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C.S. Lewis's "The Meteorite" and the Importance of Context

Abstract

Contrasts two readings of C.S. Lewis's poem "The Meteorite": first reading and explicating it out of context in the Formalistic manner, and then demonstrating the added layer of meaning gained by considering its use as the *envoi* to *Miracles*, and the implications this has for Formalistic critical approaches to literature.

Additional Keywords

Context in criticism; Critical theories; Formalistic criticism; Lewis, C.S. "The Meteorite"; Lewis, C.S. *Miracles*



S. LEWIS'S "THE METEORITE" AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

JOE R. CHRISTOPHER

C.S. Lewis published "The Meteorite" in a journal in 1946. It has been reprinted in Lewis's *Poems* and *Collected Poems* since his death. It also appeared in one of Lewis's books in 1947. The thesis of this essay can be simply stated: without the context of the 1947 publication, the true meaning of the poem cannot be ascertained. This thesis is bothersome for those who, like this author, were trained in the New Critical approach of the early part of the twentieth century—what is now called a Formalistic approach. But it seems to be true. The evidence will consist of an elaborate Formalistic analysis, with the conclusion to which it brings the reader. And then the context will be given, and a second meaning will be presented.

Therefore, the first analysis. "The Meteorite" consists of five quatrains of iambic tetrameter rhyming ABAB. The poem begins:

Among the hills a meteorite
Lies huge; and moss has overgrown,
And wind and rain with touches light
Made soft, the contours of the stone.

Off-hand, one might expect that a huge meteorite would have made a large crater when hitting the earth, but this is not indicated. Perhaps one may conjecture a slow-moving meteorite that approached the earth in the direction of its movement around the sun, and not head-on; thus, the speed may not have been great enough to produce one of the major impacts, such as the largest on earth, the 160-kilometer-wide depression of Lake Acraman in Australia.

This relatively mild landing is reinforced by the meteorite being on the top of the ground, where moss can overgrow the stone and wind and rain can soften its contours. The rhyme word *stone* also indicates that this meteorite is one that is primarily made up of stony minerals, not one that is primarily iron. (Technically, this is a distinction among differentiated meteorites.) Since the Willamette Meteorite, at fifteen and a half tons the largest ever found in the United States, has one pitted side, due partially to atmospheric friction when it came down but also to rust since that time—it is an iron meteorite—Lewis's common-sense depiction of moss, wind, and rain seems factual.

This first quatrain has some alliteration—*hills* and *huge*; *-mong*, *meteorite*, and *moss*, for example—and some off-rhymes, such as *wind*, *rain*, *con-* of *contours*, and *stone*. But these and other devices, such as vowel variety with occasional assonance, seem to be used not so much to emphasize key ideas as to simply create the usual aural harmony of good English verse. Thus these techniques will not be emphasized in the rest of this discussion. Lewis can be assumed to be in command of these devices.

The syntax is more significant. Lewis obviously is not trying for a lyric emphasis to his verse, for lyrics tend to fit the thought to the line. But Lewis has the enjambment of “Lies huge” carried over from the first line into the second, and has the major internal pause of the quatrain after that first foot of the second line with the semicolon that follows *huge*. The elaborate parallelism of the “moss has overgrown” and the “wind and rain [have] made soft” that follows, running from the second into the fourth line, has an appeal to the intellect more than to the emotions. In short, Lewis is writing a type of spoken verse, based on wit (in the word’s larger meaning); the poem is thus an epigram, not a lyric, in a rather Martialian or Jonsonian sense.

If one wanted to argue for a lyric, one would have to emphasize the caesurae after the first feet in the second and fourth lines, and argue (ignoring the A rhymes) for a pattern of alternate iambic pentameter and iambic trimeter lines:

Among the hills a meteorite lies huge;
And moss has overgrown,
And wind and rain with touches light made soft,
The contours of the stone.

But this, though clever, has no support in the rest of the poem, for never again is there a quatrain with this pattern and only once again a caesura after the first foot of a second or fourth line—or, for that matter, any line.

The second quatrain generalizes about the moss, wind, and rain:

Thus easily can Earth digest
A cinder of sidereal fire,
And make her translunary guest
The native of an English shire

The moss, wind, and rain are thus “digest[ing]” the meteorite, in a metaphor, or making it “native” to England, in another. This was prepared for by the wind and rain “Ma[king] soft [...] the contours” of the meteorite in the first stanza. The wearing away of the stone is equivalent to the digesting; the covering of it with moss is equivalent to making it native.

