

Man and Everyman

Assembling the Fragments

by Joseph Pearce

The *Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis's masterful critique of the relativism that was as rampant in his day as it is in ours, represented the culmination of the author's quest for the quintessential meaning of man's being and purpose. Always a diligent searcher after truth, Lewis had climbed a long and arduous path from the faithless rationalism of his youth to the pinnacle of perspective from which *The Abolition of Man* was written. Following in Lewis's footsteps will enable us to understand not only the arduous path that he had taken but the ardor with which he trod it.

Lewis's long ascent began from the depths of the valley of doubt into which he had descended following the loss of the lukewarm Christianity of his childhood. "And so," he said, in his autobiographical *Surprised by Joy*, "little by little, with fluctuations which I cannot now trace, I became an apostate, dropping my faith with no sense of loss but with the greatest relief." By 1916, he was dismissing all religions with a 17-year-old's arrogant ignorance, stating superciliously that he believed in no religion because, as he said in correspondence, there was "absolutely no proof for any of them," adding that his atheism was merely a reflection of "the recognized scientific account of the growth of religions." Superstition had always "held the common people, but in every age the educated and thinking ones have stood outside it."

In spite of his superciliousness and his atheism, Lewis never sank into the quagmire of relativism. On July 6, 1922, he wrote in his diary of his intention to write a dissertation on "the hegemony of moral value" and, two years later, read a paper of that title to the Oxford Philosophical Society. He was, therefore, a believer in the Absolute and an advocate of the Permanent Things long before his conversion to Christianity. It was this belief in, and desire for, order that animated his objections to the aesthetic experimentation of the modern poets in general, and of T.S. Eliot in particular.

Lewis's didacticism and his desire for order and formality were at loggerheads aesthetically with the subtlety and obscurantism of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Lewis was seeking to unify "moral value," bringing all the pieces together according to the harmonizing principle of the Absolute, whereas Eliot was shoring up "fragments" of "broken images," scattering the pieces apparently at random. Appearances can be deceptive, however, and, after many years, Lewis finally came to accept Eliot as a kindred spirit. Eliot's *Modern Education and the Classics*, published in 1934, complemented Lewis's own "Reflections on Education With Special Reference to the Teaching of English," which was the subtitle of *The Abolition of Man*.

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Both works insisted that education cannot be divorced from morality and that the latter must inform the former. Similarly, Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (1948) dovetailed with Lewis's position regarding the necessity of Christianity to any genuine restoration of European culture. Most notably, Eliot's poetic depiction of "The Hollow Men," published in 1925, prefigures Lewis's "Men Without Chests" in *The Abolition of Man*. It is indeed a little odd that Lewis remained apparently blind to these multifaceted and multifarious similarities between his own work and that of one whom he deemed an "enemy."

This singular and peculiar blindness extended to other kindred spirits, such as Roy Campbell and Edith Sitwell, both of whom were satirized mercilessly in Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the former as the "bearded singer" and the latter as "Victoriana," two of the "Clevers" in Eschropolis. Lewis also attacked Roy Campbell in his poem "To the Author of *Flowering Rifle*" and, as with his belated friendship with Eliot, would only later recognize his affinity with one whom he had presumed to be an enemy. Similarly, although he had dismissed her so acrimoniously in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, I cannot imagine Lewis failing to appreciate Edith Sitwell's later poems, such as "Still Falls the Rain" or "The Shadow of Cain," the latter of which, being the first of her "three poems of the Atomic Age," resonates profoundly and disturbingly with the diabolical scientism of the N.I.C.E. in Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. "The Shadow of Cain" was written in 1945, the same year in which *That Hideous Strength* was published, and both works share the same "merely Christian" response to the destructive triumph of technology over humanity in the "atomic" age. Lewis's original inspiration for the N.I.C.E.—the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments—had been the controversy surrounding the founding of an atomic plant near Blewbury, 15 miles from Oxford. Sitwell's "Shadow of Cain" was inspired by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and was about "the fission of the world into warring particles, destroying and self-destructive." Both works also employed the imagery of coldness as a metaphor for the atomic age long before the post-war nuclear impasse became known as the "Cold War." One of the diabolical materialists in *That Hideous Strength* is named Frost, accentuating the chilling hardness of his characterization, whereas Sitwell characterized her poem as a description of "the gradual migration of mankind . . . into the desert of the Cold, towards the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima." According to Sitwell, the first two pages of her poem "were partly a physical description of the highest degree of cold, partly a spiritual description of this."

