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**Wordsmiths as Warriors:
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by J. Daryl Charles

Bigotry may be roughly defined as the anger of men who have no opinions.
— G.K. Chesterton

Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point.
— C.S. Lewis

While this centenary celebration focuses on the literary legacy of C.S. Lewis, the name of another literary legend—a generation removed—presses to the fore as we consider the formative influences upon Lewis' own spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage. Certainly Lewis himself would concede the influence of the one whose writings—*The Everlasting Man*, in particular—were instrumental in bringing him to the place of vital faith. Lewis' first encounter with G.K. Chesterton was in 1918, while recovering in a military hospital from a bout of trench fever. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis reflects on this initial encounter, unable to comprehend fully why Chesterton, unknown to him at the time, had made such "an immediate conquest" of him.

In retrospect, however, it is not at all difficult to understand what drew Lewis to Chesterton. In addition to a sharp wit, keen sense of humor and extraordinarily fertile literary imagination, each possessed a fierce intellect and passion for truth that, when combined, inevitably wove its way through controversy and debate. On display in the writings of both men is that uncanny ability to cut to the heart of a matter, recognize faulty assumptions that drive culture, and then expose those assumptions with considerable literary flare. It is this delicious mix of writ and wit that has inspired succeeding generations of Christians -- and this among Roman Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox alike. To be sure, the styles of Chesterton and Lewis differ

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drastically. The former, using pun and pen, fearlessly stormed ramparts and attempted to establish beachheads; the latter operated quietly behind enemy lines in the respectable groves of the academy. Yet both men engaged the world with a view of changing it. Both men, though not *of* the world, were very much *in* it. And both expended their all, in order that the Christian cause might be furthered.

In reading both Chesterton and Lewis, one not infrequently senses something of a kinship. Fueling and sustaining this kinship is the strong impression that one has discovered—or rediscovered—a wise, old friend, a friend who has already been where we are treading. Frequently, North Americans will be heard to say of Lewis, for example, that he taught them both to *think* as well as to think *Christianly*. Whatever the reasons for this, *something* about the character of twentieth-century religious thought has resulted in the immense appeal of Chesterton and Lewis -- an appeal, admittedly, that can take on proportions larger than life. At the close of our century, both Lewis and Chesterton still possess a power strangely unaccounted for by the average reader—a power that allows each to "walk into the heart without knocking."

Although a generation separates these two apologists of the faith, Christian warriors each, they stand as it were shoulder to shoulder—each willing to engage friend or foe and each passionately committed volunteers in the service of the Lord of Hosts.

Wordsmiths and Warriors: Emerging Profiles

Men of letters, both Chesterton and Lewis were prodigious and prolific contributors to diverse literary genres, both in prose and in

verse—the one a journalist, the other a connoisseur of medieval and Renaissance literature. Both wrote with unbounded literary imagination—what Chesterton would frequently refer to as "romance." This imagination, coupled with a knack for getting to the heart of a matter, has endeared both Chesterton and Lewis to succeeding generations. Upon engaging both, the reader senses what Aidan Mackay describes as the "inevitable feeling of rightness" about so many of their utterances.

As their popularity particularly among Protestants and Catholics alike attests, both men made their mark not only as writers but also as thinkers during their day. The life of the mind was utterly important to each. Equipped with a robust intellect that found creative and forceful literary expression, both "earnestly contended for the faith," borne by a conviction of a *philosophia perennis* that transcended—and penetrated—culture, and inevitably, compelled each toward a critical appraisal of modernity. A salient feature of modernity (with its offspring, postmodernity) is a tendency to worship the present and disavow the past. The wisdom of the past, which in contemporary culture receives short shrift, for Chesterton and Lewis was, by contrast, ever relevant. In this way the two men continuously challenged the intellectual snobbery of their day.

To suggest strong affinities between Chesterton and Lewis, however, is not to deny conspicuous differences, most notably in their work habits. An acquaintance of both men summarized the contrast this way: "Lewis wrote meticulously, cherishing time like a jewel: Chesterton wrote chaotically, making time into a disheveled mess and somehow getting away with it." While the one was

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known for being supremely disciplined with the mind and the pen, the other was not.