Lewis indicates that the meteorite's descent through the atmosphere was fiery with his metaphor of the meteorite as a cinder, a cinder left from its fiery entrance. *Sidereal* is an odd term since it refers to stars or constellations. Obviously, fiery meteoroids and meteorites *seem* to come from the stars, which is why meteors are called "shooting stars"; also, it is true that the meteor showers—those swarms of meteors that are met regularly, as the earth passes through the particles each year—are named by astronomers after the constellations from which the showers seem to come. The most brilliant recorded shower was that of 13 November 1833, as the earth passed through what is called the *Leonid* meteor shower, after the sign of Leo. So Lewis's use of *sidereal*, in either of its senses, is defensible not literally but by allusion.

The term *translunary*, on the other hand, can be taken literally. Meteorites, before they fall, typically are rotating around the sun; they certainly are beyond the orbit of the earth's moon. This term, according to the OED II, seems to be the first used by Michael Drayton in 1627; it has reappeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But the meaning is not just a matter of location. Lewis seems to be reviving an old idea from Ptolemaic astronomy, referring to the unchanging realm beyond the moon—except that the meteorite's appearance from that realm proves it is not literally unchanging, for the meteorite ends up sublunar. Indeed, in modern terms, the rest of the universe can hardly be assumed to be eternal, as it seemed to be to the ancient watchers of the sky; the whole current theory of the big-bang origin assumes an expanding universe, with possibly a big crunch at the end, if gravity is strong enough to pull all matter back together. (Or, if current beliefs about a dark energy are accurate, an ever further expanding universe.) Lewis's medieval (and classical) studies lie behind his hint of the eternal heavens. (Cf. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* 3-5, 28, 32-33, 95-96.)

This second quatrain also has a nice metaphor, mentioned before, comparing the meteorite to a human being, when it is compared to a guest who is turned into a native inhabitant "of an English shire"; people do move to a new country, as the meteorite so to speak has, and then become naturalized citizens, as the meteorite is "digest[ed]" or, in this new metaphor, is turned into a "native."

The next two quatrains present a slightly different argument, augmenting what has been said:

Nor is it strange these wanderers
Find in her lap their fitting place,
For every particle that's hers
Came at the first from outer space.

All that is Earth has once been sky;
Down from the Sun of old she came,
Or from some star that travelled by
Too close to his entangling flame.

The first of these quatrains, with the pronoun *her* referring back to the noun *Earth* of the previous stanza, continues the personification of Earth, who was there digesting the meteorite and here has a lap on which to hold the meteorite, as if a woman holding a child. (In terms of Greek myth, this is Gaia, the Earth goddess and original mother goddess, here holding an adopted child.) The last two lines of this quatrain shift to an astronomical argument: a generalization, with two specifics for support in the following quatrain. Lewis says that the unity of the Earth and the meteorite, the digestibility of the latter, the ability to be transformed into a native, the ability to be mothered, is because of their essential likeness in kind. The meteorite is not made of strange matter, entirely alien to the earth, but of matter that is compatible to earthly processes. Lewis actually stresses the idea the other way around: not that the meteorite is like the Earth, but that the Earth is made up of the same material as the meteorite: this is the form the generalization takes in the last two lines of the third quatrain and the first line of the fourth.

The science in the fourth quatrain is outdated. Lewis offers two versions of the origin of the Earth: in one, the Earth (and, according to that theory, the other planets and other units of the solar system) was spun out of the sun; in the other, another star passed by the sun and the sun's "entangling flame" (says the poem, or "entangling gravitational pull," more accurately) pulled the Earth (*etc.*) out of the other star. The current, most-widely-accepted theory is that the sun and the planets coalesced from a swirl of atoms, pulled together in various groups by attraction between particles. But Lewis's outdated science no more ruins his poem than, for example, Lucretius's theory of atoms with hooks ruins *De Rerum Natura*. (In terms of the analogy to Greek myth, one must ignore Hesiod writing that Gaia was the mother of Hyperion—the first of the sun gods—and reverse their relationship. Either Hyperion produced Gaia from himself—to a degree like Zeus producing Athena—or Hyperion sexually attracted a passing star-goddess and she gave birth to Gaia.)

All three of these quatrains since the first have been fairly simple in syntax. The second and the third run