

What pleasures there are in the world. I seem to have more than anyone could deserve – a fortnight ago with you on our own hills, and now woodcutting on a fine autumn day in this delightful place.

Minto is well and sends her love. I met Baxter, the professor of English at Belfast,<sup>38</sup> last night. The only common acquaintance we discovered was – Dr Leslie!!

Yours

Jack

*Jack had given the smaller of his rooms at Magdalen to Warnie, who had now turned it into a kind of new 'little end room'. The family papers were there, and Warnie was putting them in order, and typing them out, with editorial notes, on his little Royal typewriter. 'It is one of the most engrossing tasks I have ever undertaken,' he wrote in his diary of 9 January 1931, 'and I look forward with more eagerness than ever to my days of retirement in order to finish it' (BF, p. 75). This massive task, undertaken over a number of years, would result in the 11 volumes of 'Lewis Papers: Memoirs of the Lewis Family 1850–1930'. About the middle of the year Warnie re-enlisted for a second tour of duty in China so he could retire earlier than originally planned. He went on embarkation leave on 26 August, and sailed for China on 9 October, not to return home until 14 December 1932.*

TO ARTHUR GREEVES (W):

[The Kilns]  
Sept 22nd /31

My dear Arthur,

Thanks for your letter of the 11th. I couldn't write to you last Sunday because I had a week end guest – a man called Dyson<sup>39</sup> who teaches English at Reading University. I meet him I suppose about four or five times a year and am beginning to regard him as one of my friends of the 2nd class – i.e. not in the same rank as yourself or Barfield, but on a level with Tolkien or Macfarlane.

<sup>38</sup> Frederick William Baxter (1897–1980) was Professor of English Literature at the Queen's University, Belfast, 1930–49, and Professor of English Language and Literature at the same university 1949–58.

<sup>39</sup> See Henry Victor Dyson 'Hugo' Dyson in the Biographical Appendix.

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He stayed the night with me in College – I sleeping in in order to be able to talk far into the night as one cd. hardly do out here. Tolkien came too, and did not leave till 3 in the morning: and after seeing him out by the little postern on Magdalen bridge Dyson and I found still more to say to one another, strolling up and down the cloister of New Building, so that we did not get to bed till 4. It was really a memorable talk. We began (in Addison's walk just after dinner) on metaphor and myth – interrupted by a rush of wind which came so suddenly on the still, warm evening and sent so many leaves pattering down that we thought it was raining. We all held our breath, the other two appreciating the ecstasy of such a thing almost as you would. We continued (in my room) on Christianity: a good long satisfying talk in which I learned a lot: then discussed the difference between love and friendship – then finally drifted back to poetry and books.<sup>40</sup>

On Sunday he came out here for lunch and Maureen and Minto and I (and Tykes) all motored him to Reading – a very delightful drive with some lovely villages, and the autumn colours are here now.

I am so glad you have really enjoyed a Morris again. I had the same feeling about it as you, in a way, with this proviso – that I don't think Morris was conscious of the meaning either here or in any of his works, except *Love is Enough* where the flame actually breaks through the smoke so to speak. I feel more and more that Morris has taught me things he did not understand himself. These hauntingly beautiful lands which somehow never satisfy, – this passion to escape from death plus the certainty that life owes all its charm to mortality – these push you on to the real thing because they fill you with desire and yet prove absolutely clearly that in Morris's world that desire cannot be satisfied.

The Macdonald conception of death<sup>41</sup> – or, to speak more correctly, St Paul's<sup>42</sup> – is really the answer to Morris: but I don't think I should have understood it without going through Morris. He is an unwilling witness to the truth. He shows you just *how far* you can go without knowing God, and that is far enough to force you (tho' not poor Morris himself) to go further. If ever you feel inclined to relapse into the mundane point

40 Further important details of this 'memorable talk' with Dyson and Tolkien on Saturday 19 September are found in the next two letters to Greeves.

41 There are many good examples in Lewis's *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (1946). Extract number 146 reads: 'All that is not God is death.'

42 e.g. Romans 5:12–21, 6:5–23; 1 Corinthians 15:12–58.

of view – to feel that your book and pipe and chair are enough for happiness – it only needs a page or two of Morris to sting you wide awake into uncontrollable longing and to make you feel that everything is worthless except the hope of finding one of his countries. But if you read any of his romances through you will find the country dull before the end. All he has done is to rouse the desire: but so strongly that you *must* find the real satisfaction. And then you realise that *death* is at the root of the whole matter, and why he chose the subject of the Earthly Paradise, and how the true solution is one he never saw.

I have finished the Taylor, and enjoyed it much from the purely literary point of view. As a religious writer I put him low and still think as I did when I last wrote.

I have been studying Hamlet very intensively, and never enjoyed it more. I have been reading all the innumerable theories about him, and don't despise that sort of thing in the least: but each time I turn back to the play itself I am more delighted than ever with the mere atmosphere of it – an atmosphere hard to describe and made up equally of the prevalent sense of death, solitude, & horror and of the extraordinary graciousness and loveliness of H. himself.<sup>43</sup> Have you read it at all lately? If not, do: and just surrender yourself to the magic, regarding it as a poem or a romance.