One of the glaring contrasts between the two men is the public persona that attended each—i.e., *how* each engaged the world. Because of his appearances on radio, in public meetings and running debates with "friendly foes" such as Bernard Shaw, Chesterton came to be viewed as something of a "political animal." Swashbuckling was his style, charging into the battle with both guns blazing was his *modus operandi*. John David Burton, in a most insightful essay, captures the Chestertonian swagger most appropriately:

If a man be known by his enemies as well as by his friends, Chesterton needs no introduction. He goes forth, "fighting for the Christian civilization," throwing down the gauntlet to whatever, whomever is there in public view. The Fabian Society, Calvinism (at least Chesterton's slight grasp on the Gospel via Geneva), the landed aristocracy, industrial capitalism: you name it and Chesterton tackles it. He lives the Roman proverb, "I am a man and nothing human is foreign to me." His eccentric life-style and what seems at times to be a "hit and run" literary style may tempt some to see him as a shambling crusader seeking to slay a dragon a day to earn a knight's pay. To read Chesterton again and again, particularly the nonfiction prose, is to see that he intends to take seriously and to be taken seriously on the public issues of his day, some of which are still with us.

Lewis, by contrast, wishes most of the time neither to be political nor to be very public. This, of course, may well be due to the habitat of each man, as Burton suggests. A more plausible explanation, however, is that Lewis was much more the private individual. Consider, by way of example, the travel habits of both men. Chesterton enjoyed very much visiting the States, notwithstanding his little sympathy for the Prohibition. Lewis, on the other hand, was often invited to this country but never came. To a former pupil, Lewis confided that he looked upon every invitation to visit the U.S. with horror. It is then strangely ironic that for a brief and very tender moment in Lewis' life, love and grief are intricately bound up in the object of an *American* woman.

By most accounts, Chesterton and Lewis are viewed as polar opposites with respect to their education. Lewis, having spent thirty years at Oxford and then another ten at Cambridge before his death in 1963, was plainly a scholar of stupendous erudition; Chesterton, in stark contrast, is typically deemed "half-educated," illustrated by the comment of Evelyn Waugh: "What wonderful things Chesterton would have to say if only he had been an educated man!"

While the difference in education between Chesterton and Lewis is considerable, one dare not make too much of it. The fact of Chesterton's education—or lack thereof—as he stands next to Lewis in the end is less of a factor than some would have it. Chesterton himself grew up in a home where education was valued—and its importance taken for granted:

The general background of all my boyhood was agnostic. My own

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parents were rather exceptional, among people so intelligent . . . [A]gnosticism was an established thing. We might almost say that agnosticism was an established church. There was a uniformity of unbelief among educated people . . .

Thus, it seems exaggerated to maintain—or insinuate—that Chesterton's writing and thinking lack responsibility (with whom shall he be compared?). If indeed they mirror a lack, it is precisely this quality that seems to have attracted Lewis, who as a Second Lieutenant in the Light Infantry was recuperating from sickness near the end of World War I when infected by another "virus" of sorts:

It was here that I first read a volume of Chesterton's essays. 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. . . . Liking an author may be as involuntary and improbable as falling in love. I was by now a sufficiently experienced reader to distinguish liking from agreement. I did not need to accept what Chesterton said in order to enjoy it. His humor was of the kind which I like best—not "jokes" imbedded in the page like currants in a cake, still less . . . a general tone of flippancy and jocularly, but the humour which is not in any way separable from the argument but is rather . . . the "bloom" on dialectic itself . . . In reading Chesterton, as in reading

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.

In the end, it is the combination of style and thought in Chesterton that Lewis finds most appealing. Chesterton thinks philosophically, he thinks Christianity, he thinks in terms of the past when examining the present; ultimately, for Lewis he makes sense. Significantly, it is *Everlasting Man*, a work which—if it does anything—engages and critiques reigning philosophical assumptions, that is the catalyst for drawing Lewis to a place of intellectual, if not spiritual, conversion. Both Chesterton and Lewis were respected by their peers—the former by leading thinkers and propagandists of the day; the latter as a result of thirty years as an Oxford don and ten years at Cambridge, where even atheists were forced to concede begrudging admiration.

