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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Joint Meeting of

The Eighth

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THE C.S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS SOCIETY CONFERENCE

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“A Wild Hope”:

Resurrection Bodies and Lewis’s *The Last Battle*

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“A Wild Hope”: Resurrection Bodies and Lewis’s *The Last Battle*

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In his rather strange discussion of Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, John Goldthwaite chastises Lewis for even conceiving to write *The Last Battle*, which brings the *Chronicles* and Narnia to a conclusion with the end of a world and its judgment by its Creator – though Goldthwaite thinks this was a poor decision because he believed Lewis bereft of the humility needed to pull off such an apocalyptic judgment (243). Philip Pullman is equally offended by *The Last Battle*, calling the end of the book “one of the most vile moments in the whole of children’s literature,” proof of Lewis’ “life-hating ideology” in which “death is better than life” (“Darkside”). Narnia, Pullman says, always seemed to him “to be marked by a hatred of the physical world” (“Dark Agenda”). I find it is hard to take Goldthwaite’s virulent attack very seriously, since it is largely an *ad hominem* – Goldthwaite interprets Narnia as a literary expression of Lewis’ warped personality – his reactionary alienation from modernity and his apparent neuroses (especially, it seems, a pathological hatred of women, or perhaps just of Elizabeth Anscombe). Goldthwaite’s diatribe thus bypasses argument and even the literature he is supposedly interpreting in favor of a pathetic attempt at psychoanalysis (by, of course, a non-expert).

Pullman’s attack is at least substantive, though it too is based on an

interpretation that is uncharitable at best and willfully perverse at worst, and which echoes rather palely the work of a much more coherent and insightful atheist – Friedrich Nietzsche. Pullman’s disgust with *The Last Battle* centers on two incidents – the death of the Pevensies and their friends in a railroad accident that brings them inside the stable and into the heavenly Narnia; and Susan’s absence from the stable, which Pullman perversely misreads as Lewis’ condemnation of her to hell for, as best I can make out, her developing sexuality. These two incidents for Pullman mark Lewis’ “hatred for the physical world” since, as Pullman sees it, they represent his rejection of the natural change and development of human bodies – the Pevensies are not allowed to grow up and do good works in the world and Susan is sent to hell for becoming a sexually awakened teenager. The *Chronicles* are thus mere “propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology,” in which death is preferred over life. Pullman, of course, is really a sort of third-rate Nietzsche ventriloquist – or perhaps he’s the dummy, since the charges against Lewis are really Nietzsche’s against Christianity and Western thought as a whole – the claim that Christianity (as well as its secular imitators) is life-denying because it hates bodies, the locus of the senses and thus of pain as well as pleasure, and the natural processes of bodies, sex and child-birth in particular.

I am sure that you already gather that I think Goldthwaite and Pullman – as well as Nietzsche – to be quite wrong. Neither the Lewis of *The Chronicles of Narnia* nor Christianity hate life, bodies and their processes (even sex), and the physical world in general (Christianity claims that God made the world, after all). In particular I think their charges involve a misunderstanding (willful or not) of Christian views – including Lewis' – about the body. I'm not sure that a detailed direct response to Pullman and Goldthwaite would be particularly helpful – though Michael Ward has written a nice response to Pullman – since their vision of reality is so very different from Lewis' and the larger Christian tradition (which is quite odd in the case of Goldthwaite who seems to be a Christian himself). Instead of a direct assault on these readings and misreadings, I want to use Lewis' *The Last Battle* as an expression of Christian hope and desire about and for bodies. The resurrection bodies of Narnia present "a wild hope" that has been a part of Christianity since the beginning – the hope that our bodies are *our* bodies, that they are part of who and what we are and that the whole of us – soul and body – will be saved. This hope however is grounded in the belief that our bodies are *more* than our bodies, i.e., that our bodies are our own only when they are incorporated into Christ's body.

