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Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis

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**Into the Region of Awe:
Mysticism in C.S. Lewis**

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Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C.S. Lewis

David C. Downing

C.S. Lewis is arguably the most influential voice for Christian faith in the modern era. Whether writing as a scholar, lay theologian, or story-teller, he is famous for his commitment to “mere Christianity,” for presenting the basic tenets of faith shared “in all places at all times” by Christians of the first century to those of the twenty first.

Lewis is widely regarded as a “commonsense Christian,” one who offers theology that is understandable and morality that is practical. He stands in the mainstream of Christian tradition, avoiding sectarian disputes and writing for the ordinary reader.

Readers of Lewis who admire his middle-of-the-road metaphysics and his practical advice on daily living may be surprised by a sentence in Miracles where he describes “the burning and undimensioned depth of the Divine Life” as “unconditioned and unimaginable, transcending discursive thought” (160-161). They may be equally baffled by a passage in his memoir, Surprised by Joy, in which he describes his own conversion in overtly mystical terms: “Into the region of awe, in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with . . . the naked Other, imageless (though our imagination salutes it with a hundred images), unknown, undefined, desired” (221).

Equally unusual passages may be found in Lewis’s fiction. In That Hideous Strength, for example, he describes a young seeker’s moment of conversion not in terms of her accepting a set of beliefs or joining a church. Rather it is a moment of dramatic personal encounter:

A boundary had been crossed. She had come into a world, or into a Person, or into the presence of a Person. Something expectant, patient, inexorable, met her with no veil or protection between. . . . In this height and depth and breadth the little idea of herself which she had hitherto called *me* dropped down and vanished, unfluttering, into bottomless distance, like a bird in a space without air. (318-19)

In these passages, and many others like them, we see that the common image of Lewis as a proponent of “rational religion” does not do justice to the complexity of the man. Lewis’s spiritual imagination was every bit as powerful as his intellect. For him, Christian faith was

not merely a set of religious beliefs, nor institutional customs, nor moral traditions. It was rooted rather in a vivid, immediate sense of the Divine presence—in world history and myth, in the natural world, and in every human heart.

C.S. Lewis did not consider himself a mystic. In Letters to Malcolm, Lewis said that in younger days when he took walking tours, he loved hills, even mountain walks, but he didn’t have a head for climbing. In spiritual ascents, he also considered himself one of the “people of the foothills,” someone who didn’t dare attempt the “precipices of mysticism.” He added that he never felt called to “the higher level—the crags up which mystics vanish out of sight” (63).

Despite this disclaimer, Lewis must certainly have been one of the most mystical-minded of those who never formally embarked on the Mystical Way. We see this in the ravishing moments of Sweet Desire he experienced ever since childhood; in his vivid sense of the natural order as an image of the spiritual order; in his lifelong fascination with mystical texts; and in the mystical themes and images he so often appropriated for his own books. As his good friend Owen Barfield once remarked, Lewis, like George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton before him, radiated a sense that the spiritual world is *home*, that we are always coming back to a place we have never yet reached (Stand 316).

According to Rudolf Otto in The Idea of the Holy, one of the defining traits of the *numinous* is a habitual sense of yearning, a deep longing for something inaccessible or unknown. Throughout his lifetime, Lewis had this kind of mystical yearning in abundance, the kind of long he called Joy or Sweet Desire. In The Problem of Pain Lewis confesses that “all [my] life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of [my] consciousness” (136).

Readers of Lewis know the details of his life well, including his life-long quest for the source of Joy, so I will focus here on how his reading of mystical texts, and his own mystical intuitions, contributed to his spiritual quest. Note for example a passage in Surprised by Joy in which Lewis discusses the loss of his childhood faith while at Wynyard School in England. He explains that his schoolboy faith did not provide him with assurance or comfort, but created rather self-condemnation. He fell into an internalized legalism, such that his private prayers never seemed good enough. He felt his lips were saying the right things, but

his mind and heart were not in the words.