I don't *think* I left any pyjamas at Bernagh, but I'm afraid I want you to send me something else, W. is editing (i.e. arranging and typing) all the letters we brought from home (*don't* mention this to any one) so as to give a continuous history of the family.<sup>44</sup> We have just got to 1915 and it is maddening to have all my Bookham letters to my father (wh. tell nothing) and to know that all my Bookham letters to you are eating their heads off at Bernagh. Also, once I had them in type, I could renew those glorious years whenever I read them. Would it be a great bother to you to let me have the lot. If you want, you can have them back when they have been edited: and I promise faithfully that he will see nothing wh. gives you away in any respect, for I will go through them all first by myself. If you wd. let me have them *as soon as possible* and tell me what I owe you for registered postage, I shd. be very much obliged.

<sup>43</sup> These are some of the ideas that went into Lewis's essay, 'Hamlet: The Prince or the Poem?' found in *Selected Literary Essays*.

<sup>44</sup> The result of which was the Lewis Papers.

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It is perfect autumn here – splashes of yellow on every other tree and delicious smells. We have been up in the wood clipping all afternoon.

I think I know the walk at the back of Stormont and may have done it oftener than you. This is a bad business about the rum. Give my love to your Mother. Tell Forrest I ask every one I meet about the human tendency to represent oneself as a daring sinner (untruly) and have met no one yet who doesn't regard it as being too obvious to be worth talking about

Yrs

Jack

*About a week after the above letter was written, Monday 28 September, Warnie took Jack to Whipsnade Zoo in the sidecar of his motorbike, and it was during this outing that Jack took the final step in his conversion. 'As I drew near the conclusion,' he wrote in the last chapter of SB],*

*I felt a resistance almost as strong as my previous resistance to Theism. As strong, but short-lived, for I understood it better. Every step I had taken, from the Absolute to 'Spirit' to 'God', had been a step towards the more concrete, the more imminent, the more compulsive...I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. 'Emotional' is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake.*

TO ARTHUR GREEVES (W):

[The Kilns]  
Oct. 1st /31

My dear Arthur,

Very many thanks for the letter and enclosure that arrived this morning. Now, as to their return. I confess that I had not supposed you often read them, and had in view merely an *ultimate* return when W. had finished his editing, that is, in about 4 years' time. If however you want

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till after his return, 3 years hence. That indeed is what I ought to have done.

As things are, the four years I mentioned consist of 1 year's editing preceded by 3 years during wh. W. will be in China and the letters will be lying neatly in a drawer – safe, but idle. You see what a fool I have made of myself! The matter is now entirely in your hands, for of course they are your property not mine. If you want them seriously I will send them back: if you don't, they will be perfectly safe where they are, and safer indeed without the risk of a second postal journey. Still, the next move is to you and I will obey any orders you give.

This has filled up nearly a page so that I don't know whether I should now start to try and explain what I meant about Christianity. For one thing, reading your reply, I began to feel that perhaps I had said too much in my previous letter, that perhaps I was not nearly as clear on the subject as I had led you to think. But I certainly have moved *a bit*, even if it turns out to be a less bit than I thought.

What has been holding me back (at any rate for the last year or so) has not been so much a difficulty in believing as a difficulty in knowing what the doctrine *meant*: you can't believe a thing while you are ignorant *what* the thing is. My puzzle was the whole doctrine of Redemption: in what sense the life and death of Christ 'saved' or 'opened salvation to' the world. I could see how miraculous salvation might be necessary: one could see from ordinary experience how sin (e.g. the case of a drunkard) could get a man to such a point that he was bound to reach Hell (i.e. complete degradation and misery) in this life unless something quite beyond mere natural help or effort stepped in. And I could well imagine a whole world being in the same state and similarly in need of miracle. What I couldn't see was how the life and death of Someone Else (whoever he was) 2000 years ago could help us here and now – except in so far as his *example* helped us. And the example business, tho' true and important, is not Christianity: right in the centre of Christianity, in the Gospels and St Paul, you keep on getting something quite different and very mysterious expressed in those phrases I have so often ridiculed ('propitiation' – 'sacrifice' – 'the blood of the Lamb') – expressions wh. I cd. only interpret in senses that seemed to me either silly or shocking.

Now what Dyson and Tolkien showed me was this: that if I met the idea of sacrifice in a Pagan story I didn't mind it at all: again, that if I met the idea of a god sacrificing himself to himself (cf. the quotation

opposite the title page of *Dymer*)<sup>48</sup> I liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it: again, that the idea of the dying and reviving god (Balder, Adonis, Bacchus) similarly moved me provided I met it anywhere *except* in the Gospels. The reason was that in Pagan stories I was prepared to feel the myth as profound and suggestive of meanings beyond my grasp even tho' I could not say in cold prose 'what it meant'.

Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others, but with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*: and one must be content to accept it in the same way, remembering that it is God's myth where the others are men's myths: i.e. the Pagan stories are God expressing Himself through the minds of poets, using such images as He found there, while Christianity is God expressing Himself through what we call 'real things'. Therefore it is *true*, not in the sense of being a 'description' of God (that no finite mind could take in) but in the sense of being the way in which God chooses to (or can) appear to our faculties. The 'doctrines' we get *out* of the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that wh. God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Does this amount to a belief in Christianity? At any rate I am now certain (a) That this Christian story is to be approached, in a sense, as I approach the other myths. (b) That it is the most important and full of meaning. I am also *nearly* certain that it really happened.

No time for more now. I hope to have some literary chat in my next letter.

Yours

Jack

48 *The Hávamál*, no. 138: 'Nine nights I hung upon the Tree, wounded with the spear as an offering to Odin, myself sacrificed to myself'. *The Hávamál*, which means 'Sayings of the High One' (i.e. Odin, the chief god of Norse mythology), is a ninth century composite poem of 164 maxims or strophes in Old Norse. It is one of the poems collectively known as the Elder Edda.