Wyndham Lewis, M. R. James and Intertextuality
Part II: Canons and the Uncanny

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'It's the most troublesome stretch of all.'
'I shall be glad when we're through it won't you?'
'There's worse to come.'

I

One cannot but sympathize with Pullman and Satters as they struggle through the phantasmagoria of *The Childermass*; yet the physical difficulties they complain of here are as nothing to the theological perplexity created by the weird behaviour observable in and around the Bailiff's Court. Formidable problems of interpretation are presented by the haunting mysteries that through the mid-twenties the war-traumatised Lewis conjured up in the British Museum Reading Room. It is hard enough going for any one with access to the British Library today to make much sense of it. However, if readers press on, from the murk emerge signs indicating paths by which we can thread our way through this metaphysical labyrinth. Some of these vital clues are provided by what appear to be allusions to the multifarious achievements of Dr Montague Rhodes James who, during the Twenties, assumed the role of national pundit on questions of biblical and medieval literature and art—not to mention the Supernatural. After a distinguished career as Museum and University administrator, this renowned scholar and ghost story writer, the only man in modern times to have been Provost of both King's and Eton, was finally appointed a Trustee of the British Museum. In other words, James was reaching the height of his fame during the period when *The Human Age* first took shape.

First, though, readers may find it helpful if I retrace my own steps a little. In Part I of this essay, alerted by an explicit reference in *The Childermass* to 'Martin's Close'—one of James's eeriest tales—I tracked the many parallels between Lewis's enigmatic survey of the Afterlife and the ghost stories of this antiquary. The evidence of these parallels (too numerous, I argued, to be coincidental) suggests that in James's fiction Lewis detected the recurrence of certain features. This repertoire of motifs includes grotesque interrogation by a hanging judge who is also a national bogeyman, trials that are associated through nightmare or phantasmagoria with sexual disturbance, and which occur at the approach of Childermass. In addition to this apparent exploitation of these narrative patterns in the older writer's oeuvre, Lewis's characterisation in the first volume of his supernatural epic parallels also the flickering distinction that James makes. On the one hand there are characters like the pathetic murder victim of 'Martin's Close' or the pugnacious rector confronting the living Punch in 'A Story of a Disappearance and an Appearance' (figures in whom are discernible specific ascendants of Satters, Macrob and the Bailiff). And on the other there is the more typical James horror. 'James's ghosts are often not ghosts at all [but] mysterious, motiveless agencies, revealing themselves through the medium of tumbled bedclothes, an ancient maze, tangles of hair, lumps of heavy damp sacking': a description which would serve for Lewis's 'peons' in their hallucinatory maze.

In adopting this template (I suggested), Lewis makes important changes to James's art. One of the most important of these alterations is to hint more pointedly than the great Biblical scholar does in his stories at the theological significance of his own land of ghosts. James's tales dramatise 'with great skill—and with touches of characteristic humour—the
unlooked-for revelation of an alien order of things, of a wholly malevolent Beyond, linked to our world by a perplexing and dangerous logic. Similar apprehensions (albeit naively expressed) fill Satters with unease. Little reassurance is to be found in the more articulate explanations offered—least of all when Pullman puts his knowing gloss upon them. Nevertheless, the answers which this un-heroic pair of souls receive as they progress through *The Childermass* and its sequels centre on a theological problem that has troubled many generations, but especially our own. Whether this and the Other World are in the control of Christian or Gnostic powers—or something infinitely worse?

Part II of this essay presents evidence which suggests that in order to explore this agonising theological problem, Lewis enlarges the range of his allusions to M. R. James, going beyond references to the ghost stories and drawing on what are today less familiar aspects of the Antiquary’s career. I shall argue that it is these memories of the other achievements of the outstanding British exponent of what was then called ‘Christian archaeology’ which are intended to act in *The Childermass* as additional hermeneutic triggers.

II

During an interval in the Bailiff’s proceedings, disputes break out among the audience. ‘Dense centripetal knots’ of people collect beneath the outside wall of the auditorium ‘in the manner of the Eton wall-game’. (237) Gradually the reader is able to make out what it is that two grey-beards are discussing. (Given the mixed feelings about the increased belief in spiritualism generated by the Great War, such a topic is one that might well have been debated in the vestibules outside a similarly curved structure in Bloomsbury. There, under the watchful guard of its superintendents, the famous B. M. Reading Room also bordered the Occult world). ‘I heard a man say he had seen the Demiurge.’ ‘Indeed?’ At which an attendant interrupts ‘The Deity is not usually referred to as the demiurge here, we have nothing to do with gnostic systems nor platonizing heresies’. (244-45)

To grasp the significance of this allusion to Gnosticism, more is required of readers than that we remember ‘the Devil can quote scripture’. Only a short while earlier, when the Bailiff claimed to be a gate-keeper ‘to another life’, Macrob had questioned whether the Camp was ‘not a world of imagination….nowhere in nothing’. (221-22) In Gnostic terms, was not the Bailiff ‘an Aeon’, an emanation of the Dark Power, the evil incarnation of Time itself? As important, though, is the politico-scientific angle from which (with the Provost’s help) Lewis views modern manifestations of the Gnostic heresy.

