C. S. Lewis and the Truth about Angels

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ABSTRACT
Lewis’s perspective on angels is apparent in *The Discarded Image*, his scholarly work on medieval and Renaissance literature. His preface to *The Screwtape Letters* reveals the seriousness with which he approaches the subject: it proposes that a mistaken view of angelic beings is more dangerous than ignorance of them. The space trilogy seeks to avert that danger. In it we are confronted by angelic eldila—inscrutable and holy beings inhabiting “deep space” who relentlessly accomplish the purposes of the Almighty. Characterized by absolute goodness and archetypal charity, they are serene yet they pulsate with energy. Lewis’s intense interest in angels is further apparent in a number of his poems. Throughout his work he depicts angels as real beings, inhabiting an actual universe, who actually participate our lives. They represent mysterious eternal realities, yet they are part of God’s daily providence.

Angels and devils are creatures of myth, broadly speaking, and also part of the true myth that is Christianity. Of devils, Lewis said that there are two equally serious errors: disbelief in them and an “excessive and unhealthy interest in them” (Preface to *Screwtape Letters*). The imaginative and theological cunning he brought to *The Screwtape Letters* made Lewis famous as a spokesperson for the demonic point of view—a point of view that was by his own confession a very oppressive one. Though *The Screwtape Letters* may be entertaining to read, writing about devils was not pleasant. However, Lewis did take much delight in writing about their spiritual opposites.

Lewis’s view of angels is rooted in his knowledge of and esteem for medieval literature. In *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, based on a series of lectures
he had given a number of times at Oxford, Lewis presents the medieval view of angels not only as a historical matter, but also as a theological truth. The thinking of medieval writers and artists on the subject of angels was derived, Lewis proposes, from an idea that existed in classical antiquity when distinction was made between the absolute divine being and the “highest created spirits” (Discarded 41)—spirits that were godlike, but quite distinct from the one God. Plato associated them with the stars, and thought of them as “true gods” (41). By the phrase “true gods,” a contrast is set up with the false or degraded forms that sometimes appeared in mythology. This is a distinction that Lewis himself makes in his depiction of angels in Perelandra, the second book of his Space Trilogy. Near the end of the book, the protagonist Ransom, having encountered and conversed in some depth with the mighty archangels that are Venus and Mars, realizes that the mythology of gods and goddesses that has penetrated our world represents a far grander reality:

[T]he memory of Deep heaven and the gods with whom [Satan] once consorted is still alive. . . . [T]he traces of the celestial commonwealth are not quite lost. . . . Our mythology is based on a solider reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base. And when they [the Angels] told him this, Ransom at last understood why mythology was what it was—gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility. (201)

In The Discarded Image Lewis explains that Plato believed that the highest created spirits—the “true gods”—have some sort of material form (40). Medieval scholars based their view of angels partly on this platonic view, though they followed scriptural terminology and called these aetherial creatures “angels.” They differed from Plato in seeing them as “pure or naked spirits” (42) without material forms. In a letter of 1940 Lewis comments further on this point: “About Angels’ bodies: as far as I have seen incorporeality is the normal medieval view (appearances being explained by the temporary manufacture of a body of air)” (Letters II, 450). In The Discarded
he points out that there was, eventually, some movement away from this view of angels as essentially bodiless when Florentine Platonists preferred the older, more Platonic view. At this point substantial angelic bodies reappeared, quite visibly, in art. But even then, the representations of these “immortal, celestial, and stellar creatures” (56) were best understood as symbolic.

Lewis is particularly interested in the view of angels developed in a work called *The Celestial Hierarchies* that had become well known by the sixth century (*Discarded* 70-75). It divides “angelic creatures” into three hierarchies, each containing three species—an arrangement that was “accepted by the church” and that is evident in Canto XXVIII of Dante’s *Paradiso* (*Discarded* 71). This important medieval work (by an unidentified author sometimes designated as pseudo-Dionysius) suggests that God does nothing directly that can be done through an [angelic] intermediary” and that God’s splendor “comes to us, filtered, as it were, through the [angelic] Hierarchies” (*Discarded* 73). Lewis recounts the relevance of this idea to the biblical account of Gabriel’s visit to Mary, later confirmed by Thomas Aquinas:

This explains why even a message of such cosmic moment as the Annunciation, even to so exalted a person as Mary, was brought by an angelic being . . . ‘angels were first shown the divine mystery and, afterwards, the grace of knowing it reached us through them’ (iv). On this point Aquinas, centuries later, quotes pseudo-Dionysius and confirms him. The thing [the Annunciation] was done thus (for several reasons, but among them) ‘that even in so great a matter *(en hoc etiam)* the system (or pattern, *ordinatio*) whereby divine things reach us through the mediation of angels might be unbroken’ (*Summa Theol.* IIIa, Qu. Xxx, Art. 2.) (*Discarded* 73).

