

Power that Harms, Power that Heals

Reflecting on Two Books by C.S. Lewis: *That Hideous Strength* and *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*

The Setting

At the close of WWII, C.S. Lewis wrote two books about power. In 1945, his novel *That Hideous Strength* was written. He called this “a tall story about devilry”, it becomes a story about the power that harms. Two years later, in 1947, he wrote one of his greatest books about Christian faith: *Miracles, A Preliminary Study*. This is also a book about power, the power of God that heals and makes whole. I have wanted to examine both books together, first about bad power and then his affirmation of the good power of Jesus Christ. In December at Kindling’s Muse I presented a brief discussion on both of these books. That evening of discussion with the participants at Kindling’s Muse has inspired me to want to write this somewhat expanded study of these two C.S. Lewis books.

In the Autumn of 1939, following the invasion of Poland by the German Army (the beginning of World War II), C.S. Lewis preached a sermon at Oxford’s University Church. Its title was *Learning in Wartime*. Lewis the Oxford Don urged students to stay at their posts as scholars. He had this as a reason: to say “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered. The cool intellect must work not only against cool intellect on the other side, but against muddled heathen mysticisms which deny intellect altogether.” (Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. Eerdmans Edition. Grand Rapids, 1977. P. 50).

Some six years later in 1945, at the close of World War II Lewis wrote the third, and most terrifying of his Space Novels, *That Hideous Strength*. In the preface he describes his goal in this story:

This is a tall story about devilry, though it has behind it a serious “point”... in the story the outer rim of that devilry had to be shown touching the life of some ordinary and respectable profession. I selected my own profession...because my own is the only profession I know enough to write about. “(page 7, *That Hideous Strength*, Collier Books, MacMillan 1946).

And Now the Story

Lewis sets the story at a small English College name Bracton and its town and gown village Edgestow. Within the college grounds is Bracton Wood, important for its mythic significance as the traditional grave site of the Magician and Druid Merlin. At Edgestow a new and powerful presence has been established there; it is a government endowed National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (NICE). Rich in resources, NICE has the ability to purchase Bracton Wood from the college in order to house its offices and labs. The most Senior inner circle directors of NICE maintain total authority over NICE properties, as well as an elite police force to protect its high level, secret research experiments. As the story unfolds, we as readers soon

discover the diabolical intentions of NICE and finally at the story's ending there is a catastrophic collapse and destruction of this cultic evil. The author tells us in the preface that this tall story has a "serious point".

I have wondered if C.S. isn't reflecting on what he watched happen in 1939 with the invasion of Poland and what followed; the world watched the technological superiority of the German War Machine because of the skill of "cool intellect". But Lewis saw an even more grave harm than territorial conquest; he saw that "muddy mysticisms" were the goals of the core leadership of the Third Reich – theirs was to be a policy of cruelty toward conquered people and especially Jews who were targeted for harm. These two dangers, the "cool, methodical intellect" and the "muddy mysticism" are portrayed in the tall tale of *That Hideous Strength*.

In the first pages of the story we meet a young couple: Mark Studdock is a fellow in sociology at Bracton; his wife, Jane, is a research scholar at work on a dissertation concerning the poet John Donne. Jane has frightening and realistic dreams that play a part in the story. Fortunately, she is able to find personal safety with a community of caring people at a place called Saint Anne's House, which is led by Dr. Elwin Ransom a Philologist, who is known to readers of Lewis' *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. There is the terror of evil at NICE but it is not the whole story. There is a place of safety at St. Anne's House which is Jane's experience in the story.

A Focus on Mark/The Attraction/Allure of Power

I believe that the outer rim of devilry in *That Hideous Strength* is for Lewis the "serious point" of this story. He traces for us the "outer rim" through one young member of the college, and so he represents the evil at a level we can understand as Mark's story unfolds. We watch the bending of character in the young man Mark. He becomes the continuous linkage to the unfolding evil in the story narrative. We watch with alarm the gradual bending of his moral awareness and standards of behavior. This bending happens through his own decisions that are sourced in his own desires and ambition. The bending brings harm to himself, to others and almost to his wife, Jane.

The first of Mark's choices, is motivated by his desire to really matter as a new fellow at the college. The scene happens at a Bracton faculty meeting when the Sub Warden seeks him out in a confidential conversation:

"Yes," said Curry, "it will take the hell of a time. Probably go on after dinner. We shall have all the obstructionists wasting time as hard as they can. But luckily that's the worst they can do."

You would never have guessed from the tone of [Mark]'s reply what intense pleasure he derived from Curry's use of the pronoun "we." So very recently he had been an outsider, watching the proceedings of what he then called "Curry and his gang" with awe and with little understanding, and making at College meetings short, nervous speeches which had never influenced the course of events. Now he was inside and "Curry and his

gang” had become “we” or “the Progressive Element in College.” It had all happened quite suddenly and was still sweet in his mouth. (page 17).

