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Misreading C.S. Lewis: A Review (A Review of Wesley A. Kort, Reading C.S. Lewis: A Commentary)

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Misreading C. S. Lewis: A Review

A Review of Wesley A. Kort, *Reading C. S. Lewis: A Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2016) 299 pages

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Wesley Kort's new book, *Reading C. S. Lewis: A Commentary* (2016), is nothing less (or more) than a commentary. Thirteen books by C. S. Lewis, eight of them fiction, are somewhat arbitrarily chosen and assembled under three headings. The first part introduces "some reasonable assumptions", the second offers "some cultural critiques", and the third discusses "some principles applied".

The reader cannot escape the sense of summary lecture notes. For instance, *The Problem of Pain* is rehearsed chapter by chapter; *The Screwtape Letters*, letter by letter. Although the author has the rare talent of discussing the quotable C. S. Lewis for several pages without quoting him once, the book's own prose, bereft of any humour, is meagre compensation. Together with as many misreadings as original observations, this makes for a curiously bloodless book.

This is a shame, because it has its strengths. For example, the author shows keen awareness of Lewis's strong virtue ethics, a topic still unmapped in Lewis scholarship. The chapter on *Out of the Silent Planet* includes an insightful discussion of the relations between Ransom, Weston, and Devine. The comparisons between *The Screwtape Letters* and *Paradise Lost* are original and helpful. So is the

perceptive suggestion that *The Problem of Pain's* epigraph is left hanging in the air (p. 51): participatory suffering hardly informs the book's soul-making theodicy.

But there are simply too many misreadings to instil trust. A few examples must suffice. The author chides Lewis for discussing his friend Arthur in *Surprised by Joy* only insofar as he "contributed to Lewis's development" (p. 23). But this is precisely the filter through which Lewis distilled the narrative, omitting what was circumferential to his spiritual journey. This includes Mrs Moore, whom the author refers to as the "elephant in the room when Lewis is discussed" (p. 40). What room? I myself have never met any "Lewis partisans" (p. 38) who denied Lewis and Mrs Moore's love affair. Speaking of love, no evidence is offered for the strange claim that *The Four Loves* arranges family affection, friendship, and eros "from less to more important" (p. 220). And if Lewis was truly often "in sympathy" (p. 217) with Calvin, why are Calvinists put off by his theology?

Most of the misreadings and confusions could have been avoided by consulting more scholarship on Lewis. It is really a one-man job. Of the whopping three scholars mentioned in the main text, only one is a Lewis specialist: Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia* is mentioned twice (pp. 237, 252). A few additional sources appear in the endnotes – but jarringly not even *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis*, which, if nothing else, would have disabused him of the idea that Lewis "seems to have preferred that [*The Lion*] be read first" (p. 204). He did not, but it should be.

It is painful to think, as I fear is the case, that many potential readers will deplete their stamina before arriving at the last chapter – by far the best. Dare one hope that it is republished separately?

The author self-identifies as "neither a devotee nor a detractor" (p. vii) and believes, wisely, that "reading Lewis must be a critical as well as an appreciative art" (p. 16). The final chapter offers a thought-provoking, balanced account of C. S. Lewis's lasting value as a guide in the complexities of modern life.