Much popular thinking about the afterlife in contemporary American culture is shaped not by Scripture or Christian tradition, but by nineteenth and twentieth century spiritualism and its background in the works of the eighteenth-century mystic and prophet, Emanuel Swedenborg – heaven is a sort of cloud-place (or really, an ethereal or spiritual place) where our souls go once they leave the body behind in death, where we meet all our loved ones who we have missed since their own deaths. In many ways, of course, such a vision of human existence after death – where the

body is merely an inessential aspect of the self, like an old suit that can be cast off when outworn – is a perfect target for the Nietzschean attack that Christianity hates and rejects the body.

This popular view bears a superficial resemblance to Eastern reincarnation and Platonic metempsychosis, which both seek the soul's escape from a body that is the source of suffering and delusion, but none of them has anything to do with traditional Christian views on the aftermath of death – God's act of recreation in the resurrection of bodies and the renewal of the world He created. The bodiliness of continued human existence in the doctrine of the resurrection is stated emphatically in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Easter and post-Easter appearances, where He invites Thomas to put his hand in His wounds and eats meals with the disciples, and by Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians 15, where the meaning of Christian faith and hope is contained in the resurrection of Christ and the promise of the resurrection of the dead in general. What we find in both Paul and the Gospels are two intertwined themes of the resurrection – the bodiliness or corporeality of the resurrection, as well as the idea of some sort of transformation of the body, i.e. themes both of continuity of body – the resurrection body is a body that comes from my present body – combined with transformation or change of the body – the resurrection body is a body, but somehow also different. Paul's image of the seed or kernel that dies in the earth but then sprouts into wheat captures both of these themes – the seed is somehow carried into the mature plant, but the plant is other, and perhaps more, than the seed:

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in

glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. (1 Cor. 15: 42-44)

So what is raised is changed and yet in continuity with what was there before – we are raised, not something else in our place, so there is continuity, but that body will be transformed in some way. What is raised Paul calls a “spiritual body,” without explaining exactly what that means – the term seems oxymoronic, but Paul seems quite serious and Christian thinkers after Paul struggled to make sense of this peculiar term. All of them, however, emphasized the continuity between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies. Certainly Lewis reflects this sense of continuity in *The Last Battle*. Each of the characters in the New Narnia is recognizable (to other characters and the reader) as that character – Lucy is clearly Lucy, Edmund Edmund, and even Mount Pire is recognizable as Mount Pire. And of course Lewis depicts the characters as *physically* present – they run, talk, hug, and eat fruit.

I do not wish to go into the entire history of Christian discussions of resurrection bodies. Caroline Walker Bynum’s *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* does an admirable job of bringing many themes and concerns to light (though she has an annoying penchant for interpreting texts in terms of the cultural “anxieties” they supposedly reveal). But this history makes clear the commitment of Christian thinkers to the very physical stuff of the resurrection body and its continuity with our present bodies. From fairly early on, Christian thinkers became almost obsessed with the desire for all the matter that composes the body to be brought back together into an integrated body; their principle concern seems to have been the integrity of the bodies of martyrs and the power of their relics to heal.

Surely the bodies that endured so much for their love of Christ, and whose every part can bring healing, would not be abandoned by Christ on the day of resurrection. Thus, thinkers such as Augustine, while not rejecting Paul’s seed image, turn to different images, some of them less organic – such as a potter rethrowing a pot or a sculptor recasting a sculpture – and others organic but a far cry from the seed, such as the image of the earth and animals regurgitating parts of bodies so that God can reassemble them into the person they used to compose. What Augustine and others believed they needed in order to make sense of the resurrection body was both continuity of matter and integrity of structure in order to preserve the identity and wholeness of the person – if the resurrected person was to be *me*, the body must be *mine*, right down to the material constituent bits, though they don’t have to be in the same place as before.

The details of the speculations – which can seem comical or even bizarre to us, such as when they asked: “If a lion eats a martyr’s arm and the lion is then eaten by another person, who gets the material bits of the arm in the resurrection?” – are not as important to my present purposes as the clear dedication they exhibit on the part of these Christian thinkers to the particularities of the body. They are not imaging a disembodied soul entering some ethereal, spiritual realm, but bodies of flesh and blood. Which introduces a seeming problem, for Paul writes that “Flesh and blood will not possess the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 15:50). An interesting response to this, echoed in Lewis’ *Miracles*, comes from Hugh of St. Victor in the twelfth century, who argues that what Paul means is not that spiritual bodies will not be flesh – after all, Luke informs us that Jesus Himself referred to His resurrection body as flesh and bones (Luke 24:40) – but rather that the

harmony between flesh and spirit will be so restored that the body could be called spiritual:

Now in so far as pertains to [the] substance [of the resurrected body], even then there will be flesh. Thus the Apostle says: "It is sown a natural body, it shall rise a spiritual body," (1 Cor. 44), because so great will be the harmony of flesh and spirit that, while the spirit vivifies the subject flesh without the support of any insatiable desire, nothing from ourselves will oppose ourselves but, just as we suffer no enemy outwardly, so we shall not suffer ourselves as enemies within. (*Sacraments* 460)

Lewis speculates much the same thing in *Miracles*: "The whole conception of the New Creation includes the belief that the estrangement [of the soul and body] will be healed....Every state of affairs in the New Nature will be the perfect expression of a spiritual state and every spiritual state the perfect informing of, and bloom upon, a state of affairs..." (261-2).

This argument is key for Hugh's understanding of the second theme of resurrection bodies, i.e., their transformation or change – they both are, and yet are not, the same bodies that we possess now. For Hugh, the body is different because the resurrection body is fit for existence in the heavens, which he imagines quite spatially, as the area above the sublunar realm, the region composed of four elements, earth, water, air, in fire, in ascending order. Our bodies, made primarily of earthy stuff, belong down at the center of the universal system, yet resurrection bodies can exist out of place, in the regions above even air and fire, in apparent violation of the laws structuring the physical world (463). The resurrection body is different, capable of things our present body is not, because, Hugh claims, the resurrection will reverse the fallen relation of bodily rebellion and

restore the proper relation of soul and body.

This transformed relationship of soul and body that Hugh and Lewis suggest – soul having perfect mastery of body and body delighting in and responding perfectly to the soul – leads to bodies that are strange, as Lewis depicts in the last chapters of *The Last Battle*. It is worth noting that the story begins with the apparent transformation of a body – the seeming transformation of the body of Puzzle from a donkey-body into a lion-body, or even as Shift claims into Aslan's body. This is not, of course, a real transformation – Puzzle is not really changed into a divine being, but remains merely Puzzle the donkey. We have only the simulacrum of transformation, a *parody* of the real change that comes later: the God-effected transformation of earthly bodies, including Puzzle's, into spiritual bodies. It is the truly transformed body that Lewis depicts in the last chapters of *The Last Battle*, bodies that are youthfully whole (even bodies that had been injured or grown old), capable of focusing the eyes on incredibly distant objects, able to run as fast as a unicorn runs or an eagle flies without tiring, and even able to swim up waterfalls, "the sort of thing," the narrator tells us, "that would have been quite impossible in our world. Even if you hadn't been drowned, you would have been smashed to pieces by the terrible weight of water against the countless jags of rock. But in that world you could do it" (174). Even the topography of the Real Narnia is recognizably like the old Narnia, Mount Pire and the pass into Archenland are like the ones they knew, "And yet they're not like," said Lucy. "They're different. They have more colors on them and they look further away than I remembered and they're more...more...oh, I don't know..." "More like the real thing," said the Lord Digory softly" (168-9).

The model, of course, for the resurrection body, for Augustine and Hugh as well as Lewis, is the body of Christ, the only example Scripture gives us of a resurrected body, and that is itself a strange body indeed, and becomes stranger the more we consider it. Christ's resurrection body seems capable of moving through walls – on several occasions He comes to the disciples inside locked rooms (John 20). It can disappear, as it did from the two He walked and ate with on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). It can be strangely hard to recognize, as the two on the road did not recognize Him, nor did Mary, when she mistook Him for the gardener (John 20). Yet His is definitely a very physical body – when the Disciples in fear believe Him to be a ghost, He responds, "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39-40), and then eats a piece of broiled fish.

The strangeness of Jesus' body was actually there even before the resurrection. As Graham Ward puts it: "From the moment of the incarnation this body...is physically human and subject to all the infirmities of being such, and yet is also a body looking backward to the perfect Adamic corporeality and forward to the corporeality of the resurrection" (164). It is a body not conceived as all other post-Adamic bodies are, and is capable of walking on water, healing infirmities, transforming water into wine, and multiplying the physical matter of bread and fish to feed thousands. It is a body transfigured on the Mount of Olives, becoming radiant or translucent, in face and even clothes.

