

offing. Charles Dickens? Doesn't want to leave London and young Ellen Ternan.

PERHAPS, then, the art is wrong?—Cézanne stares when the Committee approaches him. Why, in the name of everything rational, should he want to leave these old hot southern rocks? As for apples, tablecloths, pitchers, he can find plenty here at home—what need for a university? What would he do there that he does not do here?—he paints and he paints and he paints: what else *is* there to do? Beethoven (a most deficient and maladjusted person—another *impossible* person) replies with a titanic stare, growl, and shrug. It occurs to both of them to ask, in a moment of terrifying geniality, what the Committee means by its talk of *pure creative effort*. “Pure, pure; creative, creative,” they say, “what

*blague*, what *Quatsch* is this?—we are not making pure creative efforts: we are telling you God's truth.” Sometimes, it appears, genius is touched with paranoia. Alas.

Our Committee retires to think things over. Like any Committee, ours will not admit that it has failed. It reports some strange, deeply ingrained resistance of the artists to the university, a resistance that is not to be in the least diminished by all that they are told about a new function the university has, which is that of serving as “the focal point of national growth.” Like any Committee, ours looks to the future, to the time when the universities will have discovered the way to rear up a new generation of artists who will be trained to find it possible to accommodate themselves to the accommodation of pure creative effort in the arts that the university will devise.

## Unreal Estates

*On Science Fiction — C. S. LEWIS, KINGSLEY AMIS, BRIAN ALDISS*

ALDISS: One thing that the three of us have in common is that we have all had stories published in the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, some of them pretty far-flung stories. I take it we would all agree that one of the attractions of *S.F.* is that it takes us to unknown places.

AMIS: Swift, if he were writing to-day, would have to take us out to the planets, wouldn't he? Now that most of our terra incognita is—real estate.

ALDISS: There is a lot of the eighteenth-century equivalent of *S.F.* which is placed in Australia or similar unreal estates.

SHORTLY before his recent death, Professor C. S. Lewis recorded a discussion in his rooms at Magdalene College, Cambridge, with Kingsley Amis and Brian Aldiss, on science fiction. Lewis was himself, in addition to his critical and theological work, the author of a number of imaginative tales: *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, *That Hideous Strength*, among others. Amis, besides his novels (*Lucky Jim*, *One Fat Englishman*, etc.), has written a study of science fiction, *New Maps of Hell* (now available as a *Pan Pocket Book*, 2s. 6d), and has co-edited three anthologies of science-fiction stories. Aldiss is the editor of three *Penguin Science Fiction* anthologies and author of many science fiction novels and short stories.

LEWIS: Exactly: Peter Wilkins and all that. By the way, is anyone ever going to do a translation of Kepler's *Somnium*?

AMIS: Groff Conklin told me he had read the book; I think it must exist in translation. But may we talk about the worlds you created? You chose the science fiction medium because you wanted to go to strange places? I remember with respectful and amused admiration your account of the space drive in *Out of the Silent Planet*. When Ransome and his friend get into the spaceship he says “How does this ship work?” and the man says “It operates by using some of the lesser known properties of—,” what was it?

LEWIS: Solar radiation. Ransome was reporting words without a meaning to him, which is what a layman gets when he asks for a scientific explanation. Obviously it was vague, because I'm no scientist and not interested in the purely technical side of it.

ALDISS: It's almost a quarter of a century since you wrote that first novel of the trilogy.

LEWIS: Have I been a prophet?

ALDISS: You have to a certain extent; at least, the idea of vessels propelled by solar radiation is back in favour again. Cordwainer Smith used it poetically, James Blish tried to use it technically in *The Star Dwellers*.

LEWIS: In my case it was pure mumbo-jumbo, and perhaps meant primarily to convince me.

AMIS: Obviously when one deals with isolated planets or isolated islands one does this for a certain purpose. A setting in contemporary London or a London of the future couldn't provide one with the same isolation and the heightening of consciousness it engenders.