From the reference to ‘the Eton wall game’ flows a train of implications. Becoming Provost of Eton marked a notable step in James’s rise through the educational establishment. The activities of its ‘Old Boys’ witness that Eton (even more than ‘Varsity’) is one of those cultural institutions that are as much involved in power-play as in any higher activity. The confusion of material, cultural and spiritual values implicit here is one of a number of keys to the interpretation of the proceedings at the Bailiff’s Court that are provided by reference to James’s more administrative and scholarly work.

According to Kenner *The Childermass* is ‘simply’ a dramatisation of the themes of *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926). In fact the concerns of *Time and Western Man* (1927) are also here enacted. While this dramatisation is partly effected through Lewis’s development of the figurative language of both cultural analyses, equally crucial to this adaptation is the example of James. Potent as the ghost stories seem to be, the importance of James’s biblical and medieval investigations should not be neglected. Its significance becomes evident when readers follow the lead of Lewis’s ‘disputatious idlers’, momentarily taking advantage of the Eton Wall. (237)
From its pivotal position, surveying in turn the action ahead and behind us, we can take our bearings, catching glimpses of the emergent pattern.

Intriguingly, ten pages on (and within the space of a couple of paragraphs [246-47]) there are four explicit references to new ‘canons’—more are implied. Proust comes in for some flak. Mainly, though, the complex word ‘canon’ is applied to ‘the new species of man’ created through the overthrow of classical masculine values by fashionable inversion, anti-intellectualism, and the cult of the child, phenomena which accompany the false prophets of time and flux in Lewis’s vision of the apocalypse. In the subsequent debates between the Bailiff and the Hyperideans, ‘canon’ or some variant recurs, hints being dropped as to the concept’s wider implications (254, 269, 273, 303). This Afterlife punningly reflects also the Aftermath of the Great War. So these later usages help to articulate Lewis’s fears concerning twentieth-century society: how, through the unscrupulous manipulation of class and more recently-established socio-political differences, modern society would increasingly suffer at the hands of ‘the Powers That Be’: here incarnate as the Bailiff.8

The battery of ‘canons’ paraded during the court’s adjournment also echoes an opening salvo in the purportedly judicial proceedings; there this ominous wordplay is first explicitly associated with the puppet-master masquerading as glove-puppet. The occasion is a bizarre parody of the Gospel-teaching and responses of African-American worship. (And did not the father of the sublime ‘Fats’ Waller, an Abyssinian Baptist, anathematise jazz—that most non-canonical of music—as a product of ‘the Devil’s work-shop’?) Indeed this act of public worship becomes indistinguishable from a comic Black Mass—‘the Belly in the place of God’. (168) There the Bailiff assaults our ears with his ‘swatch canon’. (169) Thus contextualized, the recurrence of this key term also brings to mind the liturgy of another Christian Church.

The ‘canon’ as the most solemn and unvarying part of the Catholic mass (in which through Transubstantiation the communion bread and wine are transformed into the Real Presence) has been travestied earlier. As they return to the camp, Satters hears from his friend how, detecting Pullman’s memories of attending Mass in Trieste (when a Berlitz teacher there), the Bailiff ‘miraculously’ repaired this lost soul’s spectacles. (94) Emphasised by the repetition of the words (within three paragraphs), the collocation of ‘mass’ and ‘Trieste’ in Pullman’s account of his past life is telling. But, whilst the iteration reminds us that the satirist has Joyce in his sights, it is M. R. James’s Christian archaeology that provides Lewis with an apt weapon.

