



mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 24  
Number 1

Article 1

6-15-2003

## The Anatomy of a Friendship: The Correspondence of Ruth Pitter and C. S. Lewis, 1946-1962

Don W. King  
Montreat College, NC

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

King, Don W. (2003) "The Anatomy of a Friendship: The Correspondence of Ruth Pitter and C. S. Lewis, 1946-1962," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol24/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



---

## Mythcon 51: A VIRTUAL “HALFLING” MYTHCON

July 31 - August 1, 2021 (Saturday and Sunday)

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-51.htm>



## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

<http://www.mythsoc.org/mythcon/mythcon-52.htm>

### Abstract

Chronological study of the friendship between Pitter and Lewis, illustrated with excerpts from their letters to each other and from Pitter’s poetry. Includes her transcript of a conversation about where the Beavers got the ingredients for the lunch they fed the Pevensie children.

### Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Friends and associates—Ruth Pitter; Pitter, Ruth S.—Friends and associates

# The Anatomy of a Friendship: The Correspondence of Ruth Pitter and C. S. Lewis, 1946-1962<sup>1</sup>

Don W. King

ALTHOUGH Ruth Pitter (1897-1992) is not well known, her credentials as a poet are extensive, and in England from the mid 1930s to the mid 1970s she maintained a modest yet loyal readership. In total she produced eighteen volumes of new and collected verse.<sup>2</sup> Her *A Trophy of Arms* (1936) won the Hawthornden Prize for Poetry in 1937, and in 1954 she was awarded the William E. Heinemann Award for *The Ermine* (1953). Most notably, perhaps, she became the first woman to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1955; this unprecedented event merited a personal audience with the queen. Furthermore, from 1946 to 1972 she was often a guest on BBC radio programs, and from 1956 to 1960 she appeared regularly on the BBC's *The Brains Trust*, one of the first television "talk" programs; her thoughtful comments on the wide range of issues discussed by the panelists were a favorite among viewers. In 1974 The Royal Society of Literature elected her to its highest honor, a Companion of Literature, and in 1979 she received her last national award when she was appointed a Commander of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup>

Pitter, in spite of this modest literary fame, had to earn her living as an artisan and worked very hard in order to make ends meet. She and her life-long friend, Kathleen O'Hara, operated Deane and Forester, a small firm that specialized in decorative furniture; often she worked twelve hour days, six days a week. Yet she was a voluminous letter writer. Her correspondents are a "Who's Who" of twentieth-century British literary luminaries, including A. R. Orage, Hilaire Belloc, Marianne Moore, Walter de la Mare, Julian Huxley, Hugh MacDiarmid, John Masefield, Lady Ottoline Morrell, Herbert Palmer, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Dorothy L. Sayers, Siegfried Sassoon, Lawrence Whistler, Virginia Sackville-West, Lord David Cecil, Roy Campbell, AE (George Russell), John Gawsworth, Constance Sitwell, Arthur W. Russell, Hallam Tennyson, Stephan Tennant, Evelyn Waugh, John Wain, Hugo Dyson, Adam Fox, Kathleen Raine, and Australian Nettie Palmer. Of particular interest is her correspondence with C. S. Lewis. His letters and her journal recollections (with one exception her letters to Lewis have not survived)

reveal the two shared a deep love for poetry.<sup>4</sup> However, they corresponded about other things as well. This essay surveys the correspondence between Pitter and Lewis (as well her correspondence to others about Lewis) and explores the intriguing nature of the friendship that developed.

Pitter first became aware of Lewis through their mutual friend, Lord David Cecil. On Feb. 1, 1941, Cecil writes Pitter: “I shared [your poetry] with C. S. Lewis the teacher of literature at Magdalen here & a very remarkable man—he wrote a book on medieval romance called *The Allegory of Love*, which is a superb piece of vital, vivid criticism—& he was deeply struck & went off to buy your poems.”<sup>5</sup> On April 16, 1941, Pitter writes Cecil: “I am much interested and honoured by what you tell me of C. S. Lewis. I shall indeed like to have his book [*The Allegory of Love*].”<sup>6</sup> A year later he adds: “Did I tell you C. S. Lewis of Magdalen College is far the most brilliant English Literature man in Oxford, admired your work so earnestly when I showed him” (Summer 1942?). In spite of Cecil’s comments about how Lewis appreciated Pitter’s poetry, she only becomes excited about Lewis later after she acquires and reads *The Screwtape Letters*; she writes Cecil: “I found the book which has excited me more than anything has done for a long time—“*The Screwtape Letters*” [. . .] I do hope you have read it. He must be a phoenix; it says in the book that he is a Fellow, I forget of which college, but am nearly sure it is an Oxford one, so very likely you know him. I have actually *bought* the book” (July 13, 1942). Shortly after this, she heard his BBC radio broadcasts (later published as *Mere Christianity*). While she was brought up in a nominal Christian family, her own faith only became energized after hearing Lewis on the radio. Depressed after a hard day’s work in a wartime munitions factory, she recalls that she wondered if she could go on:

There were air raids at night. The factory was dark and dirty. And I remember thinking—well—I must find somebody or something because like this I cannot go on. I stopped in the middle of Battersea Bridge one dreadful March night when it was cold, and the wind was howling over the bridge, and it was as dark as the pit, and I stood and leaned against the parapet and thought—like this I *cannot* go on. And it didn’t come to me at once but some time afterwards I heard the broadcast talks of C. S. Lewis, and I at once grappled them to my soul, as Shakespeare says. And I used to assemble the family to hear because I thought that they were so good that even from the point of view of enjoyment people shouldn’t miss them, and I got every word of his that I could, and I could see by hard argument there was only the one way for it. I had to be intellectually satisfied as well as emotionally because at that time of life one doesn’t just fall into it in adolescent emotion, and I was satisfied at every point that it was the one way and the hard way to do things.<sup>7</sup>

She claimed the broadcast talks did much to deliver her from the despair she felt about to consume her as the war was coming to an end.

Consequently, after a mutual friend, the poet Herbert Palmer, met Lewis in 1945, Pitter, in a series of letters, asks if he would help her meet Lewis. In a letter of Nov. 15, 1945, in which she comments briefly on several of Lewis's books, including *The Pilgrim's Regress*, she writes Palmer:

Are you really going to see Lewis? One of the few people it's worth getting excited over, I think. I know he is a good poet. I daresay he never heard of me, but I wish you would tell him that his work is the joy of my life. One's homesickness for Heaven finds at least an inn there; and it's an inn on the right road. You're absolutely right about his importance—*portentous*.<sup>8</sup>

Palmer writes several months later and tells her Lewis was surprised to learn of her interest in him; Palmer quotes Lewis to Pitter:

I am astonished at what Miss Pitter says and am most deeply rejoiced to find that my work is *not* (as her rash kindness betrayed her into saying) the 'joy of her life,' but the occasion which sometimes awakes that joy into activity. The little I have seen of her work I admired greatly" ("Wednesday," mid-Nov. 1945 to mid-Feb. 1946).<sup>9</sup>

To this high compliment, Pitter responds in her letter of Feb. 15, 1946: "I am quite [exalted] at receiving the message from C. S. Lewis, for whom my enthusiasm is of a kind I thought dead in my bosom—haven't felt anything like it for 30 years." Later in the same letter she writes:

No, I haven't got "The Great Divorce" yet: I'm on the trail. I'm half way through "The Allegory of Love." Pretty hard going, too, for the likes of me: but Herbert! could one ever have expected to see the neatly mummified & discarded Gower so brought to life & given a new importance & significance? True creative, constructive criticism: what has been without exception the scarcest article for half a century: and for why? Because authoritative criticism must be founded on moral law. Isn't there a great change here? It seems to me that in our lifetime we have passed from the wreck of liberal humanism to the beginning of a new recognition of dogma: isn't it rather tremendous?