LEWIS: The starting point of the second novel, *Perelandra*, was my mental picture of the floating islands. The whole of the rest of my labours in a sense consisted of building up a world in which floating islands could exist. And then of course the story about an averted fall developed. This is because, as you know, having got your people to this exciting country, something must happen.

AMIS: That frequently taxes people very much.

ALDISS: But I am surprised that you put it this way round. I would have thought that you constructed *Perelandra* for the didactic purpose.

LEWIS: Yes, everyone thinks that. They are quite wrong.

AMIS: If I may say a word on Professor Lewis' side, there was a didactic purpose of course; a lot of very interesting profound things were said, but—correct me if I'm wrong—I'd have thought a simple sense of wonder, extraordinary things going on, were the motive forces behind the creation.

LEWIS: Quite, but something has got to happen. The story of this averted fall came in very conveniently. Of course it wouldn't have been that particular story if I wasn't interested in those particular ideas on other grounds. But that isn't what I started from. I've never started from a message or a moral, have you?

AMIS: No, never. You get interested in the situation.

LEWIS: The story itself should force its moral upon you. You find out what the moral is by writing the story.

AMIS: Exactly: I think that sort of thing is true of all kinds of fiction.

ALDISS: But a lot of science fiction has been written from the other point of view: those dreary sociological dramas that appear from time to time, started with a didactic purpose—to make a preconceived point—and they've got no further.

LEWIS: I suppose Gulliver started from a straight point of view? Or did it really start because he wanted to write about a lot of big and little men?

AMIS: Possibly both, as Fielding's parody of Richardson turned into *Joseph Andrews*. A lot of science fiction loses much of the impact it could have by saying "Well, here we are on Mars, we all know where we are, and we're living in these pressure domes or whatever it is, and life is really very much like it is on earth, except there is a certain climatic difference..."

They accept other men's inventions rather than forge their own.

LEWIS: It's only the first journey to a new planet that is of any interest to imaginative people.

AMIS: In your reading of science fiction have you ever come across a writer who's done this properly?

LEWIS: Well, the one you probably disapprove of because he's so very unscientific is David Lindsay, in *Voyage to Arcturus*. It's a remarkable thing, because scientifically it's nonsense, the style is appalling, and yet this ghastly vision comes through.

ALDISS: It didn't come through to me.

AMIS: Nor me. Still... Victor Gollancz told me a very interesting remark of Lindsay's about *Arcturus*; he said, "I shall never appeal to a large public at all, but I think that as long as our civilisation lasts one person a year will read me." I respect that attitude.

LEWIS: Quite so. Modest and becoming. I also agree with something you said in a preface, I believe it was, that some science fiction really does deal with issues far more serious than those realistic fiction deals with; real problems about human destiny and so on. Do you remember that story about the man who meets a female monster landed from another planet with all its cubs hanging round it? It's obviously starving, and he offers them thing after thing to eat; they immediately vomit it up, until one of the young fastens on him, begins sucking his blood, and immediately begins to revive. This female creature is utterly unhuman, horrible in form; there's a long moment when it looks at the man—they're in a lonely place—and then very sadly it packs up its young, and goes back into its spaceship and goes away. Well now, you could not have a more serious theme than that. What is a footling story about some pair of human lovers compared with that?

AMIS: On the debit side, you often have these marvellous large themes tackled by people who haven't got the mental or moral or stylistic equipment to take them on. A reading of more recent *S.F.* shows that writers are getting more capable of tackling them. Have you read Walter Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*? Have you any comments on that?

LEWIS: I thought it was pretty good. I only read it once; mind you, a book's no good to me until I've read it two or three times—I'm going to read it again. It was a major work, certainly.

AMIS: What did you think about its religious feeling?

LEWIS: It came across very well. There were bits of the actual writing which one could quarrel with, but on the whole it was well imagined and well executed.

AMIS: Have you seen James Blish's novel *A Case of Conscience*? Would you agree that to write a religious novel that isn't concerned with details of ecclesiastical practice and the numbing minutiae of history and so on, science fiction would be the natural outlet for this?