This is an all-encompassing view of the whole universe: “the total angelic creation is a mean between God and Man” in two senses. The angels have a “dynamic” role as God’s messengers, and they
also (as mankind is aware of them) function as a kind of “lens” through which God’s glory is perceived. The Church strives to emulate, on a lower level, their purpose and function (Discarded 74).

Such a view of celestial beings includes a view of humanity that is quite the reverse of the modern view:

In modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in this [medieval view], he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light. (Discarded 74-75)

Medieval thinking about angels, though it did not agree with him in every detail, was heavily influenced by the hierarchical system that pseudo-Dionysius developed to describe the total angelic creation. In the Medieval Model angels were thought of in a way Lewis finds very palatable intellectually and spiritually. There was no whimsy and sentiment, no mistaking the image for the spiritual reality; and when artists did attempt to depict angels they were nothing like the “waterishly feminine angels of nineteenth century art” (Discarded 75). Lewis makes it clear that “educated people in the Middle Ages never believed the winged men who represent angels in painting and sculpture to be more than symbols” (Discarded 71). This medieval view of angelic beings outlined in The Discarded Image is the view that Lewis respected theologically and employed imaginatively.

Working out of this scholarly background, and with a thorough awareness of the presentation of angels in scripture, Lewis is more concerned about the danger of a wrong conception of angels than about obliviousness to them. The travesty inherent in the modern infatuation with angels would have horrified him still more. The angel figurines and picture books of popular culture are far removed from the scriptural imagery of “mighty ones” who carry out God’s purposes, manifesting themselves as winds and flaming fires (Psalm 103.20 and Psalm 104.4)—so far removed that they are little more than insulting caricatures. With the loss of knowledge and respect for scriptures has come a greatly demeaned
understanding of spiritual realities, especially those concerned with supernatural phenomena. Even the idea of “guardian angels”—though essentially scriptural—has lost its credibility, perhaps even among serious Christians. Lewis speaks, in his Preface to The Screwtape Letters, about the wrong view of angels as something actually pernicious:

[...]

[A] belief in angels, whether good or evil, does not mean a belief in either as they are represented in art and literature. . . . They are given wings . . . in order to suggest the swiftness of unimpeded intellectual energy. They are given human form because man is the only rational creature we know. Creatures higher in the natural order than ourselves, either incorporeal or animating bodies of a sort we cannot experience, must be represented symbolically if they are to be represented at all. . . .

In the plastic arts these symbols have steadily degenerated. Fra Angelico’s angels carry in their face and gesture the peace and authority of heaven. Later come the chubby infantile nudes of Raphael; finally the soft, slim, girlish and consolatory angels of nineteenth-century art, shapes so feminine that they avoid being voluptuous only by their total insipidity—the frigid houris of a tea-table paradise. They are a pernicious symbol. In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying “Fear not.” The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say “There, there.” (viii-ix)

Though Lewis wrote of angels far more than he wrote of demons, his angels get little press. Would Lewis say, as he said of demons, that it is a mistake to think too little of them? Perhaps not. But I think Lewis would say that a sentimental and unscriptural preoccupation with angels is worse than not thinking of them at all. He was very aware of the danger inherent in the presentation of angels in literature. He said, “The literary symbols are more dangerous because they are not so easily recognized as symbolical.” (ix) The exception was, of course, Dante. His angels are best, Lewis says. “Before his angels we sink in awe.” (Preface to Screwtape Letters, ix).
We sink in awe, similarly, before the depiction of angels in Lewis’s fiction, particularly the *Space Trilogy*. *Out of the Silent Plant*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* best represent Lewis’s deep interest and insight into the nature and function of supernatural beings who are God’s agents. In a letter of 1957 Lewis makes it clear that he was working off of the various early ideas about angelic bodies. He explains his depiction of angels in the trilogy as taking into account both the older view (of the early Middle Ages) that angels “had bodies of aether as we have bodies of gross matter,” and the later view expressed by Aquinas that though there is “no composition of matter and form in an angel, yet there is act and potentiality” (Magnus on Aquinas from footnote to Lewis’s *Letters III*, p. 873). The idea Lewis derived from the early theologians was that the absence of matter does not mean the absence of form. He imagines the composition of angels has having form based on their power and potentiality, a form that need not be, but may be, expressed in a material way. In the same letter Lewis observes that from a religious or theological point of view, the question of the bodily manifestation of angels has little importance. He adds, “And anyway what do we mean by ‘Matter?’” (873).