Wordsmiths as Warriors: The Pen and the Sword

It is not without consequence for their later work that both Chesterton and Lewis endured a dark period of scepticism and despair before converting to vital faith. For both, this experience was to sharpen them—as thinkers and writers. Once through the tunnel, they could critique with clarity and cogency the state of moral and philosophical scepticism. There is an authority that lends itself to their writings because of their intimate acquaintance with both sides—faith and unbelief.

For Chesterton the dark side manifest itself at the Slade School of Art in the early

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1890's. In his *Autobiography* Chesterton reminisces about the severity of scepticism that confronted him during his days at the art school:

[T]here was a time when I had reached that condition of moral anarchy within, in which a man says, in the words of Wilde, that 'Atys with the blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am'. . . I could at this time imagine the worst and wildest proportions and distortions of more normal passion . . . overpowered and oppressed with a sort of congestion of imagination. . . I had never heard of Confession . . . ; but that is what is really needed in such cases. . . Anyhow the point is here that I dug quite low enough to discover the devil . . . When I had been for some time in these, the darkest depths of the contemporary pessimism, I had a strong inward impulse to revolt; to dislodge this incubus or throw off this nightmare.

In his autobiographical work of 1908 titled (somewhat dauntingly) *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton devotes the first two chapters—"The Maniac" and "The Suicide of Thought"—to this journey of despair. The contours of this journey are described vividly, as only one who has been there could describe them. The somewhat autobiographical phantasy, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, written the same year, also mirrors the earlier breakdown and recovery.

For Lewis, it was from a religious nihilism of a strongly "gnostic" character that personal deliverance was to come. Significantly, reading Chesterton contributed foremost to this

emergence into the light. By Lewis' own testimony, the awareness of the occult and supernatural evil was with him during his boyhood and would remain. Primary influences on the young Lewis during this darker period are acknowledged to be two-fold: (1) a matron at the school in Malvern, described by Lewis as "floundering in the mazes of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism, the whole Anglo-American occultist tradition," and (2) reading people like William Butler Yeats, whose life-view was steeped in spiritualism, theosophy and pantheism. Had the right opportunity presented itself, "I might now be a Satanist or a maniac," Lewis later reflects. It is about this time—ca. 1931—that Lewis simultaneously embraces Christ's lordship and experiences a shift away from preoccupation with the inner realm of the occult and toward an affirmation of the rational self—a quality that is integral to many of his writings. This however should not be misconstrued as a *denial* of the supernatural world of evil for Lewis. Though a world to be avoided, it was also for Lewis a world to be taken into account.

It is significant that both Chesterton and Lewis claimed to be profoundly affected by the writings of George MacDonald, whose own theological and philosophical assumptions imbue his poetry, novels, children's fantasies and literary criticism. Already as a child Chesterton had read MacDonald, and in later years he reflected on how powerfully the fantasy *The Princess and the Goblin* had influenced him. Of peculiar interest is the appearance in Chesterton of a white horse (for example, *Ballad of the White Horse*), which was a recurring image in MacDonald's novels (for example, in *The Princess and the Goblin* and *The Back of the North Wind*). Years later Chesterton would confess: "To this day I can

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never see a big white horse in the street without a sudden sense of indescribable things."

Somewhat the same could be said for MacDonald's influence on Lewis as well. Profound as this influence was, it came about almost by accident:

It must be more than thirty years ago that I bought—almost unwillingly, for I had looked at that volume on that bookstall and rejected it on a dozen previous occasions—the Everyman edition of *Phantastes*. A few hours later I knew that I had crossed a great frontier. I had already been waist-deep in Romanticism; and likely enough, at any moment, to flounder into its darker and more evil forms, slithering down the steep descent that leads from the love of strangeness to that of eccentricity and thence to that of perversion. Now *Phantastes* was romantic enough . . . ; but there was a difference. Nothing was at that time further from my thoughts than Christianity and I therefore had no notion what this difference really was... What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise . . . my imagination.