Mark now enjoys a certain felt superiority above others at the school and he joins in eagerly at the putdowns of the others who are “reactionary” and “obstructionists”. Especially in the early part of the story, he joins in the language of mockery. “Denniston is off the rails” “These few are ‘die hards’;”, one scholar he described as “That little mascot”, about another, “let him drive on”. Of one man named Stone who might have become a friend, Mark realizes “How dangerous it is to be friends with a sinking man or even to be seen with him.” Once he is inside the important circle, others are outsiders and therefore diminished.

The next key marker in Mark’s character decline happens when the sub warden introduces him to one of the most senior members of both Bracton and the NICE leadership, Lord Feverstone, formerly known as Dick Devine. The sub warden informs Mark “He got you your fellowship.” This discovery is troubling to Mark since he had thought that his own superior scholarship had won him his college fellowship. As for Mark himself, he is in fact diminished by the new awareness. He now knows that Feverstone had known of him and he is the one who has invited Mark to the inside circle at NICE. Mark is then indebted permanently to Feverstone in every professional sense. Mark’s captivity is under way. These new NICE. figures are the powerful shapers of his destiny. From this point on we notice that Mark, though he feels himself an insider, is personally put on edge. Nothing is made really clear to him, not even the actual amount of the very large salary at first suggested to him.

Since Mark is a sociologist by educational training, he is given assignment to write research reports for national publication about the village of Edgestow. He soon realizes even after his own long hours of work that his research reports are always partly false in matters of actual factualness when they appear in print. He does not question the falsehoods incorporated in his work since by now he realizes the need to shape and conclude all of the stories to favor the public relations goals of NICE.

A low point in the intellectual and moral integrity of Mark comes when he is assigned to write a news account of a damaging riot in the village and argue vigorously for increasing the absolute authority of the NICE police force. He is to create the riot story before the riot has actually happened.

“And the stuff must be all ready to appear in the papers the very day after the riot,” said Miss Hardcastle. “That means it must be handed in to the D.D. [Deputy Director] by six tomorrow morning, at latest.”

“But how are we to write it tonight if the thing doesn’t even happen till tomorrow at the earliest?”

Everyone burst out laughing.

“You’ll never manage publicity that way, Mark,” said Feverstone. “You surely don’t need to wait for a thing to happen before you tell the story of it!”

"Well, I admit," said Mark, and his face was full of laughter, "I had a faint prejudice for doing so,"

...This was the first thing Mark had been asked to do which he himself, before he did it, clearly knew to be criminal. But the moment of his consent almost escaped his notice; certainly, there was no struggle, no sense of turning a corner. There may have been a time in the world's history when such moments fully revealed their gravity...But for him, it all slipped past in a chatter of laughter, of that intimate laughter between fellow professionals, which of all earthly powers is strongest to make men do very bad things before they are yet, individually, very bad men. (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*. page 130)

What About Jane?

Soon after these corrupt news items by Mark he is confronted with increasing intensity to bring his wife Jane into the Belbury Estate of NICE.

"Look, my friend, the real question is whether you mean to be truly at one with us or not"

"I don't quite follow," said Mark.

"Do you want to be a mere hireling? But you have already come too far in for that. You are at the turning point of your career, Mr. Studdock."...

"But of course I want to come in," said Mark. A certain excitement was stealing over him.

"The head thinks that you cannot be really one of us if you will not bring your wife here..."

This remark was like a shock of cold water in Mark's face. And yet...and yet... (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*. page 175)

While the inner circle of NICE had knowledge of Jane's amazing predictive dreams, Mark has no knowledge throughout the story of the importance of Jane to the organization. Fortunately, Mark fails in this assignment to bring Jane to NICE. Because of this failure – near the end of the novel – Mark is detained as keeper of the Tramp found near the gravesite of Merlin, whom NICE officials believe to be the actual Merlin, the Druid and Magician who holds the mythic power that they seek.

The Critical Choice

The final bending of temptation that Mark faces happens at the eve of the triumphant banquet planned by NICE in which Merlin is to be shown. Now that they have Merlin (or at least the one whom they think is Merlin but is actually the Tramp) under their control, and a translator they have employed to speak ancient Latin to their "Merlin" (He turns out to be the real Merlin) they expect the supreme show of power will now happen. Jane is no longer necessary for NICE; however, they decided to include Mark into the highest circle of power which has a ceremony of admittance for him. Mark is to walk with contempt over the wooden cross and its wooden figure of Christ.