By early June of 1946, Palmer has arranged for Pitter to meet Lewis; she expresses her gratitude: "I would do any honest thing under the sun to know C. S. Lewis, and so am very grateful to you" (June 19, 1946). She adds later in the same letter:

"I should say I *did* know "That Hideous Strength." Haven't been so excited since I was about 14. I've just got "Out of the Silent Planet" and "Perelandra" [. . .] and have

read both 3 times, and watched too the utter absorption of several very various people I've lent them to. Have been wondering just how learned one would have to be to realize *all* their implications: and yet merely as stories they are so rich." (June 19, 1946)<sup>10</sup>

Palmer's letter of reply further heightened Pitter's anticipation when he writes: "C. S. Lewis sends you his Duty, and says you may see him when you like. His exact words are: 'My duty to Miss Pitter. She can know me when she pleases'" ("Sunday," June to early July 1946). On July 8, 1946, Pitter writes Palmer: "Many thanks for the kind messages from C. S. Lewis. I will write to him, and ask if I may go to see him: and in this prospect I feel more excitement, and more diffidence, than I have felt since the age of 18 or so."

Pitter finally writes Lewis sometime between July 8-13, 1946, asking to meet him. In his response to her letter, he expresses surprise that she was hesitant in asking for the meeting: "But what you should be 'trepidant' about in calling on a middle aged don I can't imagine [. . .] Wd. Wed. July 17<sup>th</sup> suit?" (July 13, 1946).<sup>11</sup> Pitter's July 17, 1946, letter to Lewis recalls the visit:

I have hunted these out [her *The Spirit Watches* (1939), *A Mad Lady's Garland* (1934), and *The Bridge* (1945)] wishing you to see something more recent than the "Trophy" [*A Trophy of Arms* (1936)], and particularly that you should see "A Mad Lady's Garland", which though only grotesque & satirical [. . .] I think is my best & most original [. . .] My visit to you has discountenanced all the gypsy's warnings of people who say "never meet your favourite authors. They are so disappointing." With heartfelt thanks.<sup>12</sup>

On Aug. 5, 1946, Pitter writes her Australian friend, Nettie Palmer, about this meeting:

My most exciting adventure of late has been making the acquaintance of C. S. Lewis. I think more of his work than anybody else's now, and shd. never have dreamed of bothering him: but Herbert Palmer [. . .] egged me on until I actually took a day off & popped down to Oxford: invaded sacred precincts of Magdalen, and found Lewis in his study (what a perfect place to live in). I took him the "Trophy," and he afterwards wrote to me about it—the most generous praise. But he doesn't like the "Garland," and I can only hope he will never discover the "Rude Potato." Well, I *can't* hope that so saintly a man would sympathize with my bawdy side—I'm not sure that I sympathize with it myself. But Nettie, what a privilege to know anyone so learned and so humane. He is a poet too—has sent me some pieces in MSS [. . .] He is a black Ulsterman. Is only 48, has been Fellow & Tutor for 21 years, and is said by learned people to be the dominant figure in Oxford—yet he received kindly the likes of me and poor Herbert [. . .] Nettie, I do glory in knowing this man, and to think that he admires my work.<sup>13</sup>

Besides an extensive correspondence about poetry that followed, Pitter's correspondence with Lewis touched on other topics as well.<sup>14</sup> For instance, on Sept. 27, 1946, Lewis writes:

You said there was some chance of your paying another visit to Oxford. I am having a few people to lunch at 1:15 on Wed. October 9<sup>th</sup> [ . . . ] It wd. give me great pleasure if you wd. join us; and I know my friend [Hugo] Dyson who speaks of your poetry with something like awe very much wants to meet you."<sup>15</sup>

On Oct. 6, 1946, Pitter writes Theodore Maynard about this invitation: "The thing that looms largest on my present horizon is the prospect of a luncheon at Magdalen College on the 9<sup>th</sup>. C. S. Lewis has very friendly & unexpectedly invited me."<sup>16</sup> Pitter, in recalling this luncheon, wrote: "I remember at this lunch Mr. Dyson's saying 'Can't we devise something that will get her here to Oxford?' and feeling my chronic Jude-the-Obscure syndrome somewhat alleviated."<sup>17</sup>

Pitter's enchantment with Lewis at this time comes through clearly in several letters. For instance, on April 24, 1947, she writes Herbert Palmer:

I've been trying to fix a date to take Sir Ronald Storrs to see Lewis—it's very difficult, as Sir R. seems to think everybody's engagements shd. give way to his, and I feel the same with regard to Lewis: am shocked, in fact, that anyone should not regard him as a Being of Another Sphere (the hero-worshipping old maid *will* come out)."<sup>18</sup>

Lewis writes her on May 25, 1947, about the difficulty of arranging the meeting with Storrs, but tells her to set a date for the luncheon sometime during his summer vacation and adds that if Storrs cannot make it: "Come without him. We have not yet explored each other's minds so fully that we need a third to keep us going!"<sup>19</sup> This luncheon was later confirmed for July 16, 1947; Pitter writes in her diary for that date: "Lunch with Lewis? Yes. 1 p.m. Mdlm [Magdalen College]."<sup>20</sup> Their meetings continued regularly over the next two years, as Lewis writes: "It is maddening that you should be in Oxford without our meeting [ . . . ] I should love to come and lunch with you, thanks, and let us by all means read our works" (Aug. 13, 1949).<sup>21</sup> A month later Lewis writes and thanks her for a wonderful luncheon, his only regret being that he could not get her cat, *Blitzekatze*, to befriend him (Sept. 22, 1949).<sup>22</sup> Pitter recalls:

Lewis came with Owen Barfield to lunch in Chelsea [ . . . ] The 'cornucopia' allusion—it was autumn, and I had taken some trouble to bring from the fruity Essex bower the richest specimens of grapes, pears, plums, & peaches: we arranged them on a large silver tray with sprays of vine-leaves, etc. The *Blitzekatze* was our cat."<sup>23</sup>

On an earlier occasion Pitter, knowing of Lewis's delight in grapes, sent him some from her own vines; regrettably, he was away when the grapes arrived and they spoiled by the time he noticed them. On Sept. 26, 1948, he writes her an elaborate apology in mock middle English.<sup>24</sup> Pitter recalls:

I had noticed that Lewis had a special feeling about grapes. So have I. Of all fruits they are the most wholesome, grateful, beautiful, various: the plant is '*de toute beaute,*' the modest flower ravishing in scent: then there is wine [ . . . ] And most of all, the sacred associations & imagery" (Sept. 26, 1948).<sup>25</sup>

Their warm friendship flourished during the next year as revealed in a letter Pitter writes to another friend, Mary Cooley, on Dec. 28, 1949:

I'm going to Oxford on Friday, to assist at a 2-day debate on whether women ought to be parsons. I think not, though it's not easy to say why. It's going to be held in C. S. Lewis's rooms at Magdalen [College], & some of us are going to lunch with him afterwards. This interests me a good deal more than the debate."<sup>26</sup>

To Cooley on May 9, 1951, Pitter also notes:

Old Bertrand Russell is doing a series of radio pep-talks, trying to sell us the hoary fallacy of being radiantly happy on an ethical basis! I wonder who let the darned old fool loose. I am going to Oxford tomorrow to see C. S. Lewis, who puts the blame where it belongs, on our fallen nature!"  
↓

But if Pitter was enchanted with Lewis, he was equally appreciative of her, often sharing with her his thoughts, feelings, and ideas. For instance, on one occasion Lewis writes Pitter and frankly reveals his frustration with modern literature:

Incidentally, what is the point of keeping in touch with the contemporary scene? Why should one read authors one doesn't like because they happen to be alive at the same time as oneself? One might as well read everyone who had the same job or the same coloured hair, or the same income, or the same chest measurements, as far as I can see [ . . . ]" (Jan. 6, 1951).<sup>27</sup>

Two months later he writes Pitter and seeks her company:

When next term cd. You come down and lunch? There's an extra reason: you have property to reclaim. Groping in the inn'ards of an old arm chair lately (a place which rivals the sea bed for lost treasure) I fished out a spectacle case which, being opened, revealed your golden name wrapped in your silver address" (March 17, 1951).<sup>28</sup>



After the subsequent get together on May 10, 1951, Lewis writes her: "It is I who have to thank you for making my little party a success. You supplied the air and fire" (May 18, 1951).<sup>29</sup> No matter how overwhelmed Lewis became, he always enjoyed receiving Pitter's letters; once on a return from Ireland he says her waiting letter is a bright spot in a hailstorm of other correspondence (Sept. 12, 1951).<sup>30</sup> He is particularly gracious in his new year's remarks for 1952: "Congratulations on being a Book of the Year for '51. Whenever I re-read your poems, I blame myself for not re-reading them oftener [ . . . ] All blessings. I will drink to your health (not "only with my eyes") at lunch time" (Dec. 29, 1951).<sup>31</sup> Lewis's playfulness with Pitter appears again when he writes and invites her to one of his lectures:

It always seems a bit of cheek to send anyone (especially the likes of you) a ticket for one's lectures, unless one could do it in the Chinese style 'In the inconceivably unlikely event of honourable poetess wishing to attend this person's illiterate and erroneous lecture'" (April 16, 1952).<sup>32</sup>

Lewis also thanks Pitter for an important essay she wrote on poetry, "The Return to Poetic Law."<sup>33</sup> While he praises her for the essay, he wryly notes that those who most need to read it, won't even take notice (Jan. 2, 1953).<sup>34</sup>

On Oct. 3, 1953, in response to a request by Pitter, Lewis writes and for the first time addresses her as "Ruth" rather than "Miss Pitter"; in addition, for the first time he signs his letter "Jack."<sup>35</sup> Pitter writes: "I had now known Lewis for seven years (I had asked "if I might now have Rachel," alluding to Jacob's seven-year service), and thought perhaps he would not mind if we now used Xtian names."<sup>36</sup> On March 13, 1954, Pitter writes Cecil about this: "I have managed to get on Xtian name terms with CSL after seven years' acquaintance; quite soon enough for decency, if one thinks as I do that undue or premature familiarity tends to make real intimacy meaningless." While there is no way to establish with certainty the exact number of times Pitter and Lewis met during this period of their friendship—often, it appears, with others also in attendance—it is safe to say such meetings ranged in the dozens from 1946 to 1953.

Toward the end of 1953 Pitter and O'Hara, long eager to leave the dust and grit of London, moved from Chelsea to Long Crendon, a village only a short drive from Oxford. For Pitter's part, it is clear she wanted to move near Oxford so that she could more easily visit and be visited by her friends, including in particular Lord David Cecil and Lewis.<sup>37</sup> Lewis offers Pitter welcome to the area in his letter

of Dec. 21, 1953, noting that Tolkien calls it the Little Kingdom. He hopes she and O'Hara will be happy there and wonders how long it will be before she begins rusticate. In this letter he also mentions Joy Davidman for the first time, relating how she and her boys are staying with he and Warnie. He ends by promising to knock on her door in Long Crendon very soon.<sup>38</sup> On Jan. 4, 1954, he follows up with another letter in which he tells Pitter his delay in visiting her is the result of gout ("dooiced gentlemanly complaint, what?"). At the same time he urges her to come to Oxford very soon so they can lunch together.<sup>39</sup>

Once in Long Crendon, however, Pitter's hopes for frequent visits were stymied by two things. First, transportation was a real problem since Long Crendon was relatively inaccessible except by car. Pitter writes her friend Mary Cooley about this on Jan. 31, 1954: "Now we *know* we are near Oxford. I am going there for the first time since the move, to lunch with C. S. Lewis to-morrow. It's only about 13 miles away, but when you have to take 2 buses it seems a great undertaking."<sup>40</sup> Since neither she nor Lewis owned a car, their visits depended on the good will of others, including George Sayer's. In his biography of Lewis, *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*, Sayer recalls:

Ruth Pitter was one of the very few modern poets whose work [Lewis] admired. His writing to her of his appreciation developed into a witty and profound correspondence and occasional meetings between them [. . .] I [drove him to see Pitter] three times between 1953 and 1955, though on one occasion Ruth was not there [. . .] It was obvious that he liked her very much. He felt at ease in her presence—and he did not feel relaxed with many people—and, in fact, seemed to be on intimate terms with her. The conversation was a mixture of the literary and the domestic [. . .] Each suggested amusing and improbable books for the other to write. Herbs were pinched and tasted in the cottage garden. Homemade drinks were sampled. She asked for the recipe of my moselld-like elderflower wine. Jack did not contribute much to this domestic conversation, but it was clear that he enjoyed it [. . .] It was clear that he enjoyed both the idea and the reality of domesticity [. . .] After one visit in 1955, he remarked that, if he were not a confirmed bachelor, Ruth Pitter would be the woman he would like to marry [. . .] [When I said it was not too late, he said] "Oh yes it is [. . .] I've burnt my boats."<sup>41</sup>

On another occasion, Pitter recalls how she one-upped Lewis in an argument during a luncheon at her home in Long Crendon:

On June 12, 1954, David and Rachel Cecil came to lunch, bringing the two Lewises, "Warnie" and C. S. I asked C. S. if I might catechize him a bit about the delectable "Lion, Witch, and Wardrobe," in which I thought I had detected a weakness. Permission courteously given:

R. P.: The Witch makes it always winter and never summer?

C. S.: (In his fine reverberating voice) She does.

R. P.: Does she allow any foreign trade?

C. S.: She does not.

R. P.: Am I allowed to postulate a *deus ex machina*, perhaps on the lines of Santa Claus with the tea-tray? (This is where C. S. lost the contest. If he had allowed the *deus-ex-m.*, for which Santa gives good precedent, he would have saved himself).