Lewis adds “if only someone had read me old Walter Hilton’s warning that we must never in prayer strive to extort ‘by maistry’ [mastery] what God does not give” (62). This is one of those casual references in Lewis which reveals a whole other side to him which may surprise those who think of him mainly as a Christian rationalist.

“Old Walter Hilton” is the fourteenth-century author of a manual for contemplatives called The Scale of Perfection. This book is sometimes called The Ladder of Perfection, as it presents the image of a ladder upon which one’s soul may ascend to a place of perfect unity and rest in the Spirit of God.

The passage about “maistry” Lewis wished he’d known as a boy comes early in The Scale of Perfection, a section about different kinds of prayer, including liturgical prayers, spontaneous prayers, and “prayers in the heart alone” which do not use words. Hilton’s advice for people “who are troubled by vain thoughts in their prayer” is not to feel alone. He notes it is very common to be distracted in prayer by thoughts of what “you have done or will do, other people’s actions, or matters hindering or vexing you” (105).

Hilton goes on to explain that no one can keep fully the Lord’s command to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. The best you can do is humbly acknowledge your weakness and ask for mercy. However badly one’s first resolve fades, says Hilton, you should not get “too fearful, too angry with yourself, or impatient with God for not giving you savor and spiritual sweetness in devotion” (106). Instead of feeling wretched, it is better to leave off and go do some other good or useful work, resolving to do better next time. Hilton concludes that even if you fail in prayer a hundred times, or a thousand, God in his charity will reward you for your labor (106).

Walter Hilton was the canon of a priory in the Midlands of England and an experienced spiritual director of those who had taken monastic vows. His book is full of mellow wisdom about spiritual growth, and Lewis considered it one of “great Christian books” (Dock 206) that is too often neglected by modern believers. Hilton’s recurring theme—do what you know to be right and don’t worry about your feelings—is one that appears often in Lewis’s own Christian meditations.

But, alas, Lewis as a boy did not have the benefit of Hilton’s advice. In those boyhood years at Wynyard, he was trapped in a religion of guilt, not grace. More and more he came to associate Christianity with condemnation of others, as in northern Ireland, or condemnation of oneself, for not living up to God’s standards.

When he was in his early teens, Lewis decided to put away childish things, including his faith. Despite his intellectual skepticism during those years, Lewis never

lost his sense of wonder, a certain mystical intuition that there was more to the story that his rational side could find out. If his reason had truly reigned, he would have quickly dismissed anything written by George MacDonald, the 19th century Scottish homilist, poet and fantasy writer. But when Lewis, at age seventeen, discovered MacDonald’s Phantastes, it was an emotional and spiritual watershed. Reading the story for the first time in the spring of 1916, Lewis wrote enthusiastically to a friend that he’d had a “great literary experience” that week (Stand 206), and the book became one of his lifelong favorites. Over a decade later, Lewis wrote that nothing gave him a sense of “spiritual healing, of being washed” as much as reading George MacDonald (Stand 389).

Though he didn’t recognize it at the time, the young Lewis was responding warmly to the Christian mysticism that pervades all of MacDonald’s writing. Lewis later called MacDonald a “mystic and natural symbolist . . . who was seduced into writing novels” (Allegory 232). This judgment is borne out by critic Rolland Hein in summarizing the worldview which underlies MacDonald’s fiction. Tracing the influence of Novalis (1772-1801), Hein finds in MacDonald a pervasive quest to find “an inner harmony commensurate with the harmony seen in the outer universe,” as well as a “yearning after the eternal and the infinite—a type of spiritual love which draws man toward the divine” (7).

