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Angels and Inklings

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Abstract

Religious and philosophical discussion on the nature of angels, particularly as portrayed by Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams.

Additional Keywords

Angels—Religious aspects; Angels in literature

ANGELS AND INKLINGS

JAMES S. CUTSINGER

The heart of man cannot hoard. His brain or his hand may gather into its box and hoard, but the moment the thing has passed into the box, the heart has lost it and is hungry again. If a man would have, it is the Giver he must have.... There all that He makes must be free to come and go though the heart of His child; he can enjoy it only as it passes, can enjoy only its life, its sound, its vision, its meaning, not itself. — George MacDonald

Both of the terms in my title will be familiar to many of this journal's readers. For the sake of precision, however, I begin with definitions.

By "angels" I mean incorporeal intelligences whose normal haunt is Heaven, and by "Inklings" I mean corporeal intelligences whose normal haunt was Oxford. Now I must at once add, lest an angel be confused with its supra-angelical Origin and Source, that by "incorporeal" I do not wish to signify something simple — that is, having no body at all — but something having no physical body; nor do I mean by "intelligences" only minds (lest an Inking be confused with his infra-intelligent cousins), but minds aware of themselves, and through themselves of what exceeds them. These qualifications should be sufficient to exclude God from the first category, as He must be from all categories; and, if not altogether to exclude from the second quite every other Oxonian of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, at least to include as models of their class those whom we know best as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams.

Yet a further proviso is in order before proceeding, and that is to say that having thus defined my topic, I shall nevertheless be taking certain liberties. In fact I intend deliberately to complicate the matter by exchanging the differentiae of my definitions; and I plan to insist that without this complication, one cannot possibly understand what Inklings thought of angels. To be precise, I shall be acting as though angels are corporeal intelligences, and as though Inklings are of the incorporeal variety. What I have up my sleeve with regard to the first paradox will be revealed presently. By the second I mean to say that I shall be referring to the work of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams without a single explicit reference to a place, a time, a motive, an influence, a background, or an "ism" — indeed, without the use of these names at all, which is perhaps what they would have preferred. The Inklings are to be understood here, not as though they were men, but only insofar as their books, especially their fantasies, can be employed as a kind of shorthand for certain insights into the nature and purpose of angels, or as abbreviations for angelic ideas.

It is for my purposes here, therefore, altogether accidental and irrelevant, that these ideas should have become

incarnate in the particular books we find them in — notably, in *The Silmarillion*, which arrived on the earth through the agency of Tolkien; in *Perelandra*, which was mediated to the minds of men through Lewis; and in *The Place of the Lion*, which is (among other things) the Apocalypse according to Williams.¹ Of course, some might wish to corroborate the observations I make, and if so, they are advised to examine the recollections of Lewis and the incantations of Williams in particular, as well as the "theoretical" work of the sometimes neglected Inking Owen Barfield, especially his early book *Poetic Diction*, which strongly informs the first part of what follows, just as it informed also the work of both Tolkien and Lewis.

But here the aim is quite different from corroboration or the examination of texts. It is to enter Other Worlds — what Tolkien called "secondary worlds" — so as to take seriously what they can teach us about the primary world we seem to live in; and further — to borrow a distinction from Lewis — it is to look "along" and not "at" what we find in those worlds in hopes of a freshened perception.²



Although the world of physical phenomena is being known into being by God through the mind of His creature man, this creature ordinarily knows it not, but supposes instead that what he sees before him, on the other side of his skin from his brain and his heart, is a *fait accompli*, a product or result, to be modified, not by the present active, but by the perfect passive participle. Because he so seldom looks at the mind, so as to discover what it actually is, this creature has come to assume that the power of looking is derivative and subsequent. He approaches the world as a given, and as though it possessed a solidity in comparison with which his corresponding thoughts appear as little more than shadows, and apart from which (or so it seems) he would cease, not only to know, but to be. Men have in this way become captives of what were in the first place, and what continue to be, the creations, constructions, or projections of the human mind itself.

I say "the" mind, and not "their" minds, for theirs on their own, considered distinctly from those of other men, and as but parts of particular egos, are quite clearly *not* the cause of what men see. They are not the cause, but the caused, and for them, for these individual minds, the world we find around us does and must remain a given, the antepenultimate source of all those associations, tendencies, and sensations that make a man among men who he is. But who he is and what he is are not the same. Though he be a man as a "who," he is as a "what" simply man; and as such, however much he forgets, he continues to be that channel

created by God through which the Word might be consciously poured on its way in the direction of matter. Man is meant to be no mere spectator, but an active participant in the continuous making of sunshine and birds and trees and mountains — of all that exists as an object of his senses.