C. S.: You are not.

R. P.: Then how could the Beavers have put on that splendid lunch?

C. S.: They caught the fish through holes in the ice.

R. P.: Quite so, but the drippings to fry them? The potatoes—a plant that perishes at a touch of frost—the oranges and sugar and suet and flour for the lovely surprise Marmalade Roll—the malt and hops for Mr. Beaver’s beer—the milk for the children?

C. S.: (With great presence of mind) I must refer you to a further study of the text.

Warnie: Nonsense, Jack; you’re stumped and you know it.<sup>42</sup>

However, although Pitter entertained hopes of more frequent visits with Lewis, the complications of transportation were little compared to the second and more chilling mitigating factor: Lewis’s blossoming relationship with Joy Davidman. On Jan. 26, 1954, Lewis arranged for the three of them to dine together at the Eastgate Hotel in Oxford; in her most terse journal entry, Pitter writes: “It was at this luncheon that I met Mrs. Gresham for the first and last time.”<sup>43</sup> In spite of Lewis’s best intentions, there is no evidence the two women he most cared about ever warmed to the other. The icy relationship between Davidman and Pitter is not surprising. Indeed, in the Bodleian Library there remains sealed correspondence between Pitter and Walter Hooper, Lewis’s literary executor, which may reveal further evidence of Pitter’s disaffection for Davidman; however, this correspondence may not be opened until the death of Joy’s sons, David and Douglas Gresham. While the exact nature of this correspondence will fall to future scholars to publish, Pitter, motivated by an understandable but uncharitable bitterness, convinced herself that Joy used her illness (bone cancer) to manipulate Lewis into marrying her and caring for her two sons.<sup>44</sup> While Pitter’s claims against Joy are ill-conceived sour grapes—after all she had some thirty years to let this kind of thinking fester—this is also evidence regarding what she saw as her own greatest character flaw: unforgiveness. For instance, on Jan. 12, 1964, Pitter writes her sister-in-law, Mary: “Often & often I can’t speak as I should to some people because if I did I should go for them, say far too much, and do horrid destruction.”<sup>45</sup>

However, in spite of the infrequency of their visits once Lewis's relationship with Joy began in earnest, Lewis and Pitter continued to write. For example, prior to his move to accept a professorship at Cambridge, Pitter recalls: "On the eve of his translation to Cambridge I asked with spiteful relish what he was going to do to certain persons whose ideas I disliked (little as I knew them), and he replied that it was rather a question of what they would do to him" (Mar. 5, 1955).<sup>46</sup> On March 19, 1955, Lewis offers her lavish praise for her homemade marmalade, referring to it as gold and amber, a perfect gift from a poetess illustrating that she is able to capture sunlight in snares other than words.<sup>47</sup> Good food was a common liking, but at least on one occasion Lewis scrupled to eat a pork pie she had prepared especially for him. Pitter notes: "I remember taking great pains to make a Raised Pork Pie, whose goodness surprised even myself, when Lewis was coming to lunch, only to find that he was reluctant to eat meat on a Friday (I had forgotten) and would hardly do more than taste it" (Mar. 19, 1955).<sup>48</sup> On another occasion when Lewis believes he and Pitter might be attending a Garden Party given by the Queen, he tries to arrange their traveling and dining together; he felt her experience as a traveler would give him great moral support (July 9, 1956).<sup>49</sup> The whole affair was not very enjoyable for Lewis (he complained of tasteless metal flamingoes), only partly redeemed by his having met the one person he knew. In his July 14, 1956, letter he says he was one of 8000 guests, never saw the Queen, and the crowd was like that at the Liverpool St. station on an August bank holiday. However, he is excited to hear Pitter has given an address on his Ransom trilogy and invites Pitter and O'Hara for lunch in Oxford.<sup>50</sup>

From this point forward, Lewis's correspondence to Pitter drops off markedly, in part almost certainly because of Joy's illness. On Jan. 28, 1957, Lewis writes Pitter about his wife's bone cancer and reports that it had been incorrectly diagnosed as arthritis in the hip. While things look grim, Lewis writes, the cancer has gone into remission for the time being and they live under the sword of Damocles. While Joy is confined to lying flat, she can still read and Lewis invites Pitter to write her a letter. He ends by thanking Pitter for a painted tray she has sent and solicits her prayers.<sup>51</sup> In her journal recollection of this letter, Pitter notes:

I had of course seen the announcement of his marriage and (so tragically soon after) the news of his wife's illness. Not being near enough to help practically (supposing this would have been acceptable) I thought it best not to bother him, except for an occasional brief message requiring no reply. I had been taught in youth that a woman's friendship with a married man must be by grace and favour of his wife, and as Joy recovered and

lived on so amazingly, I did from time to time write to her: but there was never any reply, so I decided to be thankful for this correspondence and friendship with so rare a creature as Lewis, and to leave it at that.<sup>52</sup>

Later, on April 15, 1957, Lewis writes and thanks Pitter for her offer of financial support. The situation at this point regarding Joy is even darker, as Lewis says she is doomed and totally bedridden. He reports that he is employing two nurses and he is spending much of his day like a hospital orderly. At the same time, Joy is without pain and cheerful.<sup>53</sup>

Of course Joy does eventually recover for a time, and she and Lewis enjoy three years of happiness together before the cancer returns and takes her life on July 13, 1960. Accordingly, five years pass before Lewis writes again, inviting Pitter for a visit, but sadly unable to have her for a meal since “our domestic arrangements hardly make that possible at present (Aug. 8, 1962).<sup>54</sup> Lewis’s last letter to Pitter is filled with discussion of poetry and Coventry Patmore, the effect of drug-induced dreams, and domestic musings ending with his acknowledgment of her recent visit: “Remember me most kindly to Miss O’Hara. Your visit was a great pleasure” (Aug. 20, 1962).<sup>55</sup>

It is tempting to speculate about whether or not Pitter developed romantic feelings for Lewis. Well before she met Lewis, she wrote Herbert Palmer: “Have kept out of love as much as possible, as my psychology is such a muck-heap that it takes all my skill to carry on, without jarring impacts, which would ruin all my careful improvements. I lurk, intensely observant, in the undergrowth” (Nov. 14, 1936). Furthermore, she says her poem “If You Came” (from *The Spirit Watches* 1939) is about the “biological fact” that women long to be wooed, to have their hearts discovered by men; if this does not happen, a woman will not give herself:

If you came to my secret glade,  
Weary with heat,  
I would set you down in the shade  
I would wash your feet.

If you came in the winter sad,  
Wanting for bread,  
I would give you the last that I had,  
I would give you my bed.

But the place is hidden apart  
Like a nest by a brook,

And I will not show you my heart  
By a word, by a look.

The place is hidden apart  
Like the nest of a bird:  
And I will not show you my heart  
By a look, by a word.<sup>56</sup>

While this poem indicates Pitter's longing to be "found out" by a man, it is obviously impossible to link it to her possible feelings for Lewis since it was written well before their friendship began. At the same time, according to Mark Pitter, her nephew and literary executor, his aunt almost certainly had romantic feelings for Lewis.