Despite his avowed commitment to a materialistic worldview in his teens and early twenties, Lewis showed a great deal of interest in occultism and magic during those years. But this interest cooled when he met actual Magicians and Occultists while at Oxford. Then it was utterly quenched when he watched the complete psychic collapse of his friend Dr. John Askins, who had exhibited an unhealthy fascination for spiritualism, seances, and the occult. Though Askins’ death in his mid-40s was certainly rooted in physical causes, Lewis could never quite get over a sense that those who conjure up spirits may get more than they bargain for. He acquired an ongoing sense that spiritual realities were less remote, less hypothetical, than he had previously believed. Good and Evil began to seem less philosophical postulates than unseen spiritual forces. Later on, Lewis did not say his youthful interest in the occult was dangerous or deceptive; he says more emphatically that it was a stratagem of “the Enemy” (Joy 60).

During his twenties undertook formal study of Idealism, the philosophy that the world of the senses is but an appearance, and that the ultimate reality is a trans-empirical Absolute. But the more he tried to live out this worldview, the more it seemed to him that the Absolute had to be something more than a transcendent Ground of Being. He sensed, perhaps more by intuition

than intellect, that he was grappling with something—or Someone—concrete and personal. As he wrote to his friend Owen Barfield in a tone of humorous panic, "Terrible things are happening to me. The 'Spirit' or 'Real I' is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God. You'd better come on Monday at the latest or I may have entered a monastery" (Letters 223-224).

In his memoir Surprised by Joy Lewis described two conversion experiences, the first to a generalized Theism, the second to Christianity specifically, an affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth was God come down from heaven. The first of these occurred in the summer of 1929, centering on a mystically-charged experience that occurred while he was riding on a bus. Having affirmed that there is an Absolute, Lewis was increasingly attracted to Christians he had met at Oxford, especially J.R.R. Tolkien, and to Christian authors he had been reading, especially Samuel Johnson, George MacDonald, and G. K. Chesterton. Then one summer's day, riding on the top deck of an omnibus, he became aware, without words or clear mental pictures, that he was "holding something at bay, or shutting something out" (224). He felt he was being presented with a free choice, that of opening a door or bolting it shut. He said he felt no weight of compulsion or duty, no threats or rewards, only a vivid sense that "to open the door . . . meant the incalculable" (224).

Lewis chose to open the door and the consequences seemed not only incalculable, but almost ineffable. Writing in Surprised by Joy more than quarter century later, Lewis struggled to find the right metaphor to capture the experience. In the short space of one paragraph, he describes the moment as walking through a door, but also like taking off a tight corset, removing one's armor, and even the melting of a snowman. Obviously, something profound and pivotal happened that day, but trying to do it justice seemed to push Lewis to the outer reaches of his considerable expressive powers.

After the experience on the bus, Lewis took a full two years trying to figure out what it meant. He began by kneeling and praying soon afterwards, "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (Joy 228). Then he started to explore a variety of spiritual and mystical texts. Though there are only scattered references to "devotional" reading in Lewis's letters or diaries in his twenties, the two-year period 1929-31 finds him reading George MacDonald's Diary of an Old Soul and Lilith, John Bunyan's Grace Abounding, Dante's Paradiso, Jacob Boehme's The Signature of All Things, Brother Lawrence's The Practice of the Presence of God, Thomas Traherne's Centuries of Meditations, William Law's an Appeal to All Who Doubt, Thomas a Kempis' Imitation of Christ, as well

as the Gospel of John in the original Greek.

All this thinking and reading came to a head in September 1931, when Lewis was persuaded by J.R.R. Tolkien and another Christian friend that Christ's Incarnation is the historical embodiment of the Dying God myth, the universal story of One who gives himself for the sake of his people. Lewis's second conversion, his acknowledgment that Christ is God, once again came while riding, this time in the sidecar of his brother Warren's motorcycle.

Of all the texts Lewis read during his spiritual apprenticeship, one that affected him the most was the Gospel of John (in Greek), which he said made all other religious writing seem like a comedown. He also responded strongly to Jacob Boehme's The Signature of All Things (1623). Upon his first reading in 1930, Lewis said it had been "about the biggest shaking up I've got from a book since I first read Phantastes" (Stand 328). After talking about qualities of horror and dread which made Boehme less pleasant than MacDonald, Lewis concludes, "It's not like a book at all, but like a thunderclap. Heaven defend us—what things there are knocking about in the world!" (Stand 328). Part of what filled Lewis with uneasy fascination was Boehme's portrayal of God when there was nothing but God. The Book of Genesis begins with God in the act of creation. But Boehme goes back a step and describes, "the eternal Stillness," a noplac and notime with only the Infinite Being and Non-Being. Perhaps more importantly, Lewis encountered in Boehme the first fully-articulated system of nature-mysticism.

