

## C. S. Lewis and the Star of Bethlehem

Recovering the medieval imagination.

"It was beautiful," C.S. Lewis confided, "on two or three successive nights about the Holy Time, to see Venus and Jove blazing at one another, once with the Moon right between them: Majesty and Love linked by Virginité—what could be more appropriate?" Thus Lewis wrote to the poet Ruth Pitter early in January 1953, recalling what he had seen in the night sky during the Christmas that had just passed.

As the Nativity story is retold year by year, all those who hear it are bound to think—however briefly—about the original Star of Bethlehem that led the Magi to the cradle of Christ, but few would then go and scan the horizon for vestiges of its rising. Lewis was different. He was fascinated by the heavens and by astrology—although what he meant by "astrology" is different from what most modern people understand by the word, as we shall see.

He was a keen amateur astronomer and had a telescope on the balcony of his bedroom at The Kilns, his Oxford home. According to one of the girls evacuated there during World War II, he used it to introduce his youthful charges to many of the sidereal wonders of the universe. Using the naked eye, he did the same for his pupils at Magdalen College: Derek Brewer remembers how Lewis once "pointed out to us the extremely rare conjunction of five planets all brilliantly visible in a circle." His letters frequently detail the pleasures he took in the firmament: "Isn't Jupiter splendid these nights?" he exclaimed to one correspondent in 1938; "Do you ever notice Venus these mornings at about quarter past seven?" he asked his godson in 1946. "She has been terrifically bright lately, almost better than Jupiter."

Jupiter (Jove) was Lewis' favorite object of attention in the night sky; that was because, according to medieval cosmology, Jupiter was the "best planet," *Fortuna Major*. Lewis used to tell his university lecture audiences, "Those born under Jupiter are apt to be loud-voiced and red-faced." He would then pause before adding, "It is obvious under which planet I was born"—which always raised a laugh.



He lectured on the subject because he thought that familiarity with the pre-Copernican cosmos was essential to a proper understanding of medieval and renaissance literature, and in *The Discarded Image*, the published version of his lectures, he repeatedly encourages his readers to take a stroll under the sky at night. Looking up at the heavens now, he argues, is a very different experience from what it was in the Middle Ages. Now we sense that we are looking out into a trackless vacuity, pitch-black and dead-cold. Then we would have felt as if we were looking into a vast, lighted concavity. In the nearest part of the sky our eyes would have seen—or, rather, seen through—the transparent sphere in which the Planet Luna revolves, then the larger sphere of Mercury, then the still larger one of Venus, and so on through the spheres of Sol, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, each sphere rotating more rapidly than the last and each exerting a peculiar influence upon mundane people and events. Beyond Saturn's sphere we would have seen the heaven of the fixed stars, the *Stellatum*, and, beyond that, the *Primum Mobile*, the sphere which conveys movement to all the other, lower spheres. Further than the *Primum Mobile* we would not have been able to see, for that would take our sight outside the created order into the Empyrean, the very home of God. One of the divine titles was "the Unmoved Mover" because God moved the *Primum Mobile* "by being loved, not by loving; by being the supremely desirable object." It is in this sense, Lewis says, that we should understand Dante's immortal line, the final words of *The Divine Comedy*: "The love that moves the sun and the other stars."



Lewis makes no effort to hide the pleasure he derives from this view of the cosmos. He remarks that the human imagination has seldom entertained an object so sublimely ordered; the medieval universe was "tingling with anthropomorphic life, dancing, ceremonial, a festival not a machine." Its tingling quality is especially worth noting because Lewis is here making an Anglo-Saxon pun. He wrote to his father in 1922: "[Anglo-Saxon] gives the impression of parodied English badly spelled. Thus ... TINGUL for a star ... think of 'Twinkle, twinkle little star.'" Almost invariably when the word appears in his subsequent works it comes loaded with astrological connotations. For instance, in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* when Lucy lays her hand on the book of spells in the house of Coriakin, the fallen star, "her fingers tingled when she touched it as if it were full of electricity."

Lewis' delight in this old picture of the heavens was not confined to his professional life as a literary historian; he also had a much more personal and imaginative investment in it. He liked, so he said, "the whole planetary idea as a *mythology*," and in his poetry that idea often receives a Christian treatment. "The Turn of the Tide," a meditation upon the cosmic significance of Christ's Nativity, is one notable example. From the landlord of the Bethlehem tavern all the way up to Saturn in the outermost planetary sphere, the entire universe is breathless with expectancy about what is to happen in the Stable behind the Inn. When Christ is finally born:

Saturn laughed and lost his latter age's frost,  
His beard, Niagara-like, unfroze;  
Monsters in the Sun rejoiced; the Inconstant One,  
The unwedded Moon, forgot her woes.