Pitter herself is never quite so explicit.<sup>57</sup> However, several letters to other correspondents offer tantalizing hints. In a letter to her sister-in-law, Mary Pitter, on July 31, 1962, Pitter writes:

I had such a surprise a week or two back. I was putting soot and salt on the onion-bed, and was even dirtier than usual, when I heard voices, and it was Owen Barfield and C.S. Lewis [. . .] I was very glad, as it must be 3 or 4 years since I had seen either. C.S.L. is a good deal changed, and no wonder, but seemed very cheerful, and determined to face life still. He asked us to go over and see him, [. . .] and this I hope we shall do.

In another letter to Mary on Nov. 10, 1963, she adds: "Poor Jack! I am afraid he hasn't much left: it seems he is a semi-invalid. D. Cecil says he could do with visitors, as he will now be fixed in Oxford, and I mean to go, if I can make sure of not being a nuisance." On Jan. 12, 1964, Pitter again writes Mary:

I have had [Jack's] last book—"Letters to Malcolm" to review for the 'Sunday Telegraph' [. . .] and have found it very solid—can't write about it without reading every word & thinking a lot. It has kept him in my mind so, I feel his death like a weight at the heart, but it will pass.

On Jan. 13, 1969, in a very revealing letter, Pitter answered several questions about Lewis posed to her by Walter Hooper :

An interesting subject, Jack's views on women. His perceptions were very numinous here as elsewhere. I have thought that losing his mother (cruel loss at age 8, and horribly emphasized by circumstances) must have seemed a black betrayal. If he was mistrustful of women, it was not hatred, but a burnt child's dread of fire. There was something else later on, I believe, in early manhood—some further ghastly let-down. (There is such a thing as being ill-fated in one respect or another). It is a pity that he made his first (and

perhaps biggest) impact with *Screwtape*, in which some women are only too well portrayed in their horrors, rather like Milton's Satan—is it this perhaps that has made people think he hated us? But even here, the insight is prodigious: and in the strength of the 3 romances, and the children's books, I would say he was a great and very perspicacious lover of women, from poor little things right up to the "Lady" in *Perelandra*. I think he touched innumerable women to the heart here—I know he did me—one could sort of "home on" his love & understanding like an aircraft on a beam. As for *Screwtape*, I have wondered whether his experience with the "mother" he adopted did not find a steam-vent here. The pressure once let off, and the success of the book being so great, the steam could be put to work less violently. Surely the shoals of letters he got from women (as he told me) must show how great was his appeal to them: nobody's going to tell me these were hate-letters.<sup>58</sup>

On July 25, 1974, Pitter writes Hooper, this time thanking him for a copy of his biography of Lewis:

Of course I find it enormously interesting. For one thing it portrays a man far more complex and untypical than I had realized—for after all I did not see very much of him, and of course nothing of his academic life and private concerns. His bluff and friendly exterior seemed to betoken a simplicity which was not there: or rather a genuine simplicity—the lucid directness of his writing speaks for it—which existed in its own right over depths in which there abode such conceptions as the awful Earth-beetles (which by the way I think he said he found in Keats!) and the noble Hnakra-hunt, awful too. It will be a long time, as I think I said before, ere humanity gets a full summing-up of the man [. . .] [Your] book will be a treasure to me, to put beside my collection of Jack's work; nearly complete, I think. How fortunate I have been to know such a sequence of great men, Lewis and [George] Orwell especially.<sup>59</sup>

In conclusion, Ruth Pitter was a great friend to Lewis, and he genuinely admired her poetry. At a minimum she was thankful to Lewis for the broadcast talks that had helped her avoid the "slough of despond" she felt herself slipping into as WWII came to a close.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, she thoroughly enjoyed their discussions about poetry, and she was flattered that he held her poetry in such high regard. To this we must add that she honored the strength of his mind and the fertile wealth of his imagination. Even after his death she paid him compliment by alluding to *Perelandra* in her *Still by Choice* (1966). "Angels" speculates about the real character of an angel ("terrible, tender, or severe?"), and she covertly refers to Lewis' *eldila*: "Or likelier, now we dream of space, Lewis's dread sublime / Pillars of light, no limbs, no face, / Sickening our space and time?" (24).<sup>61</sup> It should also be noted that her warm friendship with Lewis mitigates against the charge that he was a misogynist; someone who despised women would hardly have spent the amount

of time and energy he did in writing to and visiting with Pitter. Just as was the case with Joy, Lewis appreciated the lithe, quick, bright mind he found in Pitter and enjoyed their discussions, arguments, and musings.<sup>62</sup>

That said, we should not try to make more of their personal relationship than the evidence merits. We can say with certainty that they did meet frequently, but generally in the company of others, and always in the context of discussing religion, books, writers, literature, and, in particular, poetry. If we accept George Sayer's word, at least at one point Lewis may have entertained thoughts of marrying Pitter, *if* he was the marrying kind. If we accept Mark Pitter's judgment, his aunt probably *was* in love with Lewis, at least at some point in their relationship. In addition, Pitter's letters to her friends suggest a warmth for Lewis that was more than disinterested affection yet less than unrealistic romance. Perhaps wistful longing is the best way to describe Ruth Pitter's feelings for C. S. Lewis. Beyond such speculations, however, we are on shifting sand. All we can say with certainty is that they were linked by their shared love of poetry and faith in Christ—links untouched by time or death.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Research and funding for this paper were provided by grants from Montreat College and the Appalachian College Association. The author is deeply grateful to both the college and the association. All excerpts from the letters of Ruth Pitter are used by permission of Mark Pitter. Versions of this paper were read at the Western Regional meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, CA, March 14-17, 2002, and at the C. S. Lewis Foundation Summer Institute, Oxbridge 2002, Oxford. Material from this paper will also appear in *Hunting the Unicorn: A Critical Biography of Ruth Pitter* and Pitter's letters will appear in *Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter*.

<sup>2</sup> These volumes are, in publication order:

- Pitter, Ruth. *First Poems*. London: Cecil Palmer, 1920.
- . *First and Second Poems*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1927.
- . *Persephone in Hades*. Privately printed, 1931.
- . *A Mad Lady's Garland*. London: Cresset Press, 1934.
- . *A Trophy of Arms: Poems 1926-1935*. London: Cresset Press, 1936. (winner of the Hawthornden Prize in 1937)
- . *The Spirit Watches*. London: Cresset Press, 1939.
- . *The Rude Potato*. London: Cresset Press, 1941.
- . *Poem*. Southampton: Shirley Press, 1943.
- . *The Bridge: Poems 1939-1944*. London: Cresset Press, 1945.



- . *Pitter on Cats*. London: Cresset Press, 1946.
- . *Urania* (Selections from *A Trophy of Arms*, *The Spirit Watches*, and *The Bridge*. London: Cresset Press, 1950.
- . *The Ermine: Poems 1942-1952*. London: Cresset Press, 1953. (winner of the Wm. Heinemann Award: Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, 1955)
- . *Still by Choice*. London: Cresset Press, 1966.
- . *Poems 1926-1966*. London: Barrie & Rockcliff/Cresset Press, 1968.
- . *End of the Drought*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1975.
- . *A Heaven to Find*. London: Enitharmon, 1987.
- . *Collected Poems: 1990*. Petersfield: Enitharmon, 1990.
- . *Collected Poems*. London: Enitharmon, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> That she continues to be enjoyed by readers is evidenced by *The Faber Book of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Women's Poetry*, Ed. Fleur Adcock (London: Faber, 1987), where her "The Sparrow's Skull" and "Morning Glory" appear (77-78); *More Poetry Please! 100 Popular Poems from the BBC Radio 4 Programme* (London: Everyman, 1988), where her "The Rude Potato" appears (101-02); *The Oxford Book of Garden Verse*, Ed. John Dixon Hunt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), where her "The Diehards" and "Other People's Glasshouses" appear (236-41); *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Eds. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton, 1996 [1985]), where her "The Military Harpist," "The Irish Patriarch," "Old Nelly's Birthday," and "Yorkshire Wife's Saga" appear (1573-77); and *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, Ed. Paul Keegan (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 2000), where her "But for Lust" appears (962).