During the gestation period of _The Childermass, The Times_ of 7 December 1925 had carried a report about the celebration of Founder’s Day at Eton: ‘Dr M. R. James presided. . . . [the] Play of St Nicholas was given by some of the boys’. (17) Over the five years since returning to Eton, James had revived a medieval custom related to the rituals of Christmas. However, the playful mimicries of the Mass associated with the Boy Bishop’s Play (once performed in remembrance of the Massacre of the Holy Innocents—28 December) also recalls the serious transgressions of the Feast of Fools. To such a medieval continuation of the ancient saturnalia many aspects (not least the title) of Lewis’s macabre supernatural anatomy clearly allude.9

The ‘swatch–canon’ (the traditional patter of showman and celebrant) of this ‘Punch-like person’ (the Lord of Misrule of British childhood—and of James’s darkest conjuration), introduces the lampooning of James Joyce. Dismayed by ‘The Muddest Thick That was ever Heard Dump’, a diabolical example of literary iconoclasm that Joyce had offered for publication in _The Enemy_,10 Lewis’s mockery of ‘Crossword-Joys’ is directed at the Irish genius’s megalomaniac evaluation of his own experiments with the Synoptic Canon.11 This broadly comic critique (172-79) involves Lewis in first burlesquing an incident common to the canonical New Testament—those passages in the Gospels where Christ assesses His reputation.12 Next, in mockery of Joyce’s more literary pretensions, a line from a sonnet of Shakespeare is mangled. These parodies of classics, travesties both of sacred and secular literature (when taken to-
gether with the way newly fashionable patterns of social behaviour are later explicitly satirised as ‘canons’) amount to a reminder that the general applications of that keyword fall mainly into two groups.

As regards the first category, the uses of ‘canon’ most relevant here are those signifying a standard, or a rule of conduct, taste or aesthetic. In the second group of uses there comes to mind two lists: one, of those persons recognised as saints by the Church; and the other a catalogue of the authoritative body of Scriptures. In the Hellenistic era, the Academies drawing up bibliographies for their students called any author worthy of inclusion kanonikos, ‘one who comes up to the standard’. Eventually, though, the Church made this term its exclusive property; and a couple of millennia were to pass before Modernism put that monopoly in question.\(^\text{13}\)

A comparable range of meaning is exploited by Lewis’s own wordplay on ‘canon’ in Time and Western Man. One example is found in the ‘Appendix to Book I’:

> When a great creation or invention of art makes its appearance, usually a short sharp struggle ensues. The social organism is put on its mettle. If it is impossible quite to overcome the work in question, it is (after the short sharp struggle) accepted. Its canonization is the manner of its martyrdom. (123)\(^\text{14}\)

As may easily be imagined, Joyce’s canonical transgressions appealed to the great Bible scholar even less than they did to Lewis.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore the array of ‘canons’ in the brief introduction to James’s widely reviewed best seller The Apocryphal New Testament (1924) requires attention.\(^\text{16}\)

There are close on a dozen instances where this keyword is explicitly used (xvi, xvii, xviii, xxi, xxiv), and more are implied. The referents of these disputed applications of the term include versions of ‘the second coming, the future state’ (xii), ‘primitive christian history’ (xiii), ‘Liturgies…i.e. communion offices’ (xxiv), and notably modern texts claiming canonical status. This is not quite the extent of meanings conveyed by ‘canon’ in Time and Western Man and The Childermass (unsurprisingly class-war and inversion go unremarked by James). Yet the number and semantic reach of the affinities with Lewis’s work prompt further investigation. Not least because, ever alert to cultural politics (as in the above Time and Western Man extract), there Lewis twice equates ‘canonization’ with a kind of ‘martyrdom’. Such complex metaphors imply a comparison with the theological alternatives tempting the faithful in the period when the canon of the New Testament was being established.

III

A basic premise of The Art of Being Ruled is that Science and Socialism constitute the religion of today. But while he notes ‘[h]ow near in many ways primitive christianity was to the present revolution’ (77; and variants upon this comparison occur throughout the book), the parallels Lewis draws are, almost without exception, unspecific and eschew accusations of heresy. In Time and Western Man, on the other hand, the analogies made when he aims at modern targets become more overtly heterodox. Much of the content and form, ideas and style of the ultimate paragraphs in Lewis’s ‘analysis of the mind of James Joyce’ seems indebted to those entries dealing with Gnosticism and its greatest teachers (Simon Magus, Marcion, Mani et al.) that appear in the eleventh edition of The Encyclopaedia Britannica and (what is perhaps more influential) the roughly contemporaneous Hastings’s Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics.\(^\text{17}\)

In expressing his repugnance for the new aesthetic—‘the surging ecstatic featureless chaos…being set up as an ideal’ (Time and Western Man, 109-10), Lewis assumes a position between Plato and Aquinas. A little later in the Preface to Book II of Time and Western Man, he links Bergson with Gnosticism; tracing the origins of the Time philosophy to ‘the mongrel westernized-orientalism of alexandrian mystical doctrine’. (134) Further (though again scarcely
twenty pages on) in deploring the alienation from physical ‘reality’ caused by ‘phenomenalism’, (161-62) Lewis echoes the alarm provoked among the Church Fathers by Gnosticism. Using the terminology of canon-formation, Lewis holds that the artist and thinker in the Greek states were ‘recognized as the custodian of the spiritual consciousness of the race. The productions of art assumed somewhat the role of sacred books’. (187-88)