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) was a German shoemaker who began having visions while still a boy. From his personal revelations, Boehme developed a philosophy that he considered an enrichment of Christianity, but which Church authorities condemned as heretical. For Boehme, nature is truly the garment of God, as all natural things are symbols of spiritual things. Boehme was well versed in alchemy, focusing especially on quicksilver (mercury), salt, and sulfur. For him, quicksilver was a symbol of human consciousness and salt a sign of immortality. Sulfur was a material which, when ignited, vaporized into "sulfur spirits." This made it a mystical symbol of a soul inhabiting a body. For Boehme, all material things have a "signature," an essential quality by which to read the nature of spiritual things.

Jacob Boehme's works were condemned for their seemingly pantheistic teaching that human souls partake of the Universal Soul. Yet his philosophy echoed down the centuries, an important influence in thinkers as diverse as the American Transcendentalists, the British Theosophists, and German Romantics such as Novalis. Another latter-day reader of Boehme was George MacDonald, who expressed his nature mysticism in sacramental terms. "What on God's earth," asks a

character in MacDonald's novel The Portent, "is *not* an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace?" (Hein 6). MacDonald's son Greville recalled later that his father speaking of *correspondences*, "innumerable instances of physical law tallying with metaphysical, of chemical affinities with spiritual affections" (Hein 46).

Lewis's early letters show an equal enthusiasm for Boehme and for his more orthodox disciple, George McDonald. Lewis's friend and biographer, George Sayer, observed that Jack's view of nature was "essentially mystical" and that he spoke of nature as "the signature of all things" (148). Lewis dropped Boehme's alchemy and justified his views instead with St. Paul's observation that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." (Rom. 1:20a).

For Lewis nature mysticism was not so much a philosophy as a deeply realized sense of joy and gratitude in the beauty of the natural world. He liked all kinds of weather and loved to fill his letters with minute descriptions of landscapes, farmyards, forests, skies, stormclouds, and sunsets. He often made explicit the spiritual resonances he saw in the natural world. In one letter he compares the woods at Whipsnade Zoo, with their bluebells and birdsong, to "the world before the Fall" (Letters 154). In another he says that early morning luminosity of a country churchyard before Easter service "makes the Resurrection almost seem natural" (Unpub ltr, Mar 29, 1940).

Sometimes in his letters Lewis drew out more fully the spiritual lessons to be learned at the feet of nature. For example, he explained St. John's description of God to his friend Arthur Greeves in Bohemian terms: "He is pure Light. All the *heat* that in us is lust or anger in Him is cool light—eternal morning, eternal freshness, eternal springtime: never disturbed, never strained. Go out in early summer before the world is awake and see, not the thing itself, but the material symbol of it" (Stand 463).

In Mere Christianity Lewis goes beyond momentary impressions and gives an account of everything in the cosmos as a mirror of God's nature. Space, in its very immensity, is a symbol of God's greatness, a "translation of it into non-spiritual terms." The physical energy in matter reminds of the spiritual power of God. Growing plant life is a sign of the living God, as animal life is a sign of his ceaseless activity and creative power. And humans, in their ability to think and will and love, are the most complete and fully realized image of God in this earthly realm (139).

