris, nostalgically invoking in pseudo-medieval English a world of craftsmen and pilgrims, was yet too keenly aware of social realities to cling to any outworn class-structure or creed. Lewis, who actually knew far more about medieval life and thought, felt equally critical of the materialism and flavourless standardisation of modern life, but his only remedy lay in the individual's refusal to go with the tide. Despite his advocacy of a return to the religious orthodoxy of an earlier day, despite his emphatic rejection of 'chronological snobbery,' as he called the cult of modernity, his dialectical skill, his witty and trenchant prose won for him a far wider readership than Morris enjoyed. Indeed he and those who shared his Christianity and belief in the 'mythopoeic' function of literature did much to determine the directions that imaginative writing would take in the mid-twentieth century.
1 Much of the material in this correspondence is discussed in the biography of Lewis by Fr. Hooper and Mr R. Lancelyn Green, to be published in the U.K. by Collins and in the U.S.A. by Harcourt Brace. The Letters, held jointly by the Bodleian Library and Wheaton College, are to be published later by Fr. Hooper, who for some years has been collecting them. My quotations are restricted to those relevant to Lewis's readings of Morris.

2 My research was carried out at Wheaton College, Illinois, U.S.A., in the Lewis Collection. I have pleasure in thanking Dr C. S. Kilby, successive Archivists Mrs R. Cording and Mr P. Snezek and the College authorities for hospitality and ready assistance. Quotations are by kind permission of Rev. W. Hooper and other trustees of the Lewis Estate and I am beholden also to Miss Elizabeth Brown, University of Victoria, for bibliographical assistance and some valuable suggestions.

3 My numbering of the Greeves letters follows that of the Wheaton collection. The five-year gap from 1921 to 1926 is unlikely to have denoted a break in the friendship. Letters 93 and 94 are missing from the Wheaton collection. In 1933 Lewis read over the letters and excised some passages, mainly sexual in content. Many of the letters are undated. Letter-numbers hereafter are given within the text of the article.

4 This couplet, mentioned in Letter 25 and elsewhere, appears to come from Andrew Lang's *The Moon's Minion*, a verse translation from the prose of Baudelaire, printed in his *Poetical Works* vol. II, pp. 187-8 (London, 1923). Two refrains have been combined, viz.:

The lover thou shalt never meet,
The land where thou shalt never be.

Dreaming of her I shall not meet
And of the land I shall not see.

The speaker of the second refrain has lost his lady who, when kissed by the moon, became pale and unattainable. Lewis shows no particular interest in Baudelaire, so he may well have been struck by the poem's relevance to his own state of mind. Variations of the lines appear in several letters other than No. 25, from which this couplet was taken.


6 Letter 62, devoted largely to bindings and formats. The typeface displeased Lewis.

7 The point is discussed at length in *S.J.* pp. 73-79; 157-71.


9 Series including ‘Out of the Silent Planet’ (1938), ‘Perelandra’ (1943), ‘That Hideous Strength’ (1945).
10 Greeves was first so addressed in Letter 9, when Lewis was reading both Malory and Morris, but probable explanation is in Letter 20, which refers to Tennyson's Galahad (having 'strength of ten, because his heart was pure').


13 Against Lewis's view quoted in the text must be set his remark in Letter 155, 22.9.1931:
'The hauntingly beautiful lands which somehow never satisfy - this passion to escape from death plus the certainty that life owes all its charm to mortality... fill you with desire and yet prove absolutely clearly that in M.'s world that desire cannot be satisfied.... M. shows just how far you can go without knowing God and that [forces you] to go farther... you realise death is at the root of the whole matter, and why he chose Earthly Paradise, and how the true solution is one he never saw'


14 Jessie Kocmanová: The Poetic Maturing of William Morris (Prague, 1964 and Folcroft Lib. 1970) maintains that the poem is consistent with Marxian materialism.


16 This view was confirmed by Lewis's close friend Mr A. Owen Barfield, in a recent letter to me regarding my projected article on some controversies between him and Lewis.

17 Quoted from Mackail, op. cit., p. 337.


19 The dismissal of Swinburne and Huxley recalls similar comments by G. K. Chesterton, whose influence Lewis acknowledges in S.J.

20 Lewis to Barfield, Sept. 2nd, 1937, quoted with the recipient's kind permission. The phrases in quotation marks are from a previous letter by Barfield.

21 In Letter 59, Lewis refers to finding Catholicism (in France) preferable to Puritanism.
See especially *The Well at the World's End*, and the Lang lines discussed in note 4 above. In 1930 Lewis records dreaming of a dead woman.

See opening pages of *The Problem of Pain* (London, 1940). Lewis's former opinions, summarized there, are given in several letters to Greeves, notably Letter 37.


Lewis himself mentions especially E. R. Eddison's *Worm Ouroboros* and Lyndsay's *Voyage to Arcturus*.

Dr Firar and Mrs Mathews-Gebbert. The letters, at Wheaton and in the Bodleian Library, include many spontaneous remarks on post-war conditions which should not be represented as Lewis's considered opinion but of which the total effect is to reveal increasing conservatism. Once, for example, he criticizes the building of lavishly-equipped new schools in working-class areas, yet early in his career had incurred the displeasure of the President of Magdalen College by strongly urging the admission of students on intellectual merit. (For this detail I am indebted to Mr Colin Hardie, Fellow of Magdalen).

For a fuller discussion of the literary qualities of Morris' writing, especially the prose romances, the reader is referred to Lewis's essay 'William Morris', written 1936 and published in *Literary Essays* p. 219ff., ed. W. H. Hooper (Cambridge 1969).