The para-penultimate chapter of *Time and Western Man*, ‘God as Reality’, even invites the reader ‘to fraternize with the catholic thinkers in their high and nobly ordered pagan universe’. (366-67, 380) Lewis repeatedly details the reasons why he is averse to entering into ‘communion’ with Rome, (367) nevertheless such is the spiritual crisis created by the likes of Bergson that Lewis is ‘moved to choose the catholic thinker as a confederate’. (379) Fr D’Arcy SJ welcomed these guarded overtures: ‘the Catholic philosopher very readily accepts the offer of an alliance which Mr. Lewis makes in these pages’.18 Hence when provoked by the way Joyce’s blasphemies against Holy Writ, the Liturgy of the Church, and the Shakespearean canon (not to mention a certain editorial amour-propre) are flaunted in the publication of *Ulysses*, and especially in the first instalment of the crypto-Gnostic ‘Work In Progress’,19 Lewis retaliates. As in *Time and Western Man*, his critique of modern culture in *The Childermass* involves evoking the multiple dangers that threatened early Christianity.

Obviously, the repeated references to Marcion and other Gnostics found in the interwar writings and later20 hint at what is made plain in *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952): Lewis’s ‘alliance’ with the Catholic thinkers was always an uneasy one. Yet for all his criticism of the inherent contradictions of Judaeo-Christianity, Lewis continued to be disturbed by the way certain heresies (ancient and modern) threatened to further subvert Western cultural traditions.

As is evident from his discussion of ‘the marcionite heresy’ in *Time and Western Man* (292-93), Lewis grasped how the early Church had countered similar threats by adopting the methods its most formidable rivals used. Because of the distinction that Marcion drew between the Supreme God and an evil Demiurge, and his consequent rejection of the *Old Testament*, Marcion was the first to institute a *New Testament* canon—unwittingly suggesting to the Church its most potent weapon against Gnosticism. Among Gnosticism’s other ‘gifts’ to the Church may be reckoned the Christian hymn. Significantly, James’s masterpiece of biblical scholarship pursues a comparable strategy of appropriation and exclusion. (xxii) In effect the *Apocryphal New Testament* provides a canon of the non-canonical, selecting little that is of a Gnostic nature apart from an allegoric narrative of great insight and lyric beauty. For all the utility of the *Britannica* and Hastings, indeed, Lewis seems to have derived more knowledge and inspiration from the profound and wittily presented scholarship in James’s miniature encyclopedia. It was not merely that James clarified the connections between the various teachers and sects associated with Gnosticism, a bewilderingly heterogeneous movement. Nor was it even that the baffled researcher, confronted by incomprehensible texts, can take comfort from James’s shrewd counsel that ‘while the *Pistis Sophia* is just readable, the Books of Jeu are not’. (xxiii) Illuminating too is his succinct account of the New Testament Apocrypha, their origins, defects, merits, influence. ‘As religious books, they were meant to reinforce the existing stock of Christian beliefs’. (xii) Lewis would have relished too the comparisons with some of the modern efforts at supplementing the Christian Bible. The Apocrypha is the list of those writings which among certain circles were ‘placed on a level with those of our Canon, but [which] were regarded by the Church at large as the Book of Mormon or the writings of Mrs. Mary Baker G. Eddy are now’. (xviii) Not least is the impressive artistic heritage of the Apocrypha. They have ‘exercised an influence...so great and so widespread, that no one who cares about the history of Christian thought and Christian art can possibly afford to neglect them’. (xiii)
IV

Metaphorically speaking, the Joycean burlesques in *The Childermass* attempt a kind of exclusion; far more considerable, though, is what Lewis achieves through appropriation. Some of the gems in M.R. James’s collection of New Testament Apocrypha seem to have caught his eye. Almost all the literary genres characteristic of the non-canonical tradition are re-deployed in *The Human Age*. But among the most relevant here are Lewis’s borrowings from specific works in James’s anthology, especially one subtle example of the Progress of the Soul genre. ‘The Hymn of the Soul’ was enthusiastically recommended by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: nevertheless a text of this masterpiece of Gnostic literature was not easily located until James included it in the *Apocryphal New Testament*.