Lewis himself seemed to realize that his intense response to nature went beyond mere aesthetic enjoyment to what many would consider a variety of mystical experience. In The Problem of Pain, he

confesses, "There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else" (133). He goes on to talk about a "secret thread" which ties together all the books he loves the most. Then there is the view of a landscape "which seems to embody what you have been looking for all your life," even if a friend standing nearby "cares nothing for the ineffable suggestion by which you are transported." Adding that even one's friendships and one's hobbies are shaped by this hunger in the heart, Lewis concludes "All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been just hints of it—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear." Lewis adds that if the object of this yearning were ever made manifest, we could say, beyond all doubt, "Here at last is the thing I was made for." He calls this "the secret signature of each soul, the incommunicable and unappeasable want" (133-134).

In using terms such as *ineffable*, *transport*, and *signature of the soul*, Lewis is clearly adopting the vocabulary of mysticism to describe his own soul's deepest longings. Mysticism scholar W. T. Stace distinguishes between "introverted mysticism," based upon meditation or contemplation, and "extroverted mysticism," an ecstatic response to visible emblems of the "First Fair" (EL 10) found in nature (107). Clearly, Lewis's mysticism is mainly of the second sort.

Lewis's mystical side was nourished not only by his reading and by the natural world, but also by like-minded spirits in his own life. One thinks especially of Charles Williams, who came to Oxford in the autumn of 1939 and quickly became a regular at Inklings meetings.

Born in 1886, Charles Williams was a prolific writer, as well as an energetic lecturer and editor. He is probably best known for his seven novels of the supernatural which one critic described as "wild and mystical" (Sayer 176). But he also wrote plays, book-length Arthurian poems, literary commentaries, and two classic short meditations on theology and church history, He Came Down From Heaven (1938) and The Descent of the Dove (1939).

Lewis and Williams valued each other's company partly because the two of them had few intellectual equals. But they also shared the same vivid sense of spiritual realities just beyond the doors of perception. T. S. Eliot, who said he considered Williams very nearly a saint, commented that "he makes our everyday world much more exciting because of the supernatural which he always finds active in it" (Carpenter 97). This sounds very much like George Sayer describing Lewis: "The most precious moments to Jack in his ordinary life were those . . . when he was aware of the spiritual quality of material things, of the infusion of the

supernatural into the workaday world” (192).

The central thread of Williams’ thought, and the one that most influenced Lewis, is his idea of Co-inherence. Williams believed that Co-inherence is built into the very fabric of reality, a reflection of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one being, eternally expressing their natures in relation to the others. Co-inherence leads to Substitution, Christ’s dying for all humanity in order that they may be lifted up. Redeemed humans co-inhere in their Maker, living in the Spirit as he lives in them, and also with each other in a mystical body.

For Williams Co-inherence was not just a theological abstraction, but a practical relation. He believed that Paul’s advice to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2) was more than just a call for mutual aid or emotional support. He taught that one could actually accept someone else’s physical, emotional, or spiritual burdens, to re-enact Christ’s substitution by taking upon oneself the dread, pain, or anxiety of another. He even argued that such a Substitution could transcend time. In his novel *Descent into Hell* (1937) a young, modern-day woman sees a vision of one of her ancestors being martyred for his faith in the 16th century. She senses his terrible agony in facing death and takes a portion of his suffering upon herself. In so doing, she finds a peace that had eluded her, while her ancestor goes forward to his death proclaiming, “I have seen the salvation of my God.”

When asked in a letter about Williams’ ideas of Co-inherence and Substitution, Lewis responded that he would not argue against them. He noted that Jesus asks Saul on the road to Damascus, (“Why do you persecute me?” not “Why do you persecute my followers?”) Lewis takes this to mean that “Our Lord suffers in all the sufferings of His people.” He goes on to speculate that “when we suffer for others and offer it to God on their behalf, it may be united with His sufferings and, in Him, may help to their redemption.” (Letters 412).

Williams reinforced Lewis’s mystical side not only in life, but also in his death. When Williams died unexpectedly in 1945, Lewis was deeply saddened, but somehow also sustained. In later years, speaking of the strong sense of presence he felt after his good friend’s passing, Lewis wondered if God welcomed souls newly arrived in the City of Grace with a power to bless those left behind. As he observed in 1946, “No event has corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed.”