In *Out of the Silent Planet* Ransom’s sense of ‘what is matter and what is not’ is challenged when he first encounters the eldila, the spiritual beings who preside over the planet Malacandra (or Mars). Eldila are first described for Ransom (by his hrossa friend Hyoi) as a kind of hnau—or rational being, but one that is hard to see because light goes right through them and they may be easily mistaken “for a sunbeam or even a moving of the leaves” (76). Later, when they are in a boat, Hyoi realizes that an eldil is coming to them over the water. He addresses it, asking, “What is it, sky-born?” The message delivered by the eldil is that Ransom must go immediately to the presiding eldil, the Oyarsa who rules the planet (79). Intense fear of this unknown, yet authoritative, power overwhelms Ransom. It is not, however, like a fear of the supernatural in the sense that one fears a ghost. He knew that the Oyarsa was “a real person”
Brown, C. S. Lewis and the Truth about Angels

(86). He is summoned to appear before him and he must go, and in going ascend to higher elevations and traverse a far more austere and terrifying landscape than the comfortable handramit of Malacandra, the valley-like crevices where he had felt safe. The difficulty of seeing eldila is a large part of the fear. Ransom asks “Why can I not see them? Have they no bodies?” The sorn Augray, his guide, explains:

Of course they have bodies. There are a great many bodies that you cannot see. . . . Body is movement. . . . If movement is faster, then that which moves is more nearly in two places at once. . . . But if movement is faster still . . . faster and faster, in the end the moving thing would be in all places at once. . . . The swiftest thing that touches our senses is light, we only see slower things by it, so that for us light is on the edge—the last thing we know before things become too swift for us. But the body of an eldil is a movement swift as light; you may say its body is made of light, but not of that which is light for the eldil. His “light” is a swifter movement which for us is nothing at all: and what we call light is for him a thing like water, a visible thing, a thing he can touch and bathe in—even a dark thing when not illumined by the swifter. And what we call firm things—flesh and earth—seem to him thinner, and harder to see, than our light, and more like clouds and nearly nothing. To us the eldil is a thin half-real body that can go through walls and rocks: to himself he goes through them because he is solid and firm and they are like a cloud. (94-95)

The explanation provides a rational context within which Ransom can begin to think about the eldila with a little understanding and much respect, rather than simply fear. He recalls the “human tradition of bright, elusive people sometimes appearing on the Earth” and realizes that such stories might in fact be rooted in fact rather than simply in folklore, as anthropologists would suggest (95). His understanding of the universe is being turned completely inside out—it is what is usually called the spiritual aspect of things that constitutes the truest and highest sort of reality.
Soon Ransom comes to Melidorn, the place where the Oyarsa manifests himself to the creatures of the planet. He is called into his presence. Despite the sorn’s explanation, Ransom feels “a tingling of his blood and a pricking of his fingers as if lightning were near him; and his heart and body seemed . . . to be made of water” (119)

“What are you so afraid of, Ransom of Thulcandra?” it said.

“Of you, Oyarsa, because you are unlike me and I cannot see you.”

“Those are not great reasons,” said the voice. . . . “These are not the real reasons. . . . You began to be afraid of me before you set foot in my world. And you have spent your time then in flying from me. My servant told you to come to me, you would not.” (119-20)

In order to explain his fear Ransom is forced to identify the root of it: the sinfulness of his own planet, where “false eldila” (fallen angels) destroy men, is what has caused human beings to assume that “if there is any life beyond their own air it is evil” (121).

Yet goodness is the most magnificent characteristic of this eldil—this presiding Oyarsa—who deals out justice tempered with mercy to the two other earthlings and to Ransom. Indeed goodness is the most magnificent characteristic of all the eldila we encounter in the trilogy. And the goodness is most striking for being both serene and energized.

In Perelandra, the second book of the trilogy, Ranson is brought to Perelandra (Venus) by the will of God himself (Maledil) and through the operation of his eldila, but he does not encounter any eldila on the planet until the closing episode. Having climbed to the top of the great mountain, he perceives (dimly at first) the presence of the Oyarsa of Perelandra and the (visiting) Oyarsa of Malacandra. They are enormous in power and authority, and they are speaking of him:

“The small one from Thulacandra is already here,” [said one eldil].
“Look on him, beloved, and love him,” said the [other],
“he is but breathing dust and a careless touch would unmake
him. . . . But he is in the body of Maledil and his sins are
forgiven.”