Mark risks his own death in this final temptation. He sees for the first time the wooden figure of the helpless, suffering Christ who is broken by the same kind of power that Mark himself has supported earlier, but now at last he recognizes this in a moment of truth. He sees for himself the Man on the Cross.

“What are you waiting for, Mr. Studdock?” said Frost.

Mark was well aware of the rising danger... He was himself, he felt, as helpless as the wooden Christ. As he thought of this, he found himself looking at the crucifix in a new way—neither as a piece of wood nor a monument of superstition but as a bit of history. Christianity was nonsense, but one did not doubt that the man had lived and had been executed thus by the Belbury of those days... It was a picture of what the Crooked did to the straight. It was, in a more emphatic sense than he had yet understood, a *cross*.

“Do you intend to go on with the training or not?” said Frost. His eye was on the time....

...But this raised a question that Mark had never thought of before. Was *that* the moment at which to turn against the Man? If the universe was a cheat, was that a good reason for joining its side? Supposing the Straight was utterly powerless, always and everywhere certain to be mocked, tortured and finally killed by the Crooked, what then? Why not go down with the ship? He began to be frightened by the very fact that his fears seemed to have momentarily vanished. They had been a safeguard. . . they had prevented him, all his life, from making mad decisions like that which he was now making as he turned to Frost and said,

“It’s all bloody nonsense, and I’m damned if I do any such thing.” (Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*. page 337).

At the final NICE Banquet scene, the real Merlin, who is in fact the translator hired by NICE to speak to the Tramp is present in the room. What happens then is an incredible confusion of words and non-language, which leads to the final, chaotic destruction of NICE. This leads to murderous assaults within the inner circle and final destruction with fire and earthquake. Merlin helps Mark and the Tramp escape with their lives. Mark finds his wife Jane in St. Anne’s House. The story ends as Dr. Elwin Ransom sends Jane to the lodge where her battle weary husband Mark has been told to wait for her. Ransom’s words to Jane are, “Your husband is waiting for you in the lodge. . . you will find love. You will have no more dreams, have children instead.”

Reflections on the Serious Point

I have been wondering about this “serious point” in C.S. Lewis’ tall story. Lewis, as also in *Screwtape Letters* shows us as human beings tempted by ordinary desires or the craving power which leads to us becoming “bent”. *That Hideous Strength* spells out the deceptive ways the bending may happen and warns us against the pathways that lead to diminishment and

disrespect, whether of others or of ourselves, and finally of distrust of the Moral Straightness of Truth.

The intense pleasure Mark derived from the sub-wardens use of the pronoun “we” was the beginning of a perilous bending. Mark felt he was inside an important and powerful ring and that others were not. His laughter at writing the story about the riot before it was to happen at the direction of NICE turns a bending into crookedness.

C.S. Lewis presented a lecture in 1944 at King’s College in London which gives to us more insight into the temptation journey of Mark. Lewis’ London lecture was titled *The Inner Ring*. Lewis shares advice and a warning with the students at King’s College, “Of all passions, the passion for the Inner Ring is the most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things ... you were not looking for virtue or kindness or loyalty or humour or learning or wit or any of the things that can be really enjoyed. You merely wanted to be ‘in’.” (Lewis, C.S. *The Inner Ring*, 1944 page 63, 64).

But the false riot story which justified an escalation of NICE police terror tactics at Edgestow is concretely dangerous to average citizens that Mark does not know or care to know. In the story, Mark recognizes the criminal nature of his role yet he brushes past the alarm signal because of the laughter of his new friends. By then he also has joined with the Inner Circle Agreement at NICE he has joined in the belief that its projects and experiments were of such importance that certain ethical shortcuts were certainly justified.

C.S. Lewis may have included such a scene because of historical events on November 10, 1938 which was a night of sheer terror for the Jewish population in Germany. *The Evening of Broken Glass* was reported to the world as a spontaneous public temper tantrum of outrage at the news of a Third officer of the German embassy in Paris who was killed by a young student. In fact, the rioting was designed and carefully planned from the highest level of the Third Reich. 119 Synagogues were set on fire, 815 shops destroyed, and 20,000 Jews arrested. (*The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Wm. L. Shirer, Simon & Schuster New York. 1960. page 581).

Heading a Safe Place

This story honors a safe place like St. Anne’s House where a small community, including Jane, are safe enough to open themselves into the places of truth and grace. Finally, Mark is able to enter St. Anne’s House, now personally weary and broken by what he had seen and done. At least he had bravely withstood the temptation of the ceremony.