The effects of MacDonald's writings can be measured quite straightforwardly by Lewis' own words of tribute:

I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; indeed I fancy that I have never written a book in which I did not quote from

him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it.

In the end, MacDonald helps shape a worldview perspective that will be indispensable to two of this century's most effective apologists. Although Chesterton, unlike Lewis, was unschooled in logic and dialectic, both men were controversialists, engaging scepticism and irreligion in their respective eras. What Chesterton lacked in scholarly erudition he made up for with a passionately combative mind. Chesterton's was the age of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, and Sigmund Freud; of Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, Ludwig Wittgenstein and H.G. Wells. Christian faith was very much under siege. In the year 1891, when Chesterton was seventeen, Friedrich Engels was publishing his completion of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Openly materialistic atheism, socialism and social Darwinism were vying for restless hearts and minds. Chesterton engaged "friendly enemies" such as Bernard Shaw and Wells in public debates, on BBC radio talks broadcast regularly during the 1930's, as well as through his journalism and books. The "heretics" with whom he debated were men "whose philosophy was quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong."

Though Chesterton and Wells were contemporary, Lewis' life overlaps that of Wells, whose works such as *The Time Machine* (1895), *The War of the Worlds* (1898), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901) are considered pioneering masterpieces of science fiction, and whose *The Outline of History* (1920) sets forth a progressive view of

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time and cosmogony predicated on Darwinian evolutionary theory. It is during Lewis' lifetime that Jules Verne's popularity was peaking, corresponding to a self-confessed "ravenous" interest in science fiction on the part of Lewis himself. When people think of Lewis the apologist, they normally tend to think of works other than *Perelandra*. It may well be, however, that in this fantasy Lewis the apologist shines brightest, given the vivid representations of the demonic realm, the nature of sin, the nature of grace and the nature of the universe that are on display. Lewis, too, with an extraordinarily fecund imagination, is a man of his time.

Conclusion

Both Chesterton and Lewis are indeed men of their times, creatively seeking to carve out an apologetic for Christian truth-claims in the context of the prevailing intellectual climate. Both men engage the world not because they despise it but because God loves it. They continue to serve as a model to the Christian lay person, whatever his or her calling. Both are fighters for the cause of Christ; both are artists, applying the rich brushstrokes of literary imagination. Of the many individual qualities that these two have in common, one of the more striking is their ability to cut to the very heart of an issue in such a way that their arguments come to us, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, with remarkable clarity, freshness and relevance. The spirit of their bold and artistic witness still beckons us.

Notes

¹*Everlasting Man* is devoted to two principal ends—highlighting the contours of human history and examining the effects of Christ's visitation upon history. Given this agenda, in the book's introduction Chesterton chides the critics of Christianity—evolutionists and professors of comparative religion in particular—for their "stark hypocrisy" in pretending to be "impartial."

²C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 180.

³Thus Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1952), p. 193.

⁴Aidan Mackay, "The Christian Influence of G.K. Chesterton on C.S. Lewis," in Andrew Walker and James Patrick, eds., *A Christian for All Seasons: Essays in Honor of C.S. Lewis* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1992), p. 82.

⁵Christopher Derrick, "Some Personal Angles on Chesterton and Lewis," in Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie, eds., *The Riddle of Joy: G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 11.

⁶John David Burton, "G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis: The Men and Their Times," in Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie, eds., *The Riddle of Joy: G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 161-62.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 166.

⁸Derrick, "Personal Angles," pp. 10-11.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰Cited in Christopher Hollis, *The Mind of Chesterton* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1970), p. 191.