We did not heed the Cloud in the Heavens shaped like
the hand

Of Man . . .
the Primal Matter
Was broken, the womb from which all life began.
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose
in memory of Man.

In these lines, the similarities between Lewis's work and Sitwell's are made manifest, from the plaintive description of the Promethean arrogance of scientism, which is the "hideous strength" of the N.I.C.E., to the sobering consequences of such hideous strength in the abolition of man himself.

There was, in Lewis's own mind, a close relationship between *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength*. Both were written in 1943, although the latter would not be published until two years later, and Lewis makes a distinct connection between them in his Preface to *That Hideous Strength*: "This is a 'tall story' about devilry, though it has behind it a serious 'point' which I have tried to make in my *Abolition of Man*." Free will is the strength at the heart of man, but, at the same time, it is the weakness at the heart of man. If the will is ordered in its freedom—if it is in harmony with the Will of the One who bestowed it in the first place—it is man's greatest strength. If, on the other hand, it is disordered, rebelling against the Divine Will, it becomes his greatest weakness. Paradoxically, however, the weakness is strong, in the sense that it has great destructive—and, ultimately, self-destructive—power. At the moment that it ceases to be the true freedom that, as Edmund Burke insisted, "must be limited in order to be possessed," it becomes the anarchy that, as Oscar Wilde so memorably asserted, is "freedom's own Judas." Man betrays himself with a kiss when he kisses the mirror.

This Promethean self-centeredness is man's "hideous strength." And pride is at the root of the philosophical relativism that leads to the abolition of man. Put simply, the philosophical errors exposed by Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* lead to the diabolical idolization of science or "progress" that is the destructive driving force behind the N.I.C.E. in *That Hideous Strength*.

None of this is original to Lewis, of course; it is as old as Original Sin itself. It is, however, all-too-often forgotten in our meretriciously myopic age. Lewis himself, as a young atheist, had not been averse to an element of "progressive" idolization of science, genuflecting before "the recognized scientific account of the growth of religions." He was led away from such scientism, in large part, by the benign influence of G.K. Chesterton, so much so that it is easy to trace the intellectual roots of *The Abolition of Man* and *That Hideous Strength* to ideas that Lewis might have learned from his reading of Chesterton.

Lewis first read Chesterton while convalescing from an attack of "trench fever" in a British Red Cross field hospital at Le Treport in France during World War I. In *Surprised by Joy*, he notes:

I had never heard of him and had no idea of what he stood for; nor can I quite understand why he made such an immediate conquest of me. It might have been expected that my pessimism, my atheism, and my hatred of sentiment would have made him to me the least congenial of all authors. It would almost seem that Providence, or some 'second cause' of a very obscure kind,

quite over-rules our previous tastes when It decides to bring two minds together. Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love . . . In reading Chesterton, as in reading [George] Macdonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to remain a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere . . . God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous.

In the years after World War I, Lewis continued to read the works of Chesterton voraciously without ever succumbing to the fullness of their veracity. "Chesterton had more sense than all the moderns put together; bating, of course, his Christianity." Even as he was treating contemporaries such as Eliot, Campbell, and Sitwell with unmerited contempt, Lewis was allowing Chesterton's religious orthodoxy to drip-feed itself into his heart without ever consciously admitting it into his head. "Then I read Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* and for the first time saw the whole Christian outline of history set out in a form that seemed to make sense."



Melanie Anderson

Chesterton had written *The Everlasting Man* as a response and riposte to H.G. Wells' *The Outline of History*. Wells' work, ostensibly an objective account of the history of the world, was, in fact, a retelling of history according to Wells' own philosophy of materialistic determinism. Its overriding presumption was that human society is "progressing" toward perfection and that, in consequence, the past is always and necessarily inferior to the present, as the present is necessarily inferior to the future. Wells believed that human "progress" was blind, beneficial, and utterly unstoppable and inexorable. He perceived history as the product of invisible and immutable evolutionary forces that were coming to fruition in the 20th century. The history of man had begun in caves and was reaching a climax in the modern age with the triumph of science over religion. This, in turn, heralded a new dawn, a brave new world where happiness would be ushered in by technology. Wells' *Outline of History* had an immense and immediate impact. It was lauded by those who shared his philosophy as a thoroughly modern view of history, unshackled by the prejudices and superstitions of the past. It was history as if God did not matter. In 1923, Joy Davidman (who was destined many years later to become Lewis's wife) had read *The Outline of History* as an impressionable eight-year-old and had immediately declared herself an atheist.