Three quite different, but equally pernicious, errors may interpose themselves at this point unless we carefully and consciously guard against them. The first consists in thinking that the human mind, and not merely my mind, is locked within the skull somewhere and rooted in the brain, whereas in fact what is meant by “skull” and “brain” are themselves the products of man’s knowing — contained in it, not in them. If one is to understand the origin of matter, one must not, on pain of absurdity, begin by assuming that this origin itself is made of solid stuff. A second mistake would be to suppose that, had the human being not been created, the places, spaces, or positions now occupied by chairs and tables, not to mention skulls and brains, would have been left vacant, empty holes possessing only the shape or outline of the contents we have made to fill them. Whereas in fact these very “holes,” together with the space and time they presuppose, are equally our creations. The extension and duration into which we know the objects of our consciousness are themselves being known into being. Finally, a third error would consist in thinking that when we speak (as we have) of creation by God through man, we mean to inflate our already swollen egos, and that, whether we mean to or not, we risk a blasphemous promotion of the human creature above his appointed station, and beyond the orbit of those realities that would otherwise provide this measure. Whereas in fact what we mean is that man, strictly dependent even at this highest level upon the facticity and objectivity of God and God’s ideas, has been providentially designated the intelligible means through which God might clothe those ideas in sensible vestments.

Would there be stars and meadowlarks and roses were it not for the existence of man? Of course — nor could these ever not have been. But apart from man, the glimmer of the stars would not have been seen, for they would have had no light; nor the songs of the meadowlarks heard, for they would have no voice; nor the fragrance of the roses smelled, for they would have no perfume. Man’s role is that of pontifex. He is intended to make himself a bridge and to compose materials of his consciousness into bodily vessels for celestial truths. In order, however, to be such a bridge — that is, to be a good one — he must be aware of this pontifical function, and he must act in keeping with its demands, always making in strict accordance with the law by which he himself is made.³ He must understand his causal relationship to the world of colors, tones, and textures that lies spread before him, and with which his very muscles and bones and blood are interwoven. But in order to understand, to know from within its exercise this power of creativity, I as a man must first be liberated from my individual mind’s fixation on results and givens, so as then to be able to move upstream in the river of knowing toward that knowing’s source, which is (to repeat) not mine, but the mind itself; not *ratio* but *intellectus*; not soul, but Spirit.

In the meantime, the consequences of my present fixation are chiefly two. By acting as if the world I see were independent of human consciousness, a world already real in itself, I am in the first place blinded to the fact that whatever has happened, and whatever shall happen, in its deepest dimension, is happening right now. Because the trees and the mountains, the tables and chairs, appear to be given, their making is thought to be past, and their seeming solidity is allowed to displace and eclipse a creating that seems no longer real. Nor can it help but follow as a corollary of this blindness that God — if He is believed in at all — should also be removed from the “now,” and placed safely at the start of a temporal series of secondary causes, whose discontinuous moments might serve to shield me from His present power.

A second consequence is this. By allowing *my* mind to freeze and to fix the liquid and continuous creations of the mind *as such*, I have compromised the original integrity of things. What comes into the mind from God as a whole, I have cut and divided, my ego acting as a “half-silvered mirror,” and splitting the beam of the divine ideas. Thus is Spirit split into body and soul, percepts and concepts, facts and notions, things that exist apparently outside the physical envelopes in which we live and the thoughts we have about those things when we are safe and snug “in here.” What we call the material and the immaterial, or the corporeal and incorporeal, are given by God as one, itself neither matter nor mind, nor even both, because not in itself susceptible to such divisive categories. But upon this one, this whole, the ego performs a most curious operation. Rather than giving way to God’s gift, as it was meant to, in order that the principles of things might enter the world of space and time in all their power and with all their glory, the ego of man — my mind on its own — will permit only their bodies to pass, which are the sensible halves of God’s intentions, all the while hoarding their meanings, clinging to the abstracted notions of things, and refusing to let them go. Hence the world, the fallen world, we live in: a world in which facts have lost their thoughts and thoughts their facts; a world where concepts so seldom depend on the sounds and rhythms of the words we use to mean them, and where the things we perceive so seldom mean more than symbols.