‘The Hymn of the Soul’ is a first person account of how a young child, sent to recover a pearl of great price, gets trapped in our evil material world. Attempting to rescue him, his brother too ends up forgetting the truth and fails to return. A succession of messengers in various forms is necessary to recall these noble kinsmen to their transcendent home. But no summary can do justice to what James hailed as ‘a most remarkable composition’. (411) Apparently Lewis shared the Provost’s enthusiasm for this exquisite fable. Admiration, though, never precluded Lewis from having a little fun at suitable moments in his own vast cosmic allegory—especially when such mockery was at the same time the means of preserving the mystery of knowledge that should not be too readily divulged.21

Crossing the phantasmagoric Time Flats the reluctant pilgrims encounter a Lilliputian world where, unlike Gulliver, one of the intruders brutally disregards the code of a gentleman. During the build-up of the hallucinations that help precipitate ‘the murder’ into which the Bailiff’s ‘magic’ tempts the infantile Satters, there occurs what looks remarkably like a sardonic parody of the beautiful Gnostic fable:

In the centre of the table an object the size of a large hen’s egg, of bright ultramarine, reposés. It is the egg stolen from the Great Mogul the Virgin egg: Satters’ inquisitive mouth and eyes fasten upon the egg, there is an effluence that puts on his guard the psychic clown, to touch it spells discovery it suggests, yet his blue eyes that are as large as it are kindled to kindergarten intensity. (101)

While ‘the pearl’ which is the initial object of the quest in ‘the Hymn’ is absent from *The Childermass*, it is noteworthy that Lewis deploys more than just one equivalent treasure to symbolise gnosis.22

Strategically placed near the opening of *The Childermass* (in truth, secreted within what itself is only gradually revealed to be an awesome *mise en abîme*), the other reference to a vital knowledge Wittily modulates from the ridiculous to the sublime. In a highly ironic work, this expressive device hints at the differing degrees to which Pullman and Satters (Lewis’s unheroic *alazon* and *eiron*) have access to a hidden wisdom. By means of this precious knowledge ‘lost souls’ (3) such as they can escape back into the transcendental realm whence they came.

Pullman thinks he understands their position in the after-life better than his friend; but such knowledge as he possesses is always partial, and worse he has lost the will to resist the Satanic Powers, whether here in the Camp or subsequently in Third City and Matapolis. Has he not the golden secret, who knows as he does the right road to the proper place in record time, barring accidents? But the glamour of this outcast plan, rigid and forbidden, whose lines are marked out through the solid walls of matter, contrary to the purposes of nature, is lost on the newcomer. (9)

As usual Pullman’s complacency leads him astray; for intuitively Satters has a profounder
sense of the metaphysics of the ‘trap’ (66) into which they have fallen. In his dreams Satters glimpses the essence of the cosmos as Gnosticism conceives it. This naïf’s visions pre-figure a situation that the reader will encounter repeatedly in The Human Age: ‘gigantic apparitions inhabiting the dangerous hollows inside the world’. (9)

The evidence suggests that as he had done with James’s stories, Lewis analysed the ‘Hymn of the Soul’, noting its basic patterns. This task was made easier for him since James had adopted the poetic style of the Authorised Version as his model in translating this selection of Apocrypha. The incremental rhythms of Hebrew poetry create much repetition in James’s quasi-scriptural verse rendering of the Gnostic fable. There are around half a dozen parallels between the major features of the two works. Within a number of these categories these variants multiply the correspondences. So much so that, space being limited and some of the specific affinities strikingly close, in completing this comparison I shall concentrate on the more salient parallels.

It is by means of the allusions to Doughty (3), ‘Egyptian privet’ (6), ‘bulky ziggurats’ (7) and ‘Yang Gate’ (124), and ‘the hanging gardens’ of ‘Babylon’ (137-41) that the geography both physical and spiritual of the Camp and Magnetic City mirrors ‘The Hymn of the Soul’. As in ‘the Hymn’, so in The Childermass the references suggest locations ranging from the Levant to the Far East. The spiritual action in both is centred in an oasis city invested by forces of evil. (Hymn v. 13; Childermass, 1) In The Childermass it is not difficult to detect analogies for ‘the tyrannous demons of Labyrinthus in ‘the Hymn’. (v. 50)

The ages of the ‘lost souls’ in both works seems more or less the same. When we first encounter him even Pullman is described as having ‘the trunk and limbs of a child’ (2) and later his appearance reverts ‘from the stage of the youngish don to that of undergraduate’. (110) As for Satters, throughout The Human Age his physique and mentality are for the most part characterised in terms of an age-range between babyhood and adolescence.