Through the edila Lewis re-works our preconceptions of the nature
of the universe. He breaks down any sense we may have of outer
space as a terrifying and inhospitable void. It is not empty and dark,
but full of mighty and holy beings carrying out the purposes of
God. The Oyarsa of Perelandra tells how she created the planet:
“I rounded this ball when it first rose from Arbol. I spun the air
about it and wove the roof. I built the Fixed Island and this, the holy
mountain as Maledil taught me.”

In the same scene the complex issue of angelic form is taken up
again—the discrepancy between what they intrinsically are and the
possible forms in which they may choose to manifest themselves.
The two eldila wish to take on an appropriate visible form in honor
of the occasion when the planet Venus will be handed over to the
King and Queen who are to rule it. The angels practice on Ransom,
as they try various forms. They appear to him first as “darting pillars
filled with eyes, lightning pulsations of flame, talons and beaks
and billowy masses of what suggested snow . . .” (197). Ransom
screams in horror, so they try something else—“rolling wheels . . .
concentric wheels moving with a rather sickening slowness one
inside the other” (198). The size is appalling, but beyond that this
manifestation is inscrutable and lacking in significance to human
perception. Ransom suggests they try again:

And suddenly two human figures stood before him. . . . They
were perhaps thirty feet high. They were burning white like
white hot iron. The outline of their bodies . . . seemed to
be faintly, swiftly undulating as though the permanence of
their shape, like that of waterfalls or flames, co-existed with a
rushing movement of the matter it contained. . . . Whenever
he looked straight at them they appeared to be rushing
toward him at enormous speed: whenever his eyes took in
their surroundings he realized that they were stationary. This
may have been due to the fact that their long and sparkling hair stood out great behind them as if in a great wind. . . . It was borne in upon him that the creatures were really moving, though not moving in relation to him. This planet . . . was to them a thing moving through the heavens. In relation to their own celestial frame of reference they were rushing forward to keep abreast of the mountain valley. Had they stood still, they would have flashed past him too quickly for him to see, doubly dropped behind by the planet’s spin on its own axis, and by its onward march around the Sun. (198-99)

Again, the absolute goodness of the angelic beings is placed in the context of their terrifying reality. The changeless expression of their faces is charity—archetypal charity—arising from “pure, spiritual, intellectual love” (199). Yet, simultaneously, these eldila are the true embodiments of the mythic Mars and Venus, part of the “celestial commonwealth” (201).

Lewis uses angels, to a lesser degree, but for a similar purpose in two other fictional works. That Hideous Strength further develops the connection between the classical idea of superior spiritual beings (the gods and goddesses of mythology) and the angels of scripture. The Great Divorce has a gloriously superior angel bus driver, an angel voice of devastating rebuke coming out of a waterfall, and an angel performing a miraculous deliverance for the man with the lizard of lust who is attempting to damn his soul. In both these books what is promoted in the reader is not a taste for further angel lore, but a feeling of awe toward the Absolute power, purity and beauty of God himself.

In a letter of 1958, Lewis makes it clear that his depiction of angels in his fiction was based on what he did actually believe about them: “If the angels (who I believe to be real beings in an actual universe) have that relation to the Pagan gods that they are assumed to have in Perelandra, they might really manifest themselves in real form as they did to Ransom” (Letters III, 1005).

Angels appear frequently in Lewis’s poetry. The three poems that are directly about celestial beings depict the nature of angels
in order to—by means of contrast—create a particular perspective on what it means to be human. “Angel’s Song” is a poem about the inability of angels to understand human experience. In this poem, however, the emphasis is on human sorrow over the loss of beloved places and beloved people, and (strangely) the angel’s regret at being unable to experience it. In a letter of 1948 Lewis describes man as “a creature whom the angels—were they capable of envy—would envy (Letters II. 844). “Scazons” picks up the same thread, pointing out that God has given man “the tether and pang of the particular,” but this mixed ‘blessing’ that angels have not received is presented here as something that allows man to reflect the divine nature in a way that angels cannot. Because we are more than spirits, because we are also souls, we feel the pain that arises from the loss of things through time.