<sup>4</sup> Pitter received copious notes from Lewis about her poetry. In turn, Lewis often asked Pitter's advice about his own verse, admiring her native ability and appreciating her critical insights. In effect, Pitter became Lewis' mentor as a poet.

<sup>5</sup> Cecil family letters to Ruth Pitter used by permission of Laura Cecil

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Pitter letters to Cecil family used by permission of the Bodleian Library.

<sup>7</sup> BBC Interview with Stephen Black, June 24, 1955. Used by permission. In a letter of Jan. 1, 1948, Pitter writes Nettie Palmer:

Did I tell you I'd taken to Christianity? Yes, I went & got confirmed a year ago or more. I was driven to it by the pull of C. S. Lewis and the push of misery. Straight prayer book Anglican, nothing fancy [. . .] I realize what a tremendous thing it is to take on, but I can't imagine turning back. It cancels a great many of one's miseries at once, of course: but it brings great liabilities, too. (Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 1174. All excerpts used by permission.)

<sup>8</sup> Pitter's letter to Herbert Palmer are available at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Used by permission.

<sup>9</sup> The excerpts from Herbert Palmer's letters to Pitter are found in her uncatalogued papers at the Bodleian Library. Used by permission.

<sup>10</sup> In the early 1970s Pitter gave the Bodleian Library sixty-nine letters Lewis wrote her during the years of their friendship. Lewis, who was notorious for throwing away

letters, kept none of hers except the one noted below. In order to create a context for Lewis's letters, Pitter also gave the Bodleian a journal in which she tried to recall the substance of their correspondence for each letter. I reproduce here excerpts from this journal; used by permission of the Bodleian. In her journal recollection of Jan. 4, 1947, she writes: "I had so fallen in love with 'Perelandra' that I could not bear to think it would be different on Venus if one could get there. And I so loved the *Hrossa* and the *Sorns* in 'Out of the Silent Planet' that there was a pain in my chest for them, as when one is in love at 20. It was this world, our world, that seemed unreal to me then, not theirs" (Pitter journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 34).

<sup>11</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 17. Letters to Ruth Pitter by C. S. Lewis copyright © C. S. Lewis Pte. Led. Extracts reprinted by permission.

<sup>12</sup> This is the only letter Pitter wrote Lewis known to have survived. I discovered it on April 11, 1997, stuck between the pages of Lewis's personal copy of Pitter's *The Spirit Watches* in the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Used by permission.

<sup>13</sup> Also, on Aug. 6, 1946, Pitter writes Stephan Tennant about this meeting:

I had an adventure recently. I have been struck all of a heap by the writings of C. S. Lewis, but should never have thought of trying to make his acquaintance: but it came about through a friend, quite without my own volition, and I went down to Oxford and sought him out in his study at Magdalen. It was a great success from my point of view. He only knew about my work vaguely, but I sent him the "Trophy," and he was quite enthusiastic. He has sent me some MS poems of his own—he calls himself a "failed poet"—but such metrical skill without the slightest distortion of profound thought I never did see—didn't think English (or any tongue) capable of it. He doubts, however, whether it's true poetry. It would be glorious to find out where he's sticking, either in the work or in his estimate of it, and I mean to try—sadly hampered as I am by want of the analytical faculty. (Used by permission of Washington State University.)

<sup>14</sup> For more on their correspondence about poetry, see my, "The Poetry of Prose: C. S. Lewis, Ruth Pitter, and *Perelandra*," *Christianity and Literature* 49 (Spring 2000): 331-56 and *C. S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* (Kent: Kent State UP, 2001): 14-16 and 224-37.

<sup>15</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 29.

<sup>16</sup> Used by permission of Georgetown University. Warren Lewis confirms Pitter's attendance in his *Brother and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis*: "Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> October: "Yesterday J gave a mixed lunch party in the New Room, at which I found myself sitting next Ruth Pitter, the poetess; inter alia she told me of how in her youth she known AE in Galaway" (195-96).

<sup>17</sup> Pitter journal, Sept. 27, 1946, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in her journal, Pitter recalls: "I don't remember if he & Lewis proved at all kindred souls: probably not. Neither would have noticed the drooping ghost of my girlish dream, of course (God help me—I was in my 50<sup>th</sup> year, not my 15<sup>th</sup>!). Pitter journal, Mar. 21, April, 16, May 5 & 8, 1947, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 46.

<sup>19</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Pitter Pocket diaries and box of 'Treasures' (uncatalogued) Box 31, Diary 1947; Bodleian Library. Other diary entries indicate she met with Owen Barfield and Lewis, sometimes together. Specifically, her diary shows meetings on July 17, 1946, July 27, 1949, August 22, 1949, September 20, 1949 (her entry for this day reads: "Finally, they did actually [come]. CSL & OB? Yes, hooray"), Oct. 2, 1949, Nov. 2, 1949, and Dec. 26, 1949.

<sup>21</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 71.

<sup>22</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 80.

<sup>23</sup> Pitter journal, Sept. 22, 1949, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 81. Of another meeting, this time between Barfield, Pitter, and Lewis, Barfield writes Pitter on Sept. 25, 1949: "I hope you and Jack kept it up well into the small hours, capping carryout with carryout, besting ballade with ballade, vying in virelays and triumphing with triolets. Isn't he terrific company?" The excerpts from Owen Barfield's letters to Pitter are found in her uncatalogued papers at the Bodleian Library.

<sup>24</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 59.

<sup>25</sup> Pitter journal, Sept. 26, 1948, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 60.

<sup>26</sup> Used by permission of University of Michigan. On Dec. 10, 1949, Lewis writes inviting Pitter to the luncheon. The only other people to be there were Marjorie Milne and Owen Barfield. Lewis assures Pitter the luncheon was not to be a continuation of the conference but "an antidote or antimasque" (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, fol. 85).

<sup>27</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 93.

<sup>28</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3, Fol. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 104.