Satters objects to the demeaning sports kit he is forced to wear in the Camp. In a running joke that continues on into Monstre Gai, Satter’s endeavours to flout this dress-code (another canon, we belatedly realize) again connect The Childermass and its sequels with the ‘Hymn’, where garb, appropriate or otherwise, is also highly significant. In the 105 verses there are close on a dozen references to garments of one sort or another. When bizarrely one of these pieces of clothing changes into or is linked with a looking glass (a transformation occurring in ‘the Hymn’ no less than four times), it is clear that this specular-garment is one of the major messengers. ‘I saw the garment made unto me as it had been in a mirror, And I knew and saw myself through it’. (v. 76-7) Tellingly when just such an odd conjunction occurs in The Childermass, Pullman makes light of this disturbing confrontation with Self that has badly rattled his young companion: ‘I have it sometimes’, Pullman remarks with condescension. ‘I take that opportunity of making my toilet, which usually is much in need of attention’. (60- 3)

But Satters is not to be put off. His suspicions concerning both the Bailiff’s evil intentions and Pullman’s sycophancy are re-awakened by the shock of seeing himself as in a mirror. Satters’ badgering (60, 64, 65) forces out of Pullman the grudging and ambiguous admission, ‘I have heard [the Bailiff] called Trimalchio Loki Herod Karaguez Satan, even some madman said Jesus, there is no knowing what he is’. (66)

V

When the first rescue mission fails in ‘The Hymn of the Soul’, further messages in various forms are sent to summon the kinsmen to their transcendental home. The messages are sent as letters or oral communications delivered by human agency, or by winged creatures—avian and an-
gelic—and even by a discarnate voice. Among these message-bearers, the most relevant are the bird-heralds. The parallels between these two allegories suggest the Hymn’s choice of ‘the eagle, king of all fowls’ (v.51) was rejected as too obvious for a modernist experiment. So Lewis rings the changes on such airborne messengers, ranging from the weathercock on the Anglo-(in the 1955 edition, Roman-) Catholic church near the opening of The Childermass to the Phoenix which interrupts the proceedings of the Bailiff’s Court. That popular comprehension of the Christian significance of the legendary bird gradually increased during the Twenties was in no small part due to James’s publishing handsome scholarly facsimile editions of two splendid English Bestiaries in which the Phoenix figures as a type of Christ.23

Equally telling, though, is the fact that in later work exhibiting intriguing parallels with this exquisite Gnostic fable, Lewis chose less ostentatious birds. Related to The Childermass, as Kenner glimpses, is that strange picture Inca and the Birds (1933): its two figures are each escorted by its double ‘on a mission in which the two mysterious birds may have a helping or hindering function’.24 In another enigmatic, dream-inspired painting of this period, The Departure of a Princess from Chaos (1936-37), it is a pigeon that is carried by one of the three child-like figures accompanying their resplendently robed guardian, while another bird flies off.25 Even more memorable, though, is the appearance in the Apocryphal New Testament of what was once a common British bird—the very same species that turns up in the second volume of The Human Age:

a idol sparrow was performing a passerine goose-step outside the window. [Pullman’s host] hurriedly threw up the sash. The bird stood to attention, and Mannock took something from its beak. A harsh and brassy adieu broke from it, it revolved, and the next moment it was in undeviating, and militarily unerring flight. [O]n a small piece of paper which he had taken from the bird’s beak... ‘Please bring your two friends—
at the usual time this evening’. (Monstre Gai, 148)

Once again Pullman’s analysis of a crucial episode proves to be intellectually shallow.

Fatally, he misunderstands the balance of power in Third City when he compares the Padishah’s use of the birds as his messengers with St Francis’s ornithological activities. (148) Although in Giotto’s frescos at Assisi there is some attempt to distinguish the different species, even in a recent book where the images reproduced are of good quality it is impossible to identify any sparrows.26 This is for the good reason that neither legend nor history records the saint as having dealings with that species. True, in the Fioretti’s account of the saint’s sermon to ‘the little birds’, Francis is seen as ‘standard bearer of the cross of Christ’—which might be viewed as recruiting the birds into the Church Militant. Nevertheless even among the swallows and the larks that tradition says the saint loved, none is immortal.27

It is for this reason that, as the newcomers to Third City are disconcerted to find, their host Mannock (like all in the Padishah’s circle) is, perforce, a vegetarian. (MG, 22) By contrast there is a whiff of the diabolic about the menu in the restaurant of the Hotel Phanuel, when Pullman, as the Bailiff’s guest, is served ‘a bird something like a pheasant’. (177) This flagrant breach of the municipal embargo on meat food indicates how extensively the Satanic Fifth Column has penetrated Third City. Theologically speaking, there should be no birds or any other fauna in ‘this outpost of Heaven’, since the thrust of St Thomas Aquinas’s thinking about man’s immortality (his decision being based on Plato and Aristotle) implies that animals lack souls.28 However, at least one set of non-canonical legends seems to make an exception of sparrows.

