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# Till We Have Faces: A Restoration of Perspective on the Condition of Man

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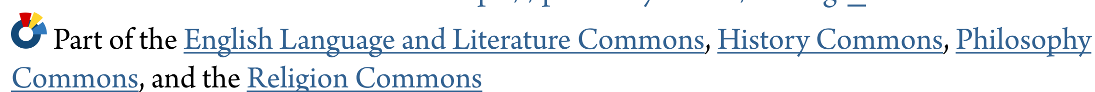
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# *Till We Have Faces:*
## A Restoration of Perspective on the Condition of Man
by Joan Alexander

*The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge; God is in the dock.*

C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

Man's relationship to a Divine Being is one of the persisting concerns of literature. As Francis Schaeffer observed, "Modern man thinks there is nobody home in the universe."[1] Or, others position, if God is there, He remains silent and uncommunicative, ignoring man's needs and efforts to find meaning and purpose in an impersonal, seemingly malevolent universe.

But perhaps God is there. Perhaps He is concerned for and doing all He can to make Himself known. Perhaps the problem lies not with God but with man. One of the central novels dealing with the problem of the human condition in relation to the Divine is *Till We Have Faces*, by C. S. Lewis. By reworking a pagan myth in the setting of a small pagan country, Lewis made his novel a test of the proposition that man may be in the wrong in his perception of the Divine.

Religious superstition abounds in the kingdom of men called Glome, but the rationalism of the Fox, a Greek slave who counsels the king and tutors the three princesses of Glome, exerts a tempering influence. Still, the central characters of the novel, Orual and her youngest sister, Psyche, are not convinced by the Fox's assertion that the divine is a matter of nature rather than of personality.

Both sisters believe the gods exist. The question that divides and causes alienation between them concerns the nature of the gods. Are they "viler than the vilest men," as Orual charges? Or, as Psyche asserts, is it that men do not understand the gods? Perhaps the gods do not do those things which men complain of, or that the gods do those things, "and the things are not what they seem.[2]

Lewis explored the proposition that modern men are wrong in their assumptions about the cause of the human condition by allowing Orual to test the human complaint against divinity in the pages of her life's story. She records the critical episodes of her life as proof of the injustice of the gods.

But certain human experiences that are frequently disregarded in post-Christian literature do appear in Orual's story, making hers a more authentic picture of the real state of real

human beings. Specifically, her autobiography reveals that she is capable of recognizing critical moments of decision and also that she suffers doubts about the validity of the assumptions by which she acts. When these two truths enter into a consideration of the man-God relationship, they make evident a sense of personal human responsibility that cannot be ignored.

Orual's story reveals that she has always possessed the freedom to choose whether to trust the gods when she does not understand their ways, or to cling, instead, to "the god within," whom her Greek tutor has taught her to revere and obey (18, 180). Her story shows that she has consciously chosen to obey "the god within" at critical moments, although time and again she has uneasily sensed that she might be wrong in choosing so.

What prompts Orual's open challenge of the gods is her encounter, near the end of her life, with the sacred story of a new Essurian goddess. This story, which appears to be the history of her own life, portrays Orual as the one responsible for the human suffering that her autobiography describes. Believing that the gods have intentionally spread this account out of malice toward her, Orual determines to defend herself and to expose the nature of the gods. Directing her account to an assumed Greek audience, she begins defiantly:

> I will write in this book what no one who has happiness would dare to write. I will accuse the gods, especially the god who lives on the Grey Mountain . . . I will tell all he has done to me from the very beginning as if I were making my complaint of him before a judge. [3]

Orual begins her record of the cruelty of the gods with her childhood. The eldest of the three princesses of Glome, she is the only one to suffer the injustice of being born without a beautiful face. One of her earliest memories is that people overlooked her in their admiration for her sister Redival. However, Orual finds satisfaction and fulfillment with her Greek tutor and her motherless infant stepsister, Istra, whom she calls Psyche.

Psyche's childish fascination with the story of the god of the holy mountain, though apparently harmless, disturbs Orual's happiness. And as Psyche grows older, greater trouble arises, for her amazing beauty arouses admiration and worship among the pagans of Glome. For a time the people even regard her as a goddess. This linking of Psyche with the gods further inflames Orual's suspicion and distrust of jealous gods.