LEWIS: If you have a religion it must be cosmic; therefore it seems to me odd that this *genre* was so late in arriving.

ALDISS: It's been around without attracting critical attention for a long time; the magazines themselves have been going since 1926, although in the beginning they appealed mainly to the technical side. As Amis says, people have come along who can write, as well as think up engineering ideas.

LEWIS: We ought to have said earlier that that's quite a different species of science fiction, about which I say nothing at all; those who were really interested in the technical side of it. It's obviously perfectly legitimate if it's well done.

AMIS: The purely technical and the purely imaginative overlap, don't they?

ALDISS: There are certainly the two streams, and they often overlap, for instance in Arthur Clarke's writings. It can be a rich mixture. Then there's the type of story that's not theological, but it makes a moral point. An example is the Sheckley story about Earth being blasted by radioactivity. The survivors of the human race have gone away to another planet for about a thousand years; they come back to reclaim Earth and find it full of all sorts of gaudy armour-plated creatures, vegetation, etc. One of the party say, "We'll clear this lot out, make it habitable for man again." But in the end the decision is 'Well, we made a mess of the place when it was ours, let's get out and leave it to them.' This story was written about '49, when most people hadn't starting thinking round the subject at all.

LEWIS: Yes, most of the earlier stories start from the opposite assumption that we, the human race, are in the right, and everything else is ogres. I may have done a little towards altering that, but the new point of view has come very much in. We've lost our confidence, so to speak.

AMIS: It's all terribly self-critical and self-contemplatory nowadays.

LEWIS: This is surely an enormous gain—a human gain, that people should be thinking that way.

AMIS: The prejudice of supposedly educated persons towards this type of fiction is fantastic. If you pick up a good science fiction magazine, the range of interests appealed to and I.Q.s employed is pretty amazing. It's time more people caught on. We've been telling them about it for some while.

LEWIS: Quite true. The world of serious fiction is very narrow.

AMIS: Too narrow if you want to deal with a broad theme. For instance, Philip Wylie in *The Disappearance* wants to deal with the difference between men and women in a general way, in twentieth-century society, unencumbered by local and temporary considerations; his point, as I understand it, is that men and women, shorn of their social roles, are really very much the same. Science fiction, which can presuppose a major change in our environment, is the natural medium for discussing a subject of that kind. Look at the job of dissecting human nastiness carried out in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.

LEWIS: That can't be science fiction.

AMIS: I would dissent from that. It starts off with a characteristic bit of *S.F.* situation: that World War III has begun, bombs dropped and all that....

LEWIS: Ah, well, you're now taking the German view that any romance about the future is science fiction. I'm not sure that this is a useful classification.

AMIS: "Science fiction" is such a hopelessly vague label.

LEWIS: And of course a great deal of it isn't *science* fiction. Really it's only a negative criterion: anything which is not naturalistic, which is not about what we call the real world.

ALDISS: I think we oughtn't to try to define it, because it's a self-defining thing in a way. We know where we are. You're right, though, about *Lord of the Flies*. The atmosphere is a science fiction atmosphere.

LEWIS: It was a very terrestrial island; the best island, almost, in fiction. Its actual sensuous effect on you is terrific.

ALDISS: Indeed. But it's a laboratory case—

AMIS: —isolating certain human characteristics, to see how they would work out—

LEWIS: The only trouble is that Golding writes so well. In one of his other novels, *The Inheritors*, the detail of every sensuous impression, the light on the leaves and so on, was so good that you couldn't find out what was happening. I'd say it was almost too well done. All these little details you only notice in real life if you've got a high temperature. You couldn't see the wood for the leaves.

ALDISS: You had this in *Pincher Martin*; every feeling in the rocks, when he's washed ashore, is done with a hallucinatory vividness.