The poem “On Being Human” builds an increasingly moving case for the sheer joy of being a human rather than an angel. Yet the vast superiority of angelic beings is apparent from the first stanza. Angels have a pure “intelligence” that allows them to “discern” the ultimate forms of nature, the “Archetypes,” and directly grasp the “verities” (absolute truths) that are accessible to mortal minds indirectly and only in limited forms. Their perception is astounding:

> Transparent in primordial truth, unvarying,  
> Pure Earthness and right Stonehood from their clear,  
> High eminence are seen; unveiled, the seminal  
> Huge Principles appear.  
> The Tree-ness of the tree they know—the meaning of  
> Arboreal life, how from earth’s salty lap  
> The solar beam uplifts it, all the holiness  
> Enacted by leaves’ fall and rising sap;

They know the things of nature as God knows them, perceiving the essential meaning of every created thing, and the holiness of it. Yet Angels cannot know the intensity of the world perceived through the senses: the blessing of coolness—“An angel has no skin”
The Journal of Inklings Studies

The next two stanzas build up more examples: angels cannot know the pleasure of summer smells, sea smells, fire smells—“an angel has no nose”; the glorious flavors of food and drink—“an angel has no nerves.”

Their advantages are vast—“far richer they” stanza five begins. But we, in our human form, are in fact protected, guarded, by our senses from the vast sphere they inhabit—“heavens too big to see”; we would die from exposure to that piercing glory, that “barb’d sublimity.” The divine beauty they live within would be like a fatal sword thrust: we could not endure it were that “dazzling edge of beauty” to be “unsheathed.” No, for us, living “within this tiny, charm’d interior” of our senses is enough for now. Yet in this homey space with our brains, our human consciousness, we have a point of connection with God himself that Angels cannot share. Because God became man and experienced our human, sense-bound existence, there is a secret “Forever ours, not theirs.” This private intimacy is something so wonderful, so absolutely unexpected that, as 1 Peter 1.12 tells us, angels long to understand it.

Though they are beautiful and powerful, these works are slight in comparison to Lewis’s fiction depicting the consciousness and personalities of angels. Nonetheless, the poems, because they are not fictional, speak more directly to the issue of how angels participate in the spiritual realities of our own lives. They make us wonder whether the presence and intervention of angels is something we should be more aware of than we are.

Certainly the Green Lady of Perelandra, though intimately aware of God, was for a long period totally unaware of the presence the angelic eldil who ruled her planet. And scripture does not seem to directly encourage in us a steady consciousness of the activity of angels. Angelic manifestations are rare, and are never ordinary and comfortable. They always bring shock and disequilibrium. Yet Lewis would say that angelic presence—though without visible manifestation—is an important spiritual reality, whether we are conscious of it or not. The epistle to the Hebrews speaks of people
entertaining angels without knowing it (13.2), and indeed we rarely, if ever, recognize the angels who come into our lives incognito.

Nonetheless, such obliviousness can sometimes be a bad thing. The nineteenth century poet Francis Thompson, in his poem “The Kingdom of God,” describes unawareness of angelic presence as spiritual blindness. He reminds us that the Kingdom of God is not distant from us in a strange, far-away realm, but is as close as our breathing. We think of the divine sphere as being somewhere far out in space, “Where the wheeling systems darken, /And our benumbed conceiving soars!” (9-10). But instead the movement of angels’ wings, “the drift of pinions” we so long to hear, is right alongside us, though we cannot hear its sound because we have our doors shut so tight against the supernatural. The guardian angels have not forsaken us; they keep their ancient, divinely appointed places. The Psalmist speaks of angels protecting us from striking our foot against a stone (91.12). Here Thompson depicts a scene of stumbling a little, turning over a stone in the path, and the angels lurching forward, their wings outspread protectingly: “turn but a stone, and start a wing.” The fault lies with us; it is our estrangement from the holy, Thompson says, that causes us time and time again to “miss the many-splendored thing.”

Reading Lewis cultivates our consciousness of angelic beings, but not by encouraging fanciful imaginings. He makes us see that our lives are overshadowed by God’s providence. It is one thing to collect figurines of angels; it is a very different thing to see one’s life—in all its vulnerability and precariousness—as hedged in by God’s supernatural provision. Lewis reminds us that the celestial beings that are concerned with our lives are nothing like kindly fairy godmothers; they are representatives of the inscrutable realities of eternity and executors of the relentless agenda of God. Lewis, like Thompson, does not want us to miss the splendor; he sharpens our attentiveness to the mighty beings who accomplish God’s purposes, but who may be so easily mistaken “for a sunbeam or even a moving of the leaves.”
Works Cited