Lewis biographer George Sayer says that Williams found a special place in Lewis’s heart, a place which would not be filled again until he met Joy Davidman. Joy had a bluff, hearty, no-nonsense manner, which Lewis once clumsily complimented as her “masculine

virtues.” (“How would you like me to compliment you on your feminine virtues?” was her trenchant reply [GO 17]). But despite her incisive intellect, Joy also had a mystical side. All her life she remembered something that happened to her as a 14-year-old: her sense of epiphany in watching a sunset through the glistening, ice-glazed branches of a tree. Though her atheist Jewish father felt the experience could easily be explained away, she retained a sense that somehow she’d witnessed a kind of Burning Bush (Dorsett 1).

Many years later Joy told Jack about another experience she’d had as a new Christian, before she met him. She was “haunted all one morning” by an intuitive sense of the nearness of God, that He was demanding her attention. She tried to ignore the feeling, afraid this was a matter of some unrepented sin or unwanted labor. But when she finally acknowledged the Presence, as Lewis explains it, “the message was, ‘I want to give you something’ and instantly she entered into joy” (GO 39).

In October 1956 Joy was diagnosed with bone cancer. The news seems to have changed her relationship with Lewis; within a few months, it was clear their companionship had ripened into love. The two were married in an Anglican ceremony in her hospital room in March 1957. By then Joy’s cancer was in an advanced stage; she was confined to bed in a great deal of pain. When she was released from the hospital in April, it was assumed she had only weeks to live.

At that time Lewis began praying that he could be a Substitute for his wife, that he could accept some of her pain and debility. That summer and fall Joy’s cancer went into remission and the bone tissue in her thigh began to mend. At the same time Lewis experienced crippling pain in his legs, as well as loss of calcium in his bones. He told several friends that he couldn’t help but wonder if Williams’ mystical idea of Substitution were not valid indeed (Guide 84).

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis had a wonderful “Indian summer” together in her last years, as she became strong enough to walk and eventually travel with Jack to Ireland in the summer of 1958. By the autumn of 1959, the bone cancer returned and Jack wrote that the “wonderful recovery Joy made in 1957 was only a reprieve not a pardon” (Guide 95). Joy Davidman Lewis died in July 1960 at 46 years of age—the same age at which Lewis’s mother had died.

Jack’s own health was not good in the years following Joy’s death. He suffered from heart and kidney disease and began receiving blood transfusions in 1961. He had a heart attack in July 1963 and went into a coma. After receiving Last Rites, he surprised everyone by waking up from his coma and asking for a cup of tea. Though he was comfortable and cheerful, Lewis never fully recovered from this condition. He died quietly on November 22, 1963.

Considering Lewis’s adolescent interest in

conjuring apparitions, it seems ironic that he himself should experience such a vision, unbidden, in the last months of his life. Walter Hooper reports that, one afternoon during Lewis's hospitalization in July, he suddenly pulled himself up and stared intently across the room. He seemed to gaze upon something or someone "very great and beautiful" near at hand, for there was rapturous expression on his face unlike anything Hooper had seen before. Jack kept on looking, and repeated to himself several times, "Oh, I never imagined, I never imagined." The joyous expression remained on his features as he fell back onto his pillows and went to sleep. Later on, he remembered nothing of this episode, but he said that even speculating about it with Hooper gave him a "refreshment of the spirit" (Essays 27-28).

There is little doubt that such an experience was related to Lewis's serious medical condition. Nonetheless, it seems fitting that for once, fleetingly, the "unattainable ecstasy" he'd been seeking his whole life was something to be grasped, an assurance of things unseen.

Rudolf Otto wrote that Christianity is not a mystical religion, because it is not built upon private intuitions. Rather he calls it a historical faith with "mystical coloring." Perhaps Otto's description of Christian tradition may fit individual Christians as well. Though Lewis did not claim to be a mystic, his faith always displayed a distinct mystical coloring, an iridescence of rich and glittering hues.

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