AMIS: It is, that's exactly the phrase. I think thirty years ago if you wanted to discuss a general theme you would go to the historical novel; now you would go to what I might describe in a prejudiced way as science fiction. In science fiction you can isolate the factors you want to examine. If you wanted to deal with the theme of colonialism, for instance, as Poul Anderson has done, you don't do it by writing a novel about Ghana or Pakistan—

LEWIS: Which involves you in such a mass of detail that you don't want to go into—

AMIS: You set up worlds in space which incorporate the characteristics you need.

LEWIS: Would you describe Abbot's *Flatland* as science fiction? There's so little effort to bring it into any sensuous—well, you couldn't do it, and it remains an intellectual theorem. . . . But probably the great work in science fiction is still to come. Futile books about the next world came before Dante, Fanny Burney came before Jane Austen, Marlowe came before Shakespeare.

AMIS: We're getting the prolegomena.

LEWIS: If only the modern highbrow critics could be induced to take it seriously. . . .

AMIS: Do you think they ever can?

LEWIS: No, the whole present dynasty has got to die and rot before anything can be done at all.

ALDISS: Splendid!

AMIS: What's holding them up, do you think?

LEWIS: Matthew Arnold made the horrible prophecy that literature would increasingly replace religion. It has, and it's taken on all the features of bitter persecution, great intolerance, and traffic in relics. All literature becomes a sacred text. A sacred text is always exposed to the most monstrous exegesis; hence we have the spectacle of some wretched scholar taking a pure divertissement written in the seventeenth century and getting the most profound ambiguities and social criticisms out of it, which of course aren't there at all. . . . It's the discovery of the mare's nest by the pursuit of the red herring. This is going to go on long after my lifetime. You may be able to see the end of it, I shan't.

AMIS: You think this is so integral a part of the Establishment that people can't overcome—

LEWIS: It's an industry, you see. What would all the people be writing *D. Phil* theses on if this prop were removed?

AMIS: An instance of this mentality the other day: somebody referred to "Mr. Amis' I suspect rather affected enthusiasm for science fiction. . . ."

LEWIS: Isn't that maddening!

AMIS: You can't really like it.

LEWIS: You must be pretending to be a plain man or something. . . . I've met the attitude

again and again. You've probably reached the stage too of having theses written on yourself. I received a letter from an American examiner asking "Is it true that you meant this and this and this?" A writer of a thesis was attributing to me views which I have explicitly contradicted in the plainest possible English. They'd be much wiser to write about the dead, who can't answer.

ALDISS: In America, I think science fiction is accepted on a more responsible level.

AMIS: I'm not so sure about that, because when *Spectrum I* came out in the States we had less friendly and less understanding treatment from "serious" reviewers than we did over here.

LEWIS: I'm surprised at that, because in general all American reviewing is more friendly and generous than in England.

AMIS: People were patting themselves on the back for not understanding what we meant.

LEWIS: This extraordinary pride in being exempt from temptation that you have not yet risen to the level of! Eunuchs boasting of their chastity!

AMIS: One of my pet theories is that serious writers as yet unborn or still at school will soon regard science fiction as a natural way of writing.

LEWIS: By the way, has any science fiction writer yet succeeded in inventing a third sex? Apart from the third sex we all know.

AMIS: Clifford Simak invented a set-up where there were seven sexes.

LEWIS: How rare happy marriages must have been then!

ALDISS: Rather worth striving for perhaps.

LEWIS: Obviously when achieved they'd be wonderful.

ALDISS: I find I would much rather write science fiction than anything else. The dead weight is so much less there than in the field of the ordinary novel. There's a sense in which you're conquering a fresh country.

AMIS: Speaking as a supposedly realistic novelist, I've written little bits of science fiction and this is such a tremendous liberation.

LEWIS: Well, you're a very ill-used man; you wrote a farce and everyone thought it a damning indictment of Redbrick. I've always had great sympathy for you. They will not understand that a joke is a joke. Everything must be serious.

AMIS: "A fever chart of society."

LEWIS: One thing in science fiction that weighs against us very heavily is the horrible shadow of the comics.

