Oscar Horta, C. S. Lewis, and the Fall of Nature

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The Spanish philosopher Oscar Horta visited Oxford recently to speak on his special interest: what we ought to feel and do about the suffering of animals in the wild. He calculates that this suffering – from hunger, disease, and, above all, predation – far outweighs whatever satisfactions nature provides for her luckier ones. It's more or less untouched by conservation projects, which anyway have other purposes. Humans have been intervening in order to mitigate, for themselves, the ruthlessness of nature's regime ever since they started to settle. To regard this same regime as a wise and acceptable one for wild animals, and to refuse to intervene on their behalf, is therefore "a clear speciesist prejudice". As to how to intervene, that's a question to which study and experience will start to provide answers once we have accepted the idea that it is indeed our business to do so. At present, Horta says, the idea "is still new and may be a strange one to many people".[1]

Strange to many but not, at least, to readers of C. S. Lewis. In his book *The Problem of Pain* (1940), Lewis has a chapter on the pains of animals, which deals, not with human cruelty towards them, much as he minded that, but with the Horta subject: their suffering in nature. For Lewis, the problem is a Christian-theological one: "how can animal suffering be reconciled with the justice of God?" On the face of it, then, he is thinking about it in a very different way. But it's not, for him, simply an intellectual puzzle, any more than it is for Horta. Lewis too believed that there was something to put right: "what shall be done for these innocents?"

Here, anyway, is the solution which he proposes to the theological problem. It can no longer be imagined, Lewis concedes, that animal suffering is a sort of by-product of the Fall of Man. Strife within the natural world clearly preceded the emergence of humans by a very large tract of time. Lewis therefore proposes that there had already been what he calls a "Satanic corruption of the beasts" before humans appeared. And humanity, when it did come, had as part of its commission in the world exactly to redeem these earlier animals from their fall and its consequences, to be in fact "the Christ" of the animals.[2] But so far from redeeming them, humanity itself fell, and has subsequently taken a clear lead in predation – opting, as Jesus Christ himself famously did not, to achieve greatness on the fallen world's own terms. "Man destroys or enslaves every species he can", as Lewis says in his essay 'Religion and Rocketry'.[3]

In the absence of scriptural direction in this subject, Lewis calls his suggestions "guesswork", as if he is aiming at something more than a myth. And this conviction that there is indeed something to know, a real and intended meaning behind the chaotic scene, as opposed to such sense or ordering as we may decide to impose on it, is a great strength of his Christian thinking here, whether it convinces or not. It accounts for his earnestness in the matter, his refusal to turn from it with a shrug. But even as a myth, the two-fold Fall makes a powerful and disturbing account. It shows humanity not, as in Horta's view of things, neglecting what may be a duty towards fellow-creatures, but culpably failing an existential trust, and then compounding the evil it was sent to remedy.

This helps to explain, then, the animus against our species which qualifies Lewis's high estimate of its spiritual destiny ("honour enough […] and shame enough", as the lion Aslan puts it to the hero of *Prince Caspian* when giving him the rather unwelcome news that he's human[4]). A motif which one might call 'man's come-uppance' vividly dramatizes this animus in his writings. Among his poems, for instance: 'Pan's Purge' envisages with some circumstantial detail and relish "the end of Man"; or there's the especially fine 'On a Picture by Chirico', where two horses, lone survivors of a "thousand years' war", hear from across the sea a summons to "their new-crowned race to leave the places where Man died". More elaborately, a revenge of the animals forms the crisis of *That Hideous Strength* (1945), and therefore of the whole trilogy of science-fiction novels of which it's the third.

The phrase "that hideous strength" comes from Sir David Lyndsay's *Ane Dialog betwixt Experience and ane Courteour* (1555), where it refers to the Tower of Babel. In the novel, its reference is to a thoroughly twentieth-century manifestation of that same Babel-spirit of bumptious humanism: the National Institute of Co-Ordinated Experiments. The NICE (that's how Lewis writes it, though now it sounds like a progressive rock group of the 1960s) brings together some of the characteristic scourges of the century thitherto: totalitarianism, mendacious propaganda, aggressive utopianism, racism. What Lewis mocks and reprobates in particular is a higher-order version of that last scourge, what might be called human-racism (Horta's "speciesist prejudice"). It's the creed which, in the first volume of the trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), the physicist Weston has taken with him to Mars (called Malacandra in the book): his purpose is "to plant the flag of man on the soil of Malacandra". As for the present denizens of that planet, they will simply have to concede "the right of the higher over the lower" and give up their claims in the place. From there, Weston envisages that humans will move further and further outward, "claiming planet after planet".[5] In short – so Lewis writes in his preface to the second volume, *Perelandra* (1943) – space travel will "open a new chapter of misery for the Universe".

