Yours, Jack

Spiritual Direction from

C. S. Lewis

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TO ARTHUR GREEVES, his oldest friend: On the book that baptized Lewis's imagination—see *Surprised by Joy*, 180–181. Anodos is the hero of the book *Phantastes*; Cosmo is the hero of a story Anodos tells in the book.

7 MARCH 1916

I have had a great literary experience this week. I have discovered yet another author to add to our circle—our very own set: never since I first read 'The well at the world's end' have I enjoyed a book so much—and indeed I think my new 'find' is quite as good as [Thomas] Malory or [William] Morris himself. The book, to get to the point, is George MacDonald's 'Faerie Romance', *Phantastes*, which I picked up by hazard in a rather tired Everyman copy—by the way isn't it funny, they cost 1/1d. now—on our station bookstall last Saturday. Have you read it? I suppose not, as if you had, you could not have helped telling me about it. At any rate, whatever the book you are reading now, you simply must get this at once: and it is quite worth getting in a superior Everyman binding too.

Of course it is hopeless for me to try and describe it, but when you have followed the hero Anodos along that little stream to the faery wood, have heard about the terrible ash tree and how the shadow of his gnarled, knotted hand falls upon the book the hero is reading, when you have read about the faery palace . . . and heard the episode of Cosmo, I know that you will quite agree with me. You must not be disappointed at the first chapter which is rather conventional faery tale style, and after it you won't be able to stop until you have finished. There are one or two poems in the tale—as in the Morris tales you know—which, with one or two exceptions are shockingly bad, so don't *try* to appreciate them: it is just a sign, isn't it, of how some geniuses can't work in metrical forms—another example being the Brontës.

TO ARTHUR GREEVES: On how imagination differs from mere fancy and how holiness differs from mere morality; on Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*; on asceticism and marriage; on good humiliation; and on love for one's own father. Lawson and Keir are Oxford dons Lewis's age.

7 JUNE 1930

I have managed to get a few evenings free this week and have read two new books. The first was Kingsley's *Water Babies*. It was one of the books belonging to my mother which my father had locked up at her death and I only recovered at the recent clearance. It was strange—after the first few pages the most incredibly faint memories began to come about me: she must have read it, or started to read it, to me when I was very small indeed. I had even a curious sense of bringing my mother to life—as if she were reading it through me. The feeling was impressive, but not entirely pleasant. (I don't mean that it was at all unpleasant in the commonplace ghostie sense.) The book itself seems to me not very good. There is some fancy, and I don't object to the preaching: but after MacDonald it is tasteless. Put the two side by side and see how imagination differs from mere fancy, and holiness from mere morality. Have you ever read it? As I say it is not very good: but well worth reading.

The other was Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House*. As you know, it is a long poem in a very strict and even monotonous metre, describing a very simple story of love and marriage, interspersed with half philosophic, half religious odes on the author's theory of marriage as a mystical image of and approach to divine love. The story parts are deliberately prosaic and hum-drum, and would be very easy to parody . . . though it is surprising how one feels less and less inclined to sneer as you go on. But the bits in between are really often sublime. . . .

He is extremely down on people who take the ascetic view. These will be shut without the fold as 'too good' for God. The whole poem has raised a lot of difficulties in my mind. Even if it were true that marriage is what he says, what help does this give as regards the sexual problem for the innumerable people who can't marry? Surely for them asceticism remains the only path? And if, as he suggests, marriage and romantic love is the real ascent to Spirit, how are we to account for a world in which it is inaccessible to so many, and are we to regard the old saints as simply deluded in thinking it specially denied to them? As a matter of fact he does seem to suggest in one passage that romantic love is *one* ascent, and imagination the other—At all events the book has left me with an extraordinary renewal of my appetite for poetry.

TO SISTER PENELOPE, who had written him of her latest translation: On Lewis's state of ease; and on his realizing that he had never understood the real meaning of forgiveness (a realization that came to him on April 25th—see the letter below to Don Giovanni Calabria, 26 December 1951).

5 JUNE 1951

My love for George MacDonald has not extended to most of his poetry. I have naturally made several attempts to like it. Except for the *Diary of An Old Soul* it won't (so far as I'm concerned) do. . . .

I'm very glad to hear the work is 'roaring' . . . and I much look forward to seeing the results. As for me I specially need your prayers because I am (like the pilgrim in Bunyan) travelling across 'a plain called Ease'. Everything without, and many things within, are marvellously well at present. Indeed (I do not know whether to be more ashamed or joyful at confessing this) I realise that until about a month ago I never really believed (though I thought I did) in God's forgiveness. What an ass I have been both for not knowing and for thinking I knew. I do not feel that one must never say one believes or understands anything: any morning a doctrine I thought I already possessed may blossom into this new reality. . . . But pray for me always, as I do for you.

TO RHONA BODLE: On not forcing books on others; and on the providence of reading.