But the body of Jesus, both before and after the crucifixion and resurrection, is stranger still, a body that in fact disturbs our metaphysical expectations about bodies, which we think of as discrete, individual, and unified wholes, dependent upon and following all the laws of natural forces, brought together

into an integral whole through those forces and eventually dismantled by them. But Jesus' body insists on extending beyond the boundaries of its skin. At the final Passover meal shared with His disciples, Jesus "took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take; this is my body'" (Mark 14:22). It is, of course, possible to understand Jesus' words as symbolic or metaphorical, the breaking and handing over of the bread being a symbol for the coming crucifixion, where His body is broken and salvation extended to humanity. But another long-standing tradition of the Church has been to take this literally – that the bread, broken and extended to His disciples, is the breaking and handing over of Jesus' body, a metaphysical absurdity, or as Graham Ward puts it "an ontological scandal" (168):

What had throughout the Gospel story been an unstable body is now to be understood as an extendable body. For it is not that Jesus, at this point, stops being a physical presence. It is more that his physical presence can extend to incorporate other bodies, like bread, and make them extensions of his own. (167)

It is this strange body, that extends itself beyond its expected boundaries (its skin) in the Eucharist, that extends itself further through its breaking and spilling out in the crucifixion, its defeat of death and promise for the future in the resurrection, and its absencing as an object presence in the Ascension – all of which extends and enlarges Christ's body so that, not just incorporating bread and wine into itself, it incorporates other bodies – those of His followers – into it as the Church. And so Christ's body violates or explodes our expectations of the nature of body: not a discrete whole, but an extended organism; not a bounded individual, but an interpenetrating

community. And yet still an integral body, identifiable as the Body of Christ (even if not obvious to each of us).

As Lucy and Peter and Edmund and their friends go further up and further in, they encounter more and more characters that have inhabited the Narnia stories – Reepicheep, Bree, the Beavers, Trumpkin, Trufflehunter, Puddleglum, Tumnus (even their own parents at a distance). It would be easy to see this as a capitulation to the sentimental, Swedenborgian notion of heaven – and perhaps to an extent it is (I admit that I tear up a little at this point in the story). But I will read these moments as instead Lewis' expression of this extended body of Christ (of Aslan?) – this is not just a sentimental moment where we meet all our loved ones, but the recognition that these characters are the members of the extended body of Christ, the cells and organs of the Church. It is not nostalgia and saccharine sentimentalism that drives these incidents and our emotional reaction to them – it is that "wild hope" of the believer that they and we are incorporated into one corpus, the body of our Lord and Savior.

I began this paper with references to Goldthwaite and Pullman and I wish to return to them, or at least to Pullman (though it feels like returning into Plato's cave after struggling out into the light). I hope it is clear why I think a direct response to Pullman is difficult. The metaphysical and ontological divide between Pullman and Lewis (as well as the larger Christian tradition) is so large that communication is itself seemingly impossible. Lewis' Christian vision of reality is of a world wider than the natural world and its laws, a reality that *is* only because *God* is, and where Christ extends His body so as to incorporate all who would into it, a reality where human hopes and desires, aimed beyond self to Christ and to others in Christ, are not locked within the boundaries of our lonely skins. Pullman's reality is only

natural and so he cannot imagine such hopes and desires, which in his world must collapse continually back into the limited, individual, self-contained, skin-wrapped body. It is perhaps only natural that his trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, ends with two teenagers having sex in a garden. Certainly this is a self-conscious parody of Adam and Eve, but it is also the best Pullman can imagine to satisfy the desire, as real for him as for Lewis or Paul, to get beyond oneself into true communion with others. It is then almost, but not quite, a parody of the Body of Christ. Lewis has a better imagination and thus can have a wild hope – the wild hope of all Christians – that our bodies are ours and yet not alone – that through their incorporation into a larger reality, into the extended body of Christ, our bodies are both ours and God's.

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