In the Apocryphal New Testament a unique flock of passer domesticus is formed into an avian division of the army of Heaven. Near the opening of James’s selection come ‘the Infancy Gospels’. These second century legends concerning the boyhood of Jesus are a bizarre mixture of the appealing and repellent, as the Holy Child mutates from wunderkind into l’enfant terri-
ble, perfectly capable of destroying those whom He finds displeasing—especially the Jews. Among these ‘Infancy Gospels’ is that of Thomas (49-65); James presents the three principal versions. Of these, a section of the Latin text (58-65) seems the likeliest to have held Lewis’s attention:

IV. What Jesus did in the city of Nazareth. [When] five years old...he took of the clay which came of that pool and made thereof to the number of twelve sparrows. Now it was the sabbath day when Jesus did this among the children of the Hebrews: and [they] went and said unto Joseph his father: Lo, thy son was playing with us and he took clay and made sparrows which it was not right to do upon the sabbath, and he hath broken it. And Joseph went to the child Jesus, and said unto him: Wherefore hast thou done this...? But Jesus [opened] his hands and commanded the sparrows, saying: Go forth into the height and fly: ye shall not meet death at any man’s hands. And they flew and began to cry out and praise almighty God....[W]hen the Jews saw what was done they marvelled and departed, proclaiming the signs which Jesus did (59-60).

Richest in detail, this version of the legend infuses edification with some insight into child psychology. Jesus does more than merely bring his creations to life. When apparently he grants the birds immortality, they become the messengers of the divine—and so apt for inclusion in Lewis’s reworking of ‘the Hymn’.

Lewis (like almost everybody else), though, had been appalled by what the world learnt from the victorious Allies’ discovery of Belsen and Auschwitz. He is so deeply moved by the latest horrors of a terrible century that he asks the same question of God as had the ancient Jews in their grief over the destruction of the two Temples at Jerusalem. Stripping away the disquieting early Christian anti-Semitism purveyed by this ambiguous medieval inheritance, what Lewis salvages is the legend’s enthralling revelation of infinite power possessed by the apparently helpless.

A few pages later, in Appendix I to the Gospel of Thomas, there is another legend that in effect verges on James’s favourite literary genre. In this tale from ‘the Gnostic book called Pistis Sophia’ there occurs an early example of what was to become a stock feature of the nineteenth century Gothic fiction and poetry. A heavenly double of Christ is mistaken by the Mother of the Child Jesus for a phantom. James cannot resist comparing this third century quasi-ghost story with ‘the Hymn of the Soul in the Acts of Thomas’. (66) In turn this cross-reference would seem to have further inspired Lewis’s depiction of the message-bearing White Angels who in Malign Fiesta eventually managed to break through the cordon sanitaire that Sammael has thrown around his prized human collaborator. (545)

In this penultimate visit the supernatural horror genre is given a sardonic twist as the angle of vision shifts from that of the now far less confident intellectual to that of disdainful ‘agent of Heaven’. Pullman opens the door of his flat to find ‘a tall white figure’ engaged in fixing a threatening letter upon his wall: ‘The creature [moved] with a strange somnambulistic lassitude’. (554) ‘This was not a frightened bird, attempting to escape from a room into which it had blundered, but the bearer of a terrible message, who did not wish for any contact with this evil man’. Pullman, who has become an accessory after the fact of the torturers of Hell, shudders as if he were ‘facing an executioner’. (555) Recovering somewhat from the shock of ‘the written threat’, Pullman discovers the angel has gone. Heaven’s latest messenger ‘took no interest in the private theatricals of this very wicked man, and all he said, on returning to Heaven, was that the beastly sinner had chased him round the room, and seemed disposed to lock him up’. (556)

The correspondence between Lewis’s eclectic approach to the refashioning of the ‘Progress of the Soul’ genre and the way in which James’s literary and scholarly interests are
fused in his editing of the non-canonical works associated with *The New Testament* is again marked in the final paragraph of *Malign Fiesta*. Seized by Heaven’s Angels, Pullman hears a harsh whisper in his ear: ‘No harm will come to you’. In thus completing the pattern whereby the transcendental messengers of ‘The Hymn’ become purely a disembodied voice, Lewis echoes also a typical feature of the hauntings in the ghost stories of M. R. James.

VI

The reason why Pullman has been so slow to recognise the true nature of the cosmic struggle in which he finds himself engulfed is one of a number of problems that must be deferred until the next instalment of this investigation. There I shall endeavour to argue that 1) in *Monstre Gai* there are explicit allusions to the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha of the Old Testament; 2) in the editing of one of these non-canonical texts James played a conspicuous role; 3) recognizing the impact of these outliers of both the Old and New Testaments upon the entire range of *The Human Age* enables us to locate more precisely two or three other of Lewis’s libraries. Grateful as all Lewis scholars must be for the curatorial skills of our colleagues in North America, I am happy to report these particular collections of books that Lewis read still remain in Britain.