Weston himself is destroyed in *Perelandra*, but his stripped-down humanism survives in *That Hideous Strength* as the ideology of the NICE. Lewis thought it nearly meaningless, a sentimental attachment rather than a serious creed: "If loyalty to our own species, preference for man simply because we are men, is not a sentiment, then what is?"[6] And certainly no one at the NICE really knows what anyone else or even he

himself means by it (yes, all of them are males, except the grotesque chief of police, Fairy Hardcastle, who has no creed but force). The point is brilliantly made at the banquet held to celebrate the first anniversary of the organisation, when the whole company is struck by a sort of dysphasia, and talks gibberish: the Babel-nemesis, in fact.

But if the aim is unclear, the ethic serving it is definite enough: an improvised utilitarianism (if that's not a tautology), trading off present decencies against grandiose promises. Dr Edwin Ransom, the hero of the trilogy, summarises it thus: "breaking all the rules whenever we imagine that it might possibly do some vague good to humanity in the remote future". Those rules are what have hitherto constituted our "inherited morality". In his 1947 essay *Vivisection*, Lewis uses the phrase "the old world of ethical law", and he sees vivisection as signalling its abandonment in favour of a "ruthless, non-moral utilitarianism", a change of mind as ominous to humans as to animals (he instances Dachau and Hiroshima). Just so, the NICE includes in its projects "an immense programme of vivisection, freed at last from Red Tape". Such work, so Ransom believes, promotes "a conviction that the stifling of all deep-set repugnances" is "the first essential for progress". [7] It therefore entails a drastic derogation of human sensibility. In both essay and novel, the suggestion is that how we view and treat animals is a sort of front line in the defence or defeat of moral rule in general.

The idea is present all through the trilogy. At its start, Ransom strays onto the scene of Weston's inter-planetary project, to be subsequently doped and abducted to Malacandra, because the dog which should have kept him out has gone before, as it were – used up in a preparatory experiment. On the planet Perelandra, the sign that some malign personality (in fact Weston himself) has alighted there is a trail of mutilated frogs – profoundly shocking to Ransom, even though "he was a man who had been on the Somme".[8] And this moral indicator which Lewis makes of the inter-species relation works in the positive sense as well. Ransom learns to love and understand the planet Malacandra once he has stopped seeing its strange-looking denizens as grotesque approximations to humans – the anthropocentric habit of mind – and learnt to accept and appreciate them instead for whatever it is they really are. Later, his household in *That Hideous Strength*, the centre of resistance to the NICE's totalitarian project, is dryly described by its least sociable member as "a sort of menagerie". It includes a bear, and it's this bear that releases the NICE's collection of research animals, allowing them to gate-crash the already chaotic banquet-scene and bring it – and the whole NICE – to a shockingly violent end.

It's significant that the animals which we see bursting into the dining hall are not the dogs, rabbits, mice, and other such species which actually have been able to make terms of some sort with humans, or at least to live alongside them – and which partly for that reason are the sort which more commonly find themselves in laboratories. They are the still-wild animals – tiger, snake, wolf, gorilla, finally an elephant. As such they can stand for, as well as more terrifically avenge, all the fallen creatures deserted by man. True, these particular ones belong near the top, rather than to the more pitiable lower orders, of the predation system, but those others, we must imagine, simply ran for it, as they always have to do. (Readers of C. S. Lewis will know that he had a keen sympathy for the more timid and fugitive animals.)

This is not just a come-uppance for man as vivisector, then, although most certainly it is that. In fact the downright views on that subject which Lewis expressed in the essay *Vivisection*, and also *viva voce*, very greatly offended some fellow-academics. But one of them, the geneticist J. B. S. Haldane, rightly saw the trilogy more largely as an "attack on my species".[9] It *is* an attack on the human species as Haldane conceived it: that is, as a self-sufficient progressivist project. At the time of writing his review of the novels, Haldane was a Stalinist, and spoke in particular for the sort of hustled utopianism that Lewis pilloried in his account of the NICE. Still, some variety of Haldane's science-based humanism is what the western world at least has generally approved and enjoyed. The prospectus of it which the ape named Shift (in *The Last Battle*) conjures up for the pastoral Narnia is therefore almost unobjectionably familiar to us: "a country worth living in … roads and big cities and schools and offices and whips and muzzles and saddles and cages and kennels and prisons".[10] It may not look good for the animals, of course, but Shift's allegiance is not to them: he's working for the human Calormenes.

Shift is the only importantly unpleasant animal in the Narnia books. But then, as Lewis rather unfairly says in his poem 'Sweet Desire', "Always evil was an ape" – meaning that evil makes nothing of its own, but is always a corrupt imitation of something in itself good. The dominion which Shift attempts in Narnia is something which, when properly exercised by the humans whose heritage it apparently is, Narnia requires. ("Narnia was never right except when a son of Adam was King", says the Badger in *Prince Caspian*). These seven books in fact show humanity learning to practise what Lewis had called its "redemptive function" towards the rest of nature. Intelligibly, then, the rulers that Aslan chooses for Narnia are children, or else (in *The Magician's Nephew*) a hansom cab-driver: people diffident of their own authority, habituated to take instruction rather than give it. And this instruction in redemptorism, where being human constitutes a mission rather than a status, is a characterizing feature of the many encounters and adventures with animals which are narrated in these stories.