¹¹Thus, for example, Christopher Derrick, who writes that Chesterton "could only have profited . . . from a slightly more disciplined

approach to the use of the mind and of the pen... Chesterton wrote far too much, far too quickly, far too carelessly, and often . . . in very considerable ignorance. He used to charge into battle more unthinkingly than was really prudent: he would bring the whole heavy barrage of his merriment to bear upon 'the moderns,' as he called them too sweepingly—even upon 'the scientists'—without first taking the trouble to find out what they were really trying to say, or how far it really needed denunciation *in causa Christ*" ("Personal Angles," pp. 11-12). Derrick may be a bit too severe in his criticisms of Chesterton. How do we know that Chesterton wrote "far too much, far too quickly, far too carelessly"? By what standard? And whose measurements? Certainly not by Lewis's. And did Chesterton in fact write "in very considerable ignorance"? This charge, however benign in its intention, falls prey to the very criticism Derrick raises of Chesterton—viz., it is too sweeping—but it also finds little confirmation among contemporaries of Chesterton with whom he had regular occasion to spar—namely, the H.G. Wellses, the Max Beerbohms, the George Bernard Shaws, and other leading thinkers of his day. It was no less than Bernard Shaw, the noted journalist, art and theater critic, playwright and essayist, who considered Chesterton to be a "colossal genius."

¹²G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1936), pp. 143-44. In fact, elsewhere Chesterton almost apologizes for his high-brow upbringing. As it turns out, his family is "so disappointingly respectable and even reasonable" that they are "deficient in all those unpleasant qualities that make a biography really popular" (*ibid.*, p. 29). As most of the well-educated of his day,

Chesterton's family believed "in progress and all things new" (*ibid.*, p. 24). Tongue-in-cheek, Chesterton can quip: "I regret that I have no gloomy or savage father to offer... I cannot do my duty as a true modern, by cursing everybody who made me whatever I am" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

¹³Lewis, *Surprised*, pp. 180-81.

¹⁴On occasion Chesterton would be invited to deliver university lectures, such as the esteemed University of London centenary lecture of 1927 titled "Culture and the Common Peril."

¹⁵Chesterton, *Autobiography*, pp. 92-94.

¹⁶Aidan Mackay contends that reading George MacDonald as a child laid a foundation in Chesterton's worldview that in time would preserve him from probable insanity and possible suicide during his dark and tormented adolescence ("Christian Influence," p. 72).

¹⁷Lewis, *Surprised*, p. 62.

¹⁸William Butler Yeats had been living in Oxford and conducting meetings in his apartment. One rather traumatic experience that left a strong impression on Lewis was watching a friend who had attended Yeats' meetings go insane. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis recounts how he held his friend while the friend "kicked and wallowed on the floor, screaming out that devils were tearing him and that he was that moment falling down to Hell" (p. 192). As far as we know, "the squalid nightmare of [occult] magic" was not to have affected him any longer from that point forward.

¹⁹Lewis, *Surprised*, pp. 165-66.

²⁰In the Preface to *Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis sums up his intellectual journey: "On the intellectual side my own progress had been from 'popular realism' to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from

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Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity" (*Pilgrim's Regress* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943], p. 5).

²¹See Evan K. Gibson, "The Centrality of Perelandra to Lewis's Theology," in Michael H. MacDonald and Andrew A. Tadie, eds., *The Riddle of Joy: G.K. Chesterton and C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 125-138. In *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis acknowledges so much: "that some older and mightier being long since became apostate and is now the emperor of darkness and (significantly) the Lord of this world . . . I myself believe." That Lewis took the realm of evil very seriously can be seen in numerous of his writings—for example, in *The Great Divorce*, *Perelandra*, *The Problem of Pain*, and cleverly, in *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis leaves no doubt as to his convictions; they square with the New Testament: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12).

²²G.K. Chesterton, in the "Introduction" to Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1924).

²³From the "Preface" of C.S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923), pp.11-12.

²⁶To which Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* is intended to be a response.

²⁷In the "Foreward" to *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis expresses his debt to Wells.

²⁸The influence of his pen fully aside, Lewis in 1941 founded the Socratic Club at Oxford, remaining as its president until he left

for Cambridge in 1954. The purpose of the club was to foster open and honest debates between Christians and sceptics, thereby demonstrating the intellectual viability of the Christian faith.

²⁹Thus Chesterton, in "A Hymn" penned in 1915:

From all that terror teaches,
From lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches
That comfort cruel men,
From sale and profanation
Of honour and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation,
Deliver us, good Lord!