<sup>32</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 108. Pitter recalls the lecture:

That lecture! It was in London, I forget where: a biggish hall with a gallery. This lecture was a keypoint in my mental life, but I must warn the reader that my mind goes on elaborating anything that strikes it forcibly, and allowance must be made for the accretions. I had only a smattering of Latin, and a few Greek roots, useful at least in scientific nomenclature. On arriving & taking my seat about halfway down the body of the hall, I was struck at once by the arresting character of the *assistance*. Right in front there were what seemed to be several retired lady dons, checking deaf-aids and simply beaming with anticipation. The rest of the two front rows seemed to be filled by individuals mostly well-known enough to be recognized, nearly all with people they shouldn't have been with, and glorying in it. Behind these were several rows of earnest Christians, also beaming, though looking (as I am afraid we usually do) rather mere and moth-eaten. Back under the gallery were more well-known persons, variously accompanied, and this lot not courting the limelight. Over the edge of the gallery appeared from time to time the heads of sundry well-known authors, having a swift peep and popping back. "Now what," thought I in my ignorance, "what can possibly have drawn this heterogeneous assembly together?" I was soon to know. In strides Lewis, full of bonhomie, competence, and matter—on to the platform—vast applause—

bows, & begins, "This is a very warm *poem!*" Of course! The Christians were out to hear dear Lewis, the dons for this *and* the learned exposition, and the scandalous—well, for the *warmth*. I learned a lot that afternoon. Wonderingly, I realized what times could be had in the academic shades. Since that day, though I still have no scholarship, I have done what I could with the Third Programme and the Penguins, have at least looked through a few more cracks, and acquired some sense of what I have come to think of as the pure polarized nobility-obscenity of the ancient authors. But what a pleasure to hear Lewis lecturing or broadcasting! Splendid voice, never a check, hardly a note, not a dull phrase. *O si sic omnes!* (at least I know that much Latin). (April 16, 1952, Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, fols. 109-110.)

<sup>33</sup> Pitter had given this as an address to the Royal Institution of Great Britain on Feb. 22, 1952. She recalls this in her journal entry of Jan. 2, 1953:

This venerable body occasionally goes very broadminded and asks someone who is not a scientist to give a lecture. The procedure is (or was then) very intimidating. There is a dinner and a symposium beforehand, at which the lecturer talks far too much and gets worn out. Then he is assigned an escort (really a guard, as on one occasion the lecturer panicked and ran away). Parked in a small room, with the guard outside, he nervously shuffles over his script until just on time, when he and his guard are lined up in front of a tall pair of folding doors: at a similar pair is assembled a procession consisting of the President & the governing body, all in faultless tails & white ties. The guard peeps through a crack at the lecture-room clock. At a few seconds before the hour, the doors are set open, the governing body file to their places before the demonstration-bench, the lecturer mounts the rostrum: the huge solemn clock gives, not a musical note, but one scientific ping, and the lecturer must at once plunge *in medias res* without introduction or other frivolity. On the hour, at the next scientific ping, he must cease. I was not really frightened—as a poet one meets many horrors—but the knowledge of what to expect had made me work on my matter like a beaver. It is a great cure for nerves to have done one's homework (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fols. 112-113).

<sup>34</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 111.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis tells Pitter he has been ready for some time to use first names, but he has been waiting for the initiative to come from Pitter. He also adds that her pending move to Long Crendon is delightful, noting that Barfield used to live there so her presence will give it a good second association. He calls it a lovely village and relays Warnie's welcome as well (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, fol. 118).

<sup>36</sup> Pitter Journal, Oct. 3, 1953, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, fol. 119.

<sup>37</sup> Pitter Journal: "In coming to the neighborhood of Oxford, of course I had hoped to see a little more of Lewis, of David Cecil, and others, and to attend more open lectures, plays, etc. But we could not find anything near enough to make this at all easy, so our hopes [had] only slightly materialized!" (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 113).

<sup>38</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 120.

<sup>39</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 48.

<sup>40</sup> David Cecil may have encouraged Pitter's visits with reports like the following from his April 26, 1954 letter to Pitter:

I hear rather bad accounts of poor Jack Lewis. They say he lives in such dreadful discomfort, like a bachelor in a story, in a house that is seldom clean and of which many of the windows are broken. In consequence, he never feels well. I do hope this is not true, because I see him as the sort of man who doesn't look after himself very well and is too good to bully other people into doing the work for him.

<sup>41</sup> 211-12. At least five letters from Pitter to George Sayer have survived, but because they are privately held, I have not been able to gain access to their contents.

<sup>42</sup> In a memo dated Apr. 1973, Pitter recalls this luncheon; Pitter's uncatalogued papers in the Bodleian Library.

<sup>43</sup> Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 123.

<sup>44</sup> Pitter writes about this in "The Alabaster Box, or This Awful Power," a document that I date to the mid-1970s. Pitter's restricted papers in the Bodleian Library.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, as Pitter herself notes in several letters, it was her critical spirit and temptation to say too much and thus hurt people that led Pitter to live a life of relative solitude; but, of course, a life of solitude is also fertile ground for a poet. In a letter to Arthur Russell on Aug. 1, 1956, she critiques herself:

Do you know, I agree so passionately about common chit-chat that (as an Xtian) I often feel very guilty about the violence of my feelings! This goes also for the unreasonableness. I asked to be forgiven. I mean my towering prejudices, which are as vivid as nightmares and often (I am sure) quite as unreal, so that when some people's names are mentioned I either take refuge in noncommittal mumblings or foolish abuse, often knowing next to nothing about them—some chance hearing or reading has damned them forever for me, and spiritually it is a very bad thing, as well I know. This is one of the reasons why I tend to keep myself to myself. This quite subjective inability is of course a recognized feature of the poetic character (famous even in remote antiquity) but it represents arrested development and it *ain't right*.

In a BBC interview of Nov. 7, 1977, with Hallam Tennyson she puts it this way:

[Even with my great friend Kathleen O'Hara I always felt I was essentially a lonely person]. She knew me very well, but it was only to a certain extent. We worked very well in double harness [ . . . ] But being alone is what I always liked. In fact, my most delightful moments have always been in solitude at a cottage in the forest. In my youth, why I know not, it was to weep with pure felicity in that place, and I don't think I should have ever have done that in the presence of anyone else. Used by permission.

<sup>46</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 128. Based on what Pitter says in other places, I think she has in mind here F. R. Leavis.

<sup>47</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 129.

<sup>48</sup> Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 130.

<sup>49</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 137.

<sup>50</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 138.

<sup>51</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 141.

<sup>52</sup> Pitter Journal, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 142.

<sup>53</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 144.

<sup>54</sup> Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 146. Pitter recalls: "I went to see him on Aug. 15, 1962: this was the last time I saw him.—Owen Barfield had brought him to see me on the 12<sup>th</sup> July previous" (Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, fol. 145). The fact that Lewis visited her just previous to her Aug. 15 visit suggests he may have hoped to renew more frequent visits with Pitter.

<sup>55</sup> MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, Fol. 147. Pitter recalls:

I was glad of the salutary observation about drug-visions. During a long illness in 1965 I was to have my fill of them: curiously strange & memorable, many of them, but for what I can see, pointless (the mysterious seaweed-eating creatures towards the end of "Perelandra." "Merely *other*."). Sensibility (much enhanced, judgment much impaired: no moral content. There is one exception: I found that during that time a new dimension was given to one's feeling about the great books one knew—only some of them, not all—and that this has persisted as valid. (Aug. 20, 1962, Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/5, fol. 148).