Although Chesterton does not address Wells' work directly,

it is clear that *The Everlasting Man* represents an alternative “outline of history” intended as an antidote to Wells’ book and a rebuttal of his deterministic “progressive” thesis. In essence, Chesterton was insisting that man is essentially unchanging, that human society is not “progressing” inexorably, and that the health of any human society is directly dependent on the practice of virtue and the avoidance of sin. A virtuous society might be said to be progressing, and a sinful society might be said to be regressing; since, however, sin and virtue are dependent on the freedom of the will, there is nothing “blind” or “inexorable” about human history or destiny.

Chesterton’s book could also be seen as a response to George Bernard Shaw’s “progressive” Nietzscheanism, particularly in such plays as *Man and Superman*. Contrary to the Shavian or Wellsian belief that man is evolving or progressing into an *Übermensch*, Chesterton insisted that man is always in stasis; he is best understood in relation to Everyman, the archetype of his perennial unchanging self as observed through history and through the literature of the ages. The answer to the fallacy of *Man and Superman* was the felicity of *Man and Everyman*.

The triumph of Chesterton over Wells can be seen in Lewis’s work by the negative characterization of those who espouse the Wellsian *Weltanschauung*. In *Out of the Silent Planet* and, to a lesser extent, in *Perelandra*, the character of Dr. Weston is unmistakably a parody of Wells and others of his ilk, such as Shaw, J.B.S. Haldane, and Olaf Stapledon. Perhaps more specifically, Weston can be seen as a parody of one of Wells’ or Stapledon’s fictional heroes. In *That Hideous Strength*, Horace Jules is clearly meant to remind us of Wells, though the name also suggests an allusive nod in the direction of Jules Verne. Mr. Jules is described as a “cockney,” a clear allusion to Wells’ lower-middle-class origins on the outskirts of London, whose “novels had first raised him to fame and affluence.” The ideas that Jules expounds with self-opinionated zeal are close and clear reflections of those espoused by Wells. Lewis shows that Jules’ naive philosophy of optimistic scientism is not

merely deficient rationally but is being used by more sinister and, ultimately, demonic forces. Bad philosophy and its exponents become servants of evil.

If the villainous characters of Jules and Weston can be seen, in part at least, as fictional personifications of Wells, the hero of Lewis’s space trilogy, Dr. Elwin Ransom, described as a middle-aged philologist of Cambridge University, can be seen as a fictional personification of Lewis’s great friend J.R.R. Tolkien, who, when Lewis was writing his space trilogy, was a middle-aged philologist at Oxford. “As a philologist I may have some part in him,” Tolkien, speaking of Ransom, wrote to his son Christopher, “and recognize some of my opinions and ideas Lewisified in him.” It was singularly apt that Lewis should pay tribute to his friend in this way, not least because Tolkien was perhaps the most important influence, with the possible exception of Chesterton and George Macdonald, on Lewis’s ascent from faithlessness to faith. In what must have been the most important single conversation in Lewis’s life, at Oxford in September 1931, Tolkien had convinced Lewis that myths are not “beautiful lies and therefore worthless,” as Lewis had maintained; on the contrary, they contained “splintered fragments” of the One True Light and, as such, were priceless beacons of illumination in a darkened world. Within days of this conversation, Lewis announced that he had finally come to accept the Christian God.

The conversation with Tolkien can be seen to have influenced the discussion of the *Tao* in *The Abolition of Man*, principally in the sense in which Lewis insists that the convergence of belief in various religions and myths illustrates that each contains these “splintered fragments” of truth. The underlying harmony and uniformity of the various belief systems handed down through the centuries of human experience points to their ultimate fulfillment in the One Truth, which is revealed in Christ. The experience of man points to Everyman; and Everyman is perfected in Christ.

The Bird of Poetry by Sally Cook

The brilliant bird of poetry
No longer sits atop the tree,
But acts it’s multicolored rage
By thrashing of the foliage.

Poetic Bird, idiosyncratic.
Tangled in brambles bureaucratic.
Oh, sing again in tones melodious;
Reject the self indulgent odious

Endless song of me, me, me!
Your sad decline we grieve to see.
Such birds have ears, assailed by squeak;
They mutter of the great Art Speak.

That such a one could fly the coop—
Avoid becoming chicken soup!