I said I need liberation. Anyone when he looks at the world sees it as independent of that looking, and as existing apart from the thoughts he thinks about it, needs liberation. His attachments must be dissolved. His distinctions of then from now, and inside from out, must be broken down. But in order that this may happen, he needs above all to be shown that his categories do not fit and cannot accommodate things as they really are, as they exist in the mind of God. Such a one needs showing that those pale abstractions that he calls his thoughts and those tepid, tenuous, and insipid contacts with matter that constitute his sensory experience are as nothing when compared to

what preceded and underlies them both. He must be made to see and to touch, and not only to think, that innocence which is the substance of lambs, that speed which is the operation of horses; he must be shown how to think, and not only to see or to feel, the talons of the eagle, which are its knowledge, and the coils of the snake, which are its subtlety.⁴ Our man stands in need of instruction; he needs to be given a redemptive message.

But the message, if it is to do its proper work and have its intended explosive effect, cannot be of a strictly mental sort, lest the division of this into parts be exaggerated rather than undone and a conceptual communication be effected at the expense of our perceptions. The facts of our fallen life demand instead that the message be written in the very substance, in the body, of the messenger — indeed, that the message be the messenger, and he the message. It is essential moreover that the messenger's body be such as to resist our efforts to define or explain it. For the purpose of this instruction is precisely to teach us the inadequacy of all our usual categories — so as to compel renewed attention to the arousing of our drowsed souls. We need, in a word, an angel.

I began by defining angels, as "incorporeal intelligences." I hastened to add, however, that it would prove necessary to complicate that definition and to speak of angels as in fact *having* bodies, and as possessing — in spite of their differences from the matter we ordinarily know — a corporeal or physical sort of substance. Now is the time for that complication, and the reason for it should be apparent from what has since been said. One must speak of angels only in this paradoxical way, as incorporeal corporealities — as spiritual bodies or embodied spirits — precisely because they are angels, and angels or *angeloi* are by their very nature messengers or ambassadors, as the Greek original quite clearly attests. They are envoys from God to men. But men being what they are, namely fallen, God in His wisdom knows full well that no message will be of the slightest use to them unless it penetrates the carapace of mental habit and spiritual resistance constructed by their egos, unless it violates the frontiers and blurs the distinctions that they have drawn between outer and inner, natural and supernatural, fact and thought, body and soul, — unless, in short, it subverts their usual ways of knowing. Hence the necessity that the messengers be the message and that they be such as to compel, by their very presence, a complete re-evaluation of all our earthly categories, and such as to flummox our fallen senses, in order that our thoughts and perceptions might both be pointed back to the whole from which they were broken.

And so it is that to hear an angel speak is to hear a sound quite astonishingly unlike a voice.⁵ It is perfectly articulate, even beautiful, but undoubtedly inorganic. We feel the difference between animal voices and all other noises clearly, though it is hard to define. Blood and lungs and the warm, moist cavity of the mouth are somehow indicated in every voice. But in the case of angels, speech is quite otherwise, sounding rather as if it were played upon

an instrument than spoken from a throat; and yet the timbre is not mechanical either. A machine is something *we* make. But the message that an angel brings, and which it is, sounds rather as if rock or crystal had spoken of its own accord. And it penetrates — say those who have heard it — from chest to groin like the thrill that goes through us when we think we have lost our hold while climbing a cliff.

Nor is the visual perception of angels any less unusual or disturbing. What one sees at first is a very faint rod or pillar of light, but a light with two especially peculiar characteristics. The first is its color. Since one is in fact able to see the thing, it must obviously be either white or colored. But no efforts of memory can possibly conjure up the faintest image of what that color might be. How it is possible to have a visual experience that immediately after becomes impossible to remember is difficult to explain, but so it is. The second cause of confusion is the angle of this light, or rather the angle of all *other* things, the objects of our everyday world, when compared to its perfect verticality. The impression, however produced, is that an angel has reference to some whole system of direction based outside the earth, and that its mere presence temporarily imposes that alien system on us, abolishing the terrestrial horizontal. And it appears that the homogeneous flame perceived by our senses is not the body, properly so called, of the angel, but rather either the sensorium of its body or the surface of the body that exists after a manner beyond our conception in a celestial frame of special references.

It is thus that when one looks at an angel, the outline of its body seems to be faintly, swiftly undulating, as though the permanence of its shape, like that of waterfalls or flames, co-existed with a rushing movement of the matter it contains. When one looks straight into the face of such a being, it appears to be stationary, but whenever the eyes are averted or turned to the side to take in the surroundings, the angel appears to be flying at an enormous speed. The fact is that such a messenger is always moving — to use the uselessness of such language — but not in relation to us. This world, which seems so solid and permanent, so fixed and *unmoving*, is to this being, as it is also to God, and as it *should* be to us, a thing in continuous motion, whose motion is its being. And so, in relation to their own frame of spiritual reference, the world of principles, these celestial creatures must appear, in order that they should at all, to be speeding down the universe in order to keep abreast of the mountains and valleys, the birds and the trees — all of them in the act of their coming to be.