<sup>56</sup> *The Spirit Watches*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Pitter's rare comments about romantic love and marriage are interesting. In a BBC broadcast, "Romance," for the Woman's Hour on Sept. 4, 1963, she remembered her earliest experiences of romantic longing:

He had yellow curls reaching almost to his shoulders, and lovely blue eyes. He would do. He would have to do. When your head is stuffed full of fairy-tales, there just has to be a Prince Charming, somehow, somewhere. I never told my love. I was sharp enough to know that he had never cared for me, never would. I cast myself firmly in the role of princess, fixed my eyes on the yellow curls, and the rest had to be fantasy. Then the curls were cut off. A boy had to lose his Faunteroy hairdo some time. My world fell to bits. Why even his lovely blue eyes were only boiled gooseberry, now. Perhaps that other boy—that rather nicely-behaved boy with the white silk socks—would fill the vacant throne. But he was even more of a disillusionment. Nicely-behaved indeed! He twigged my infatuation, and made fun of it. [. . .] So although my private myths flourished obstinately, over the years, and against odds too, as one after another the inadequate opposite numbers faded away, I began to have glimmerings about the dishonesty of the whole thing. The ideas of Freud and Jung began to pervade human society, and I couldn't help becoming aware of them. But the biggest eye-opener was when somebody fell romantically in love with *me*, for a change. He didn't know me, didn't want to. All he asked was that I should *pretend* to be the woman of his vision. He was looking *past* me—looking over my shoulder at a ghost. There is hardly a word in the language rude enough to reply to this attitude, I felt, choking with indignation, and throwing his flowers out of the window. And all the time I had been trying to do this very thing to other people. Now I knew what it felt like to be at the receiving end.

In addition, in an Oct. 31, 1968 BBC interview with John Wain, Pitter made the following comment about marriage:

I felt that [I would not marry] instinctively from the first, you know. I would look at the boy next door and I would look at young men one met in the course of one's work, and one would say to one's self that they are simply not relevant. One might be very fond of them, but one would realize that, as I always say it would be cruelty to animals to marry them, because there was always this ruling passion [writing poetry], this major preoccupation, in which the poor dears had no share.

Also, in a Nov. 7, 1977 BBC interview with Hallam Tennyson celebrating her eightieth birthday, Pitter confided:

I always said to myself: my true love or none. I will not marry unless I feel I cannot exist without that person. And though it were quite often painful, one realized that this extremely nice person, one would be glad to know better—well to him my work was only marginal. But to me it was absolutely primal, and if the work was only marginal to him, then he was only marginal to me. [ . . . ] [So at one point I had the opportunity to marry and turned it down]. To be sure, there's no glory in that. Every personable young woman has her opportunities, and, of course, living as we did in rather Bohemian circles, we had opportunities not only for marriage, but for all the rest of it. But it would have been fatal, I think, for myself.

<sup>58</sup> From Ruth Pitter to Walter Hooper, Jan. 13, 1969. Used by permission of the Southern Historical Association, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>59</sup> From Ruth Pitter to Walter Hooper, July 25, 1974.

<sup>60</sup> Pitter notes her spiritual debt to Lewis in many places. To correspondent Andrew Nye on May 18, 1985, she writes:

As to my faith, I owe it to C. S. Lewis. For much of my life I lived more or less as a Bohemian, but when the second war broke out, Lewis broadcast several times, and also published some little books (notably "The Screwtape Letters"), and I was fairly hooked. I came to know him personally, and he came here several times. Lewis's stories, so very entertaining but always about the war between good and evil, became a permanent part of my mental and spiritual equipment.

<sup>61</sup> She pays Lewis another tribute in *A Heaven to Find* (1987) when she writes in "Lewis Appears (Apropos of C. S. Lewis's move to Cambridge [1955], and his possible effect on [F. R.] Leavis and the Logical Positivists)":

Lewis appears, the Trojan Dinosaur,  
Eggs of ambivalence distend his Maur.  
What meant the Fathers to convey him in?  
I wish I knew the Mind of those grave Min.

She adds this note to the poem: "'Maur' is 'maw', misspelt to avoid a false rhyme with 'dinosaur'. 'Min' is the plural of 'man' in Essex dialect."

<sup>62</sup> Stylistically Pitter's letters to all her correspondents are marked by crisp prose, precise imagery, and elegant simplicity. While on a number of occasions she laments her lack of a university education, her letters reflect a vigorous mind—lithe, curious, penetrating, analytical, and perceptive. To tradesmen or tax assessors, she is polite, curt, business-like, and when necessary, hard nosed. To admirers of her verse, she is humble, appreciative and patient. To her many BBC contacts, she is generous with her time, eager to please, and ever available. To her personal friends, she is genuine, open, and winsome. There is nothing brittle about her personality, and she never engages in self-pity, even though the circumstances of her life provided plenty of opportunities for distress. At the same time, she veils certain aspects of her emotional life, particularly early failed love

affairs. While she does sometimes speak of these matters, it is always in third person—a convenient way of avoiding a direct psychological exploration of her emotions. I believe the more than 1000 letters written by Pitter between 1908-1988 go a long way toward illustrating Pitter's desire to reach a public interested in her as both a poet and personal commentator; the majority will appear in *Silent Music: The Letters of Ruth Pitter*. These letters are a first stage in understanding “the silent music, the dance in stillness, the hints and echoes and messages of which everything is full” reflected in her life and poetry.

### Works Cited

- Barfield, Owen. “Letter to Ruth Pitter.” Sept. 25, 1949. In “Ruth Pitter Papers (uncatalogued).” Bodleian Library.
- Cecil, David. “Letters to Ruth Pitter.” In “Ruth Pitter Papers (uncatalogued).” Bodleian Library.
- Lewis, C. S. “Letters to Ruth Pitter.” Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3 and c. 220/5.
- Pitter, Ruth. “Interview with Hallam Tennyson, Nov. 7, 1977.” BBC Written Archives, Caversham, England.
- . “Interview with John Wain, Oct. 31, 1968.” BBC Written Archives, Caversham, England.
- . “Interview with Stephen Black, June 24, 1955.” BBC Written Archives, Caversham, England.
- . “Journal of Her Correspondence with C. S. Lewis.” Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. lett. c. 220/3 and c. 220/5.
- . “Letter to Andrew Nye.” May 18, 1985. In “Ruth Pitter Papers (uncatalogued).” Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England.
- . “Letter to Arthur Russell.” Aug. 1, 1956. British Library, Add 70721, Ruth Pitter Letters.
- . “Letter to C. S. Lewis.” July 17, 1946. CSL /L-Pitter/ 1a, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL.
- . “Letters to David Cecil.” David Cecil Family Letters in care of Laura Cecil.
- . “Letters to Herbert Palmer.” The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
- . “Letters to Mary Cooley.” Mary E. Cooley Papers, Special Collections Library, University of Michigan.
- . “Letters to Mary Pitter.” Pitter Family Letters in care of Mark Pitter.
- . “Letters to Nettie Palmer.” Palmer Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 1174.
- . “Letter to Stephen Tennant.” Aug. 6, 1946. Stephen Tennant Papers, 1929-1977, Cage 643, held by Manuscripts, Archives & Special Collections, at Washington State University Libraries, in Pullman, Washington.
- . “Letters to Theodore Maynard.” Oct. 6, 1946. Special Collections Division, Georgetown University.



- . "Letters to Walter Hooper." Jan. 13, 1969 and July 25, 1974, in the Walter McGhee Hooper Papers # 4236, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- . "Papers (uncatalogued)." Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Oxford, England.
- . "Romance." *The Woman's Hour*. Sept. 4, 1963. BBC Written Archives, Caversham, England.
- . *The Spirit Watches*. London: Cresset Press, 1939.
- Sayer, George. *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*. San Francisco: Harper, 1988.