4 SEPTEMBER 1953

I have had 'Miss Bodle's colleague' in my daily prayers for a long time now: is that the same young man you mention in your letter of July 3rd, or do I now say 'colleagues'? Yes: don't bother him with *my* books if an aunt (it somehow *would* be an aunt—though I must add that most of my aunts were delightful) has been ramming them down his throat.

You know, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not, I find (to my surprise) everyone's book. I know several people who are both Christians and lovers of literature who can't bear it. I doubt if they were made to read it as children. Indeed, I rather wonder whether that 'being made to read it' has spoiled so many books as is supposed. I suspect that all the people who tell me they were 'put off' Scott by having *Ivanhoe* as a holiday task are people who would never have liked Scott anyway.

I don't believe anything will keep the right reader and the right book apart. But our literary loves are as diverse as our human! You couldn't make me like Henry James or dislike Jane Austen whatever you did. By the bye did Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* (I'm sure I advised you to read it) succeed or fail with you?

TO RHONA BODLE, who had written Lewis about difficulties with her father: On his most serious sin; on not expecting to feel affection for a difficult parent; on ways to work on loving such a one; and on Hans Christian Andersen.

24 MARCH 1954

Oh how you touch my conscience! I treated my own father abominably and no sin in my whole life now seems to be so serious. It is not likely you are equally guilty.

Feelings of affection are not at the command of the will and perhaps the very attempt to produce them has the opposite effect. I have been astonished at the ease (and even the affection) with which I have been able to treat in *other* old men the very same characteristics I was so impatient with in my Father. I wonder can something be done along these lines?—by remembering how merely funny, how endearing in a whimsical way, the things that divide you from your Father would seem if he were a casual acquaintance. By voluntarily standing further off might one in effect come closer? Part of the difficulty, I fancy, is heredity—a deep awareness that what one likes least in our parents has been bequeathed to oneself and, in oneself, needs to be resisted. While my Father was alive I was shocked when I caught myself acting or speaking like him; now I am amused, and not hostilely. At any rate, work now for the night cometh.

I am delighted to hear how well your Sunday School goes on. I have come to like Hans Andersen better since I grew up than I did in childhood. I think both the pathos and the satire—both very delicate, penetrating and ever-present in his work—disquieted me then. I agree about *The Little Mermaid*: I'd add *The Storks*, *The Seven Swans* and (best of all satires) *The Emperor's New Clothes*.

He was, you know, a friend of Kierkegaard's and a very disappointed novelist, for it was by his novels, not his fairy tales that he wished to be known. I wonder if the story of the *Shadow* is connected with that—the shadow outgrowing the man as a fairy-tale-writer outgrew the novelist. But I'm glad he did! All blessings.

TO MARGARET GRAY, who had asked Lewis for a reading list and who had mentioned that she had been consoled by a very real experience of her late husband: On the books Lewis most often recommended.

9 MAY 1961

How right you are when you say 'Christianity is a terrible thing for a lifelong atheist to have to face'! In people like us—adult converts in the 20th century—I take this feeling to be a good symptom. By the way, you have had in most respects a tougher life than I, but there's one thing I envy you. I lost my wife last summer after a very late, very short, and intensely happy married life, but I have not been vouchsafed (and why the deuce should I be?) a visit like yours—or certainly not except for one split second. Now about reading.

For a good ('popular') defence of our position against modern waffle, to fall back on, I know nothing better than G. K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*. Harder reading, but very protective, is Edwyn Bevan's *Symbolism and Belief*. Charles Williams's *He Came Down from Heaven* doesn't suit everyone, but try it.

For meditative and devotional reading (a little bit at a time, more like sucking a lozenge than eating a slice of bread) I suggest the *Imitation of Christ* (astringent) and Traherne's *Centuries of Meditations* (joyous). Also my selection from MacDonald, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. I can't read Kierkegaard myself, but some people find him helpful.

For Christian morals I suggest my wife's (Joy Davidman) *Smoke on the Mountain*, Gore's *The Sermon on the Mount* and (perhaps) his *Philosophy of the Good Life*. And possibly (but with a grain of salt, for he is too puritanical) William Law's *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. I know the very title makes me shudder, but we have both got a lot of shuddering to get through before we're done!

You'll want a mouth-wash for the *imagination*. I'm told that Mauriac's novels (all excellently translated, if your French is rusty) are good, though very severe. Dorothy Sayers' *Man Born to Be King* (those broadcast plays) certainly is. So, to me, but not to everyone, are Charles Williams's fantastic novels. *Pilgrim's Progress*, if you ignore some straw-splitting dialogues in Calvinist theology and concentrate on the story, is first class.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* will give you the record of an earlier adult convert, with many very great devotional passages intermixed.

Do you read poetry? George Herbert at his best is extremely nutritious.

I don't mention the Bible because I take that for granted. A modern translation is for most purposes far more useful than Authorised Version.

As regards my own books, you might (or might not) care for *Transposition*, *The Great Divorce*, or *The Four Loves*.

Yes—'being done good to'—grrr! I never asked ever to be.