Soon, Orual's greatest fears are realized. Psyche is chosen to be the Great Sacrifice to appease the anger of Ungit, goddess of Glome. Orual's efforts to save her sister from being the sacrifice all fail. An even worse blow for Orual is the realization that Psyche actually desires to leave her to be united, in some unknown way, with the mysterious god of the mountain.

Orual tries to convince Psyche that the gods are actually vile. Psyche steadfastly defends the divine nature, however, asserting that men do not understand and are in error. Instead of being the strength and comforter of Psyche in these final moments, Orual is shamed to find herself the weak and pitiable one; a subtle undertone of resentment at the reversal of their positions creeps into her account.

The first portion of Orual's story records the means by which the gods rob her of human happiness when they claim Psyche as their sacrifice. The middle portion of her account records the events upon which her charge against the gods chiefly rests. She accuses them first of afflicting her with a delirious hatred for Psyche, and then of betraying her into a fatal decision when she most needs their unmistakable guidance.

Recovered from the delirium that came upon

her the day of the Great Sacrifice, and with her love for Psyche once more intact, Orual secretly journeys to the Grey Mountain, intending to give a proper burial to Psyche's remains. Instead of a broken body, however, Orual finds Psyche radiant, marvelously well, and eager to share the story of how she has become the bride of the god. Amazed at Psyche's account, Orual admits her confusion: "If this is true, I've been wrong all my life. Everything has to be begun over again" (115).

To confirm Psyche's story, Orual asks to see the palace which Psyche shares with her husband-god. She is willing to believe the gods are good if she is given an acceptable sign. No sign appears to Orual, however. Although Psyche claims that they have been sitting at the great gate of the palace, the entire structure remains invisible to Orual.

Rather than admit that Psyche has a gift of sight denied her, Orual argues that Psyche's entire story is sham and pretense. She silences inner whispers of conscience, rejects Psyche's testimony, and rages against Psyche's assurances that the god will enable her to see. Orual demands some other form of proof. At that moment, a light rain begins to fall. Because Psyche is oblivious to the rain while Orual can see and feel it, Orual concludes that she should act on the basis of her own reason and should reject anything that must be received by faith. Still, it is Orual who feels defeated when the sisters part for the night.

Having refused to trust the gods when the decision must be made strictly on faith, Orual has her convictions tested the next morning as she gazes across the river toward Psyche's supposed home. Looking up, Orual sees-and knows that she sees-the solid, beautiful palace that Psyche had described. Instantly, Orual feels compelled to cross the river to beg the forgiveness-for her unbelief-of both the god and Psyche. But the realization that she would again appear inferior by doing so immediately opens the door to doubt. Perhaps what she sees is *not* real; perhaps her eyes deceive her.

The moment Orual entertains doubt, her vision of the palace vanishes in a swirl of fog. Recalling this moment, Orual sees it as another crime of the gods:

> Would they (if they answered) make it a part of their defense? say it was a sign, a hint, beckoning me to answer the riddle one way rather than the other? I'll not grant them that. What is the use of a sign which is itself only another riddle?(133)

How can a mortal be expected to believe the gods honestly intend the best for men when divine guidance is so clouded and uncertain.

Orual returns to the holy mountain, determined to use the force of Psyche's love for her to rescue her sister from delusions about a wonderful husband-god. Only because Orual threatens to take her own life does Psyche disdainfully consent to her sister's demand that she test her husband-god by disobeying his command that she not see his face.

Throughout the hours while Orual awaits the test, she is beset by the terrible conviction that she does not know everything and that she might be betraying Psyche to a horrible fate. Yet her determination to challenge the authority and the nature of the gods overrules her powerful impulse to release Psyche from the vow.

Soon enough, the silence of the night is shattered by the god of the mountain, who banishes Psyche and confronts Orual with her responsibility for the suffering that must ensue. "He rejected, denied, answered, and (worst of all) he knew, all that I had thought, done, or been," Orual acknowledges. "He made it to be as if, from the beginning, I had known that Psyche's lover was a god, and as if all my doubtings, fears, guessings, debatings . . . had been trumped up foolery (173).

Banished from Psyche and rejected by the god, Orual returns to Glome, certain she has proven that the gods exist and that they hate men (175). She rejects any other explanation for what has happened, and anticipates only some harsh judgment such as madness or a horrible death.

Instead, a series of crises greet her, and through them she proves herself fit to reign as queen over Glome. The role of queen enables her to nearly extinguish the character of Orual, to whom the god of the mountain had declared the judgment, "You, woman, shall know yourself and your work."