The joyous news spreads down "sphere below sphere," bringing the "shock / Of returning life" to the whole created order. Lewis used the imagery of the seven heavens in his poetry because "the planets, as conceived by medieval astrology, seem to me to have a permanent value as spiritual symbols—to provide a *Phänomenologie des Geistes* which is specially worth while in our own generation." These are no small claims. They help explain why the celestial bodies feature strongly in his fiction as well as his poetry.

In the first volume of Lewis' trilogy of novels, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), the hero, Ransom, travels to Mars; in the second, *Perelandra* (1943), he goes to Venus; and in the third, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), he stays on Earth but acts as a bridge across which the planetary intelligences pass as they come to bring about a grand dénouement. These and the other heavenly bodies overwhelm Ransom with their beauty as he floats among them at the beginning of the first book: "the stars, thick as daisies on an uncut lawn, reigned perpetually with no cloud, no moon, no sunrise, to dispute their sway. There were planets of unbelievable majesty, and constellations undreamed of: there were celestial sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pin-pricks of burning gold." As Ransom marvels, he becomes aware that there is a spiritual cause for his progressive lightening and exultation of heart:

A nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of "Space": at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now—now that the very



name "Space" seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it "dead"; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment . . . . No: Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory—the

"happy climes that ly  
Where day never shuts his eye  
Up in the broad fields of the sky."

He quoted Milton's words to himself lovingly, at this time and often.

It is significant that Ransom should quote lines by Milton (from *Comus*, 1634), for Milton was not just one of those "older thinkers" who understood space as "the heavens," he was also the first writer (so Lewis opines in *The Discarded Image*) to use the word "space" in the modern sense. Milton straddled the old and new views of the cosmos; he marked the transition from the traditional view of the universe to the new disenchanted model which followed in the wake of Copernicus' discovery that Earth was not central. The Ransom Trilogy is in large part an attempt to rehabilitate (imaginatively, not scientifically) that traditional view. For what purpose? Because Lewis considered it to be, in some important ways, a better conception than the modern one. Since the Copernican revolution, the heavenly bodies had been steadily evacuated of spiritual significance until they were regarded as no more than large aggregations of rock or gas. Readers of Narnia will remember an exchange in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* during which Eustace is rebuked by Ramandu for claiming that "In our world a star is a huge ball of flaming gas": "Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is but only what it is made of." Because the pre-Copernican model of the cosmos viewed the planets as *more* than merely material it was a model worth keeping in mind. It was, in this sense, a more Christian model than the Newtonian or Einsteinian versions which have succeeded it.

Emphatically, the pre-Copernican model of the cosmos was a Christian model not despite, but because of, its acceptance of astrological influence. Lewis valued its astrological aspect not because he considered astrology to be literally true, but because astrology represented a spiritual reading of materiality.

Of course, to our pre-Copernican forebears, astrology was literally true, insofar as they had a discrete science called by that name. (As Lewis points out in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, astrology and astronomy were not really distinguishable until the Copernican revolution.) No Christian theologian before that time denied the general theory of planetary influences. The planets were not to be worshipped or regarded as determinative in their influence, but within these parameters the Church was content to sanction what we would now call "astrology." After all, the Bible appeared to support the belief that there were seven planets and that they possessed influences. The author of the Book of Judges (5:20) records, "They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," a verse to which Lewis alludes in *Out of the Silent Planet*: "The stars in their courses were fighting against Weston." Throughout Scripture the stars are seen as "signs" (most famously, of course, at Bethlehem, signifying the birth of Christ) and sometimes as a celestial court or angelic choir. Christ himself is shown in the Book of Revelation (1:16, 20; 2:1) holding the seven stars in his right hand, a

vision that Austin Farrer, Lewis' friend and an expert in apocalyptic imagery, understood to be a portrayal of Christ's lordship over time, "for it is after these seven that the weekdays are named." (Saturn gives Saturday its name, the Sun Sunday's, the Moon Monday's, and so on.)

Following the Copernican paradigm-shift, astronomy and astrology became gradually distinct and the former prospered while the latter fell on hard times. *Astronomy* is now a respectable science. *Astrology*, in sharp contrast, has become the label of a subject that is generally thought to deserve no serious consideration. But to Lewis, as a scholar of the 16th century, it would have meant something very different: it meant that the heavens had spiritual significance, however that was conceived. He was not convinced that Copernicus' discovery of heliocentricity required the planets to become spiritually insignificant. He thought that disenchantment was an aspect of the "mythology that follows in the wake of science."