Thus do angles teach us, by the ministry of their very presence, the central truths we stand most in need of knowing: by the impressions they make on the ear and the eye, and by similar operations too numerous and strange to mention, and too subtle to define. And it is in this way that they prepare us for the even more important and more disturbing revelation of that One in whom is fused, not just

mind and matter, but Creator and creation. Whatever it is that an angel might "say," whatever its particular communications might be — to this or that man in this or that setting — it is in its very substance, in its incorporeal corporeality, the most crucial preliminary revelation of all, forcing those who witness it to perceive what they think and to conceive what they feel afresh, and so calling them to fulfill their intended pontifical and redemptive vocation.

For it is in fact only then, when my thoughts about light are themselves made effulgent and my conception of sound begins to resonate, that I am able to experience and to help to transmit the world that God intended: a world so packed with meaning that its very weight must surely crush the ego that exposes itself unprotected, unarmed with its fallen distinctions. Only then do I glimpse, dim-glimmering through the dewy windowpane of the mind I have presumed to make mine, the shimmering outlines of Eden, as the timbre of sound and color of light are transmuted into images of their ideas, and matter flows back in the direction of God like a balloon suddenly emptied of air.

Notes

- In speaking of angels, I have in mind throughout those beings whom these authors variously call Ainur (Tolkien), Eldila (Lewis), and Eidola or Celstitudes (Williams). See *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977); *Perelandra* (London: The Bodley Head, 1943); and *The Place of the Lion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). Though I shall bestressing only what these creatures have in common, this is not to suggest that they are equivalent or interchangeable.
- Tolkien's use of this idea can be found in his essay "On Fairy-Stories" in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); Lewis makes this distinction in "Meditation in a Toolshed," published in the collection *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).
- The allusion here is to a poem by Tolkien, composed initially in response to a conversation with Lewis and as an aid to the latter's conversion, and found in the essay "On Fairy-Stories" (71-72):
 "Dear Sir," I said — "Although now long estranged,
 Man is not wholly lost not wholly changed.
 Dis-graced he may be, yet not de-throned,
 and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
 Man, Sub-creator, the refracted Light
 through whom is splintered from a single White
 to many hues, and endlessly combined
 in living shapes that moved from mind to mind.
 Though all the crannies of the world we filled
 with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
 Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
 and sowed the seed of dragons — "twas our right
 (used or misused). That right has not decayed:
 we make still by the law in which we're made."
- These are the qualities through which the respective archetypes of these various animals makes themselves known in Williams' *The Place of the Lion*.
- What follows in the next three paragraphs is more or less direct quotations from Chapters One and Sixteen of Lewis' *Perelandra*.

BITTER VINE — Continued from page 56

rhymes builds character; this vine creates inner strength which otherwise would remain uncultivated. Searching for truth in fairy tales and nursery rhymes destroys dreams; it destroys precious bedtime stories and children's games. Even Mithridates, a king of Pontus, knew he must daily drink small doses of poison — pain in life — if he hoped to survive his enemies' assassination plot.

The poet, A.E. Houseman, dramatizes this theme in "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff."

There was a king reigned in the East:
 There, when kings will sit to feast,
 They get their fill before they think
 With poisoned meat and poisoned drink.
 He gathered all that springs to birth
 From the many-venomed earth;
 First a little thence to more,
 He sampled all her killing store;
 And easy, smiling, seasoned sound,
 Sate the king when healths went round.

They put arsenic in his meat
 And stared aghast to watch him eat;
 They poured strychnine in his cup
 And shook to see him drink it up;
 They shook, they stared as whites' their shirt:
 Them it was their poison hurt.
 — I tell the tale that I heard told.
 Mithridates, he died old. (Perrine 521-522)

The single dose of poison killed Mithridates' enemies. However, because Mithridates daily drank small doses of poison, he lived, he coped.

Just as Mithridates dealt with his shattered dream, the loyalty of his subjects, present society must deal with shattered dreams to cope with reality, the bittersweet vine. Destroying these dreams, ingesting past pain, cultivates the richness within the soul, spiritual strength. Courageously facing this bittersweet vine changes society, singly and as a whole. Without pain, the bitter vine, no inner strength, the sweet vine, develops. Pain calls society to change; pain challenges society to act; pain forces society to cope. Past or present, pain never dies. Only by mirroring the pain of the past will society, singly and as a whole, cope with the pain of the present. Fairy tales and nursery rhymes bless humanity as this challenging mirror — the bittersweet vine.

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