The independent strength that Orual demonstrates in rejecting the misty vision offered by the god makes her reign a prosperous one for Glome, but produces empty nothingness for herself. To escape that nothingness, she travels abroad, only to discover that her past has not been buried but has been preserved in a sacred story that declares her responsible for the suffering and misfortune of the past.

The story that she hears from the priest of Istra in the neighboring land of Essur is actually the Cupid-Psyche myth, but Orual is so stung by the memories it revives that she believes it to be her own story. She sees only one point to contest. In defense against the charge that jealousy has motivated her decisions, Orual sets forth her version of the story to prove the thesis that the deity had dealt falsely with her and were therefore guilty of causing the human misery:

> They gave me nothing in the world but Psyche and then took her from me. But that was not enough. Then they brought me to her at such a place and time that it hung on my word whether she should continue in bliss or be cast into misery. . . . They would give me no clear sign, though I begged for it. I had to guess. And because I guessed wrong, they punished me—what's worse, punished me through her (249).

If her story were all she claims it to be, and if it ended here, Orual's autobiography would affirm the same explanation of man's sense of alienation and abuse as much of the post-Christian fiction that wrestles with this question. But Orual's story includes some important elements missing from other accounts of man's struggle in an unjust universe.

First of all, she does record the role of the gods in spite of her accusation that they have dealt falsely. Secondly, she records all her own thoughts and passions. Looking at her completed book, Orual realizes that the past which she actually recorded was not the past which she had thought she was remembering.

In addition, confrontations with a man who makes her realize her injustice to her sister Redival and with the widow of the man whose life she had consumed with her demands as queen prepare Orual for a series of visions in which she recognizes herself as a gluttonous, devouring creature who destroys others through the very self interest that she had condemned in the gods.

Orual determines to change but finds change impossible, for the gods refuse to help. Her one consolation is the memory of her genuine love for Psyche. "There, if nowhere else, I had the right of it and the gods were in the wrong," she declares. To comfort herself, Orual turns to her book and reads again and again of how she had "cared for Psyche and taught her and tried to save her and wounded [herself] for her sake" (285).

The unveiling of her true nature takes place when, in a vision, Orual is given the opportunity to stand before the judge in the great hall of the dead to present her accusation against the gods.

Stripped of every covering so that she stands in her true character, Orual is commanded to read her book. Looking at it, she sees only "a vile scribble—each stroke mean and yet savage" (290). She intends to reject it and demand the return of the clean one which she composed. Instead, she finds herself declaring the truth that lies at the center of her soul.

Standing before the judge and the multitude, Orual asserts that she has always known the true nature of the gods. Not until they interfered with her life did she begin to hate them. Her second resentment is that they gifted Psyche with a sight which they denied to her. "You'll say I was jealous," she continues,

> Jealous of Psyche? Not while she was mine. If you'd gone the other way to work—if it was *my* [italics added] eyes you had opened. . . . But to hear a chit of a girl who had (or ought to have had) no thought in her head that I'd not put there, setting up for a seer and a prophetess and the next thing to a goddess . . . how could anyone endure it? . . .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. You're a tree in whose shadow we can't thrive. We want to be our own (291).

The character who has professed to be the innocent victim proves to be the villain instead.

To have the hero unmasked as a villain is not particularly unusual in literature. But to compose a story in defense of man's rebellion against the injustice and suffering he is compelled to endure, then to have that rebellion answered by the revelation of the selfishness that lies at the very center of man's soul and that motivates his decisions and actions is unusual in the fiction of our day. By exposing this side of human nature, Lewis restored a missing perspective on the problem of the man-God relationship. Orual realizes the vast difference that this new perspective makes in her thesis:

> I [see] well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word at the center of our souls can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? (294)

By tracing the life of a character who has suffered and who believes herself justified in accusing the gods, Lewis exposed the weaknesses of the worldview that proclaims the innocence of man and the injustice and guilt of God. The alternative, as Orual discovered, demands self-examination and confession. But if it is the correct explanation, it offers reconciliation and hope in place of alienation and despair.

**Notes**

[1] Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1969), p. 19.

[2] Schaeffer, p. 39.

[3] C. S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 71. Subsequent references to the text of this novel will be to this edition, and pagination will hereafter be indicated in parentheses.