His 16th-century volume begins with a 14-page treatment of "the new astronomy" pioneered by Nicolas of Cusa, theorized by Copernicus, and verified by Kepler and Galileo. Lewis concludes that what proved important about the new astronomy was not the mere alteration in our map of space but the methodological revolution which verified it:

By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. The world was emptied, first of her indwelling spirits, then of her occult sympathies and antipathies, finally of her colours, smells, and tastes. (Kepler at the beginning of his career explained the motion of the planets by their *anima motrices*; before he died, he explained it mechanically.) The result was dualism rather than materialism. The mind, on whose ideal constructions the whole method depended, stood over against its object in ever sharper dissimilarity. Man with his new powers became rich like Midas but all that he touched had gone dead and cold. This process, slowly working, ensured during the next century the loss of the old mythical imagination: the conceit, and later the personified abstraction, takes its place. Later still, as a desperate attempt to bridge a gulf which begins to be found intolerable, we have the Nature poetry of the Romantics.

The most important parts of this passage are the references to "the mind, on whose ideal constructions the whole method depended" and the "mythical imagination." The isolation of the one and the loss of the other were not necessary or logical consequences of Copernicus' theory: they were the unscientific or non-scientific collateral effects caused by his scientific advance. Lewis might be thought to be drawing here upon the ideas of Max Weber, whose theory of "disenchantment" bears some striking similarities to this account, but Lewis never mentions Weber in his writings and there is little to suggest that he had read him. If Lewis is indebted to anyone in particular for the picture he paints of a disenchanted cosmos, it is his close friend Owen Barfield who had written in *Poetic Diction*:

Science deals with the world which it perceives but, seeking more and more to penetrate the veil of naive perception, progresses only towards the goal of nothing, because it still does not accept in practice (whatever it may admit theoretically) that the mind first creates what it perceives as objects, including the instruments which Science uses for that very penetration. It insists on dealing with "data," but there shall no data be given, save the bare percept. The rest is imagination. Only by imagination therefore can the world be known. And what is needed is, not

only that larger and larger telescopes should be constructed, but that the human mind should become increasingly aware of its own creative activity.

Barfield goes on to argue that Newton with his "gravity" (originally "weight") and Kepler with his "focus" (originally "hearth") were developing meaning, not discovering "fact." These terms were as much part of their "instruments" as the material instruments themselves; they were concepts applied to percepts in new ways that were judged to be illuminating, but which were functions of the imagination rather than "objective" tools. Scientific and poetic knowledge are therefore indistinguishable in kind. The scientific method does not give us a new way of knowing, only a new way of testing.

To Lewis, as to Barfield, scientists in the modern period were too often naturalistic in their worldview, liable to the error of removing their own minds and their thinking processes from the total picture of the world that they were trying to understand and inhabit. This error necessarily de-spiritualizes the universe, for the rational mind is itself spiritual, dependent upon the *logos* that saturates the universe and which, in turn, depends upon God himself. The universe, perceived within such a naturalistic framework, becomes "all fact and no meaning." What in reality is tingling with life dwindles into nothing more than a complicated machine.

If there are parallels between Lewis' arguments against naturalism and the arguments of those who support Intelligent Design, they should not be pressed too far. Lewis is not attempting to lead astronomers from stars to a transcendent Designer beyond the stars. He is attempting to lead them first behind their own eyes, back inward to their own minds. Only by factoring their own minds into the equation could they discover a world permeated with Reason, a universe in which matter and spirit are already married in the miracle of rational thought and from which it is, analogically, but a small step to a universe in which matter and Spirit, God's Spirit, are related in Christ. As Lewis writes in *Miracles*:

The discrepancy between a movement of atoms in an astronomer's cortex and his understanding that there must be a still unobserved planet beyond Uranus, is already so immense that the Incarnation of God Himself is, in one sense, scarcely more startling.

Neptune, orbiting the Sun over two and a half billion miles away from Earth, made its presence known to the mind of John Couch Adams, sitting thinking in the Cambridge observatory in 1845; he deduced its existence mathematically before actually observing it. That phenomenal achievement of ratiocination is "in one sense" no less startling than the coming down to earth of the Son of God. Both rational thought and the incarnation of Christ make present to human beings realities that are otherwise intangible. Of course, there is a vast difference both of degree and kind between the ministrations of Reason and the incarnation of the Divine Reasoner, but there is nevertheless an analogy. The link between mind and matter that is forged by human reasoning is a reflection of the link which was forged between God and Man at the Annunciation and brought to light under the Star of Bethlehem, that star which was a huge ball of flaming gas—and a good deal else besides.

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