In the meantime, while I have yet to fully make my case, perhaps those readers who continue to be skeptical about the interpretations here advanced will share at least my growing sense that the number and complexity of the parallels between the two oeuvres surveyed often verge on the uncanny. Others may even be inclined to agree that the evidence so far assembled does suggest that (though they never met) Lewis gained from James’s writings an unforgettable impression of the ambiguous spell this mage-like polymath cast on those who encountered him. That experience has been memorably described: ‘The force of it, I think, was the combination of humour...with the feeling when you met him that he was slightly larger than life and could if necessary conjure a demon out of a brass bottle or tell you the names of the soldiers at the foot of the Cross.’

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NOTES

2. M.R. James’s publications consistently advertise this achievement.

52
6. ‘I am one of the ten Princes of Time’ (266): the Bailiff’s boast connects him with ancient heresies as well as modern. Specifically, the Gnostic doctrine of the Aeons is implied. This heterodox belief derives from the Zurvanite heresy, at the head of which stood Infinite Time. On Lewis’s use of these ideas, see Caracciolo, ‘Mr Punch, Zoroastrianism and Relativity’ at p. 30. Later still, towards the close of *The Human Age*, the Devil reveals the Bailiff’s true identity when he starts calling this terrifying Aeon by his proper name of ‘Zoe’ (*MF*, p. 537).


11. See Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity* (New Haven: Yale, 2000), ch. 4; unfortunately this elegant study ignores *Finnegans Wake*. Alter’s discussion of the Hebrew Bible, and the light this may shed on Lewis, will be examined in the next instalment of this essay.


17. James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion And Ethics* (Clarke, 1908-1926). The 13th volume was conveniently the Index.

18. M. C. D’Arcy reviewed *Time and Western Man* in ‘A Critic among the Philosophers’, *The Month* CL, 76 (December 1927). But (as in his edition of *Time and Western Man*, p. 510), Edwards notes that D’Arcy, too, has his reservations. Lewis’s alliance with the Jesuits seems to have lasted at least until the police chief in *Monstre Gai* is unmasked.

19. See *Ulysses* (1922), IX (Scylla and Charybdis); and the specimen of ‘Work in Progress’ in *This Quarter*: 1925-26; also, on Joyce’s Gnostic leanings and his condescension towards Shakespeare, see John Garvin (a.k.a. Myles na gCopaleen *et al*.), *James Joyce’s Disunited Kingdom and the Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976), pp. 7, 80-86, 127.

20. Lewis was powerless tempted by Marcion’s thinking (see Edwards, p. 545-47, p. 569, n.33). With characteristic ambiguity, though, in *Left Wings over Europe* (London: Cape, 1933) even as he contemplates the thought that in a devout age he would have been a Marcionite heretic, what ‘undoubtedly’ Lewis does admit to being is somewhat worse than just lukewarm.
in matters of religion. He is ‘a Laodicean’ (p. 255), that is one who because ‘neither cold nor hot’, the Angel of the Apocalypse threatens ‘I will spue thee out of my mouth’—or such is the warning in *Revelations* (3: 15-16), that questionably canonical text.
21. On Lewis’s ironical attitude to Nietzsche, see Edwards, ch. 6.
22. ‘Each of these [Gnostic] sects claimed to be the repository of a secret message, revealed from heaven; and on the knowledge of this message, with its accompanying symbols and ritual, the entrance into the higher life depended’: Hastings, VI (1913), p. 232. Could this and the earlier volumes of Hastings, like the 11th edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* have informed the creator of *The Enemy of the Stars*? See also Edwards, ch. 5.
23. *The Peterborough Psalter and Bestiary of the Fourteenth Century* (1921) and *The Bestiary* (1928).
25. See Michel, 49 and 64 on Plate 107; Lewis’s own illuminating comments are quoted at p. 440.
27. *The Little Flowers of St Francis of Assisi*, revised by Thomas Okey (London: Routledge, 1905); many times reprinted especially by Catholic publishers such as Hollis and Carter, e.g., 1946. See ch. 6, esp. pp. 51-53. See also Francis Klingender, *Animals in art and thought to the end of the Middle Ages*, ed. Evelyn Antal and John Harthan (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 444. It may have been scavenging birds that Francis confronted; see Adrian Hope, *Francis of Assisi* (London: Chatto, 2000), p. 147.