ALDISS: I don't know about that. Titbits Romantic Library doesn't really weigh against the serious writer.

LEWIS: That's a fair analogy. All the novelettes didn't kill the ordinary legitimate novel of courtship and love.

ALDISS: There might have been a time when *S.F.* and comics were weighed together and found wanting, but that at least we've got past.

AMIS: I see the comic books that my sons read, and you have there a terribly vulgar reworking of the themes that science fiction goes in for.

LEWIS: Quite harmless, mind you. This charter about the moral danger of the comics is absolute nonsense. The real objection is against the appalling draughtsmanship. Yet you'll find the same boy who reads them also reads Shakespeare or Spenser. Children are so terribly catholic. That's my experience with my step-children.

ALDISS: This is an English habit, to categorise: that if you read Shakespeare you can't read comics, that if you read science fiction you can't be serious.

AMIS: That's the thing that annoys me.

LEWIS: Oughtn't the word "serious" to have an embargo slapped on it? "Serious" ought to mean simply the opposite of comic, whereas now it means "good" or "Literature" with a capital L.

ALDISS: You can be serious without being earnest.

LEWIS: Leavis demands moral earnestness; I prefer morality.

AMIS: I'm with you every time on that one.

LEWIS: I mean I'd sooner live among people who don't cheat at cards than among people who are earnest about not cheating at cards.

Look, you want to borrow Abbot's *Flatland*, don't you? I must go to dinner I'm afraid. [Hands over *Flatland*] The original manuscript of the *Iliad* could not be more precious. It's only the ungodly who borroweth and payeth not again.

AMIS: (reading) By A. Square.

LEWIS: But of course the word "square" hadn't the same sense then.

ALDISS: It's like the poem by Francis Thompson that ends "She gave me tokens three, A look, a word of her winsome mouth, and a sweet wild raspberry"; there again the meaning has changed. It really was a wild raspberry in Thompson's day.

LEWIS: Or the lovely one about the Bishop of Exeter, who was giving the prizes at a girls' school. They did a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the poor man stood up afterwards and made a speech and said (piping voice) "I was very interested in your delightful performance, and among other things I was very interested in seeing for the first time in my life a female Bottom. . ."

5

### Letter from Rome

## On the Italian Left



WHAT I may call Togliattism is the most notable by-product of the uneasiness that has crept into a good many Communist parties at the harsh, if bloodless, manner of poor Mr. Khrushchev's defenestration. The real centre of Togliattism, however unlikely this may seem, is at present located

not in Italy but in Paris, among the fellow-travelling intellectuals whose leader is J.-P. Sartre. For them the memorandum drawn up by Togliatti at Yalta just before his death has assumed a significance far beyond that attributed to it in Italy, or by anyone acquainted with the circumstances and purpose in which and for which it was written. To put it briefly, they find confirmation in this memorandum that Communism can be adapted to the requirements of a more highly-developed society. In point of fact what it actually consists of are Togliatti's notes for the remarks and suggestions he intended to make at the interview he was waiting to have with Khrushchev. As is well-known, death overtook him before the meeting could be held, and his notes were published in Italy with as much solemnity as if they had been his political testament.

The highly charged atmosphere around Togliatti's recent funeral helped to create a distasteful mythology (and this, even in the "bourgeois" press). To make the career of a man like Togliatti sound remarkable would not, I should have thought, require much invention or distortion of the truth. Yet every great totalitarian organisation requires an apparatus of propaganda and fable from which (as Togliatti himself admitted to me on an occasion I can well remember) it is often impossible to dissociate oneself.

There is, for example, a Dostoevsky-like version of how Togliatti was put up against a wall, but escaped execution thanks to the lightning intervention of a "Comando" of the Roman Communist Federation, which routed the Fascists. (It was first announced in a commemorative number of *L'Unità*, on October 28th, 1946.) The aim of this ingenious, but completely unfounded, tale was to show that one of the principal objectives of Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922 was the capture and execution of Togliatti; and that the weak, disorganised,