In the very first of these encounters, Lucy Pevensie reproves Tumnus the Faun for his uncertainty as to her species with the richly revealing "Of course I'm human". This could be humanity's motto, with its haughty parochialism (though Lucy herself is a charming and polite girl). It is at once put into corrective context by one of the titles which Lucy spots in the Faun's modest library: *Is Man a Myth?* Much later, in the final chapters of *The Magician's Nephew*, which was the last of the series that Lewis wrote, there's the humiliation of Uncle Andrew, chased and caught as a curiosity by a rout of animals, then argued over as to his species, and finally identified as a tree and planted out accordingly. The episode shows a sort of world-turned-upside-down, for Uncle Andrew is himself a keen hunter and a scientist-cum-magician (not the oxymoron it's commonly taken to be, so Lewis argues in *The Abolition of Man* and elsewhere). And this up-ending is a trope with which Lewis habitually confuses his reader's sense of species-

prestige. He does it merely with the title of *The Horse and His Boy*. More startlingly he does it with the giants' cookery book in *The Silver Chair* where, after "Mallard. This delicious bird can be cooked in a variety of ways" comes "Man. This elegant little biped has long been valued as a delicacy."[11]

There is much ordinary playfulness in all this, of course. As Lewis observes in his poem 'Eden's Courtesy', "children all desire an animal book", and that's certainly not from a priggish inclination to be improved. But most of the classic animal books for children leave the species relation where they found it, if perhaps a little gentrified. The Narnia books don't. The word 'courtesy' in that poem's title is being used, naturally enough for a literary scholar, in its generous mediaeval and renaissance sense – the sense, for instance, which Chaucer's knight values it for in *The Canterbury Tales*, the sense in which Lewis himself again uses it in 'The Late Passenger', where the "great discourtesy" of Noah's sons in turning away the unicorn from the Ark will make "dark and crooked all the ways in which our race shall walk". In this sense, these are indeed books of courtesy, teaching pre-lapsarian manners.

It may impatiently be felt that this whole line of thought is premised in Christianity and can therefore appeal only to those who accept that premise. But my starting point, Oscar Horta, seems to show that one can join it from other directions. And besides, there's a firm basis for it in mere history. What Lewis calls the "corruption of the beasts", the lapse into carnivorousness, is certainly somewhere there in the record. The palaeontologist Richard Fortey, in his *Life: an Unauthorised Biography*, places it "a geological second" into the Cambrian era (disappointingly soon). And a fall or disaster of some kind it surely was. Fortey himself describes the change in elegiac terms: "The era of photosynthetic passivity and peaceful coexistence among bacteria and algae had passed from the Earth, and the hierarchy of power has never subsequently been forgotten."[12] He suggests that the cause was a somehow perverted symbiosis ("Always evil was an ape"). What Oscar Horta and C. S. Lewis are both proposing is that we make that aboriginal symbiosis our model for the natural world, rather than the blood-boltered free-for-all that came after it, and take action accordingly. For again, whatever we may think of man's dominion as ordained in scripture, it's a fact that man has it. We alone have the mind and power to know and to do better than fallen nature. So while, Weston-like, we are scanning outer space for signs of life, we might usefully practise our ancient heritage of species-fellowship by doing all the good we can to the life near at hand, which we know for certain exists and needs our help.

[1] A summary of Horta's thinking can be found in his online paper 'Debunking the Idyllic View of Natural Processes: Population dynamics and Suffering in the Wild', from which the quotations are taken.

[2] Quotations are from *The Problem of Pain*, Bles 1940, pp.119, 124, 123, and 66. For a more professional discussion of this aspect of C.S.Lewis, see Andrew Linzey, 'C.S.Lewis's Theology of Animals', in *Anglican Theological Review*, vol.80, no.1, 1998, and *The Lion's World: a Journey into the Heart of Narnia*, Rowan Williams, SPCK 2012.

[3] Reprinted in *Fern-seed and Elephants*, Fount 1998, p.74

[4] *Prince Caspian*, Harper Collins 1997, p.185

[5] Harper Collins 2005, pp.175 and 173

[6] From the 1947 essay *Vivisection*, reprinted in *Essay Collection*, ed. Walmsley, Harper Collins 2000

[7] Quotations from *That Hideous Strength*, Harper Collins 2005, pp.192, 129, 276

[8] Harper Collins 2001, p.280

[9] Haldane's review, titled 'Auld Hornie, F.R.S.' and published in the *Modern Quarterly* in 1946, can be seen online at www.marxists.org/archive.

[10] *The Last Battle*, Harper Collins 1980, p.34

[11] *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Harper Collins 1997, p.16 and *The Silver Chair,* Harper Collins 1980, pp.106-7

[12] Harper Collins 1998, p.104