Finding the Hallway of St. Anne’s House

During the hard days of the Battle of Britain (1941-1944) C.S. Lewis presented some 28 broadcast talks on BBC. These lectures were later edited by Lewis for print and they became his

most famous book, *Mere Christianity*. In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes his goal in his lectures and the book:

I hope no reader will suppose that “mere” Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions —as if man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose, the worst of the rooms (whatever that may be) is, I think, preferable. It is true that some people may find they have to wait in the hall for a considerable time, while others feel certain almost at once which door they must knock at. I do not know why there is this difference, but I am sure God keeps no one waiting unless He sees that it is good for him to wait. (Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*. MacMillan New York 1952. Page xi).

For Lewis, his hallway is not unlike the St. Anne’s safe house in *That Hideous Strength*. I believe Lewis makes his point. Each of us need a safe place to wonder and think and hear. This space is not as much a place of Evangelistic proclamation as it is a place of pause at the edge of discovery of good news. Jesus himself tells of such a place. Jesus says to people who are troubled, “Come unto me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you pause. Learn from me for I am meek and lowly.” These words precede his heartwarming invitation, “Yoke with me, my yoke will fit you.” (Matthew 11).

Two years after writing *That Hideous Strength*, C.S. Lewis wrote an unforgettable book about the Power that Heals. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (MacMillan, New York, 1947) is that good book. This is a straightforward and clear affirmation of the Lord of Life who neither exploits or tempts but who invites our minds and hearts to discover healing grace. Early in *Miracles* he shares his thoughts whimsically.

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract and negative deity to the living God. I do not wonder... It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. “Look out!” we cry, “it’s *alive*.” And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back—I would have done so myself if I could—and proceed no further with Christianity. An “impersonal God”—well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads—better still. A formless life force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap—best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, the king, husband—that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that a *real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion (“Man’s search for God”!) suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to *that*! Worse still, supposing He had found us?

So it is a sort of Rubicon. One goes across; or not. But if one does, there is no manner of security against miracles. One may be in for *anything*." (Lewis, *Miracles*, page 97).

The great chapter in *Miracles* is The Grand Miracle. In this chapter, Lewis explains with vividness and imagination the heaviest weight of Theological Truth, while preserving the mystery of truth too large to fasten down and yet at the same time identifiable. His approach is to show how the Good News of Jesus brings the puzzle pieces of life and our search for meaning together.

He creates a set of analogies that help us understand the wholeness and sacrificial grace of Christ that knows how to find us even in the most dangerous and complicated places.

Since the Incarnation, if it is a fact, holds this central position, and since we are assuming that we do not yet know it to have happened on historical grounds, we are in a position which may be illustrated by the following analogy. Let us suppose we possess parts of a novel or a symphony. Someone now brings us a newly discovered piece of manuscript and says, "This is the missing part of the work. This is the chapter on which the whole plot of the novel really turned. This is the main theme of the symphony." Our business would be to see whether the new passage, if admitted to the central place which the discoverer claimed for it, did actually illuminate all parts we had already seen and "pull them together." Nor should we be likely to go very far wrong. The new passage, if spurious, however attractive it looked at the first glance, would become harder and harder to reconcile with the rest of the work the longer we considered the matter. But if it were genuine, then at every fresh hearing of the music or every fresh reading of the book, we should find it settling down, making itself more at home, and eliciting significance from all sorts of details in the whole work which we had hitherto neglected. Even though the new central chapter or main theme contained great difficulties in itself, we should still think it genuine provided that it continually removed difficulties elsewhere. Something like this we must do with the doctrine of the Incarnation. Here, instead of a symphony or a novel, we have the whole mass of our knowledge. The credibility will depend on the extent to which the doctrine, if accepted, can illuminate and integrate that whole mass. It is much less important that the doctrine itself should be fully comprehensible. We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else. (Lewis, *Miracles*, page 113).

Jesus makes us safe at the cost of his own safety. In *That Hideous Strength* Mark Studdard had a sudden if only half-understood insight into the costly lowliness of the broken Jesus during the harrowing moment of his last and gravest temptation. He who had only really thought of himself in that moment saw suffering outside of his own control and his own life. C.S. Lewis puts it this way.

In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if

embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature. He had created. But He goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both coloured now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colourless in the dark, he lost his colour too. (Lewis, *Miracles*, page 115-116).

St. Anne's House plays a role in *That Hideous Strength*. Like the pause space that Jesus promised when he said, "Come unto me all you who are worn out by work and I will give you pause. Then take your time if necessary and learn from me" (Matthew 11:28). C.S. Lewis concludes his Grand Miracle Chapter with many themes brought together in his mind.

In *Miracles* we do not meet a wooden figure or a copy of a cross, but the one who lost his color and yet the colorlessness of death could not hold him captive. He is alive and able to find us not to tempt us but to heal us and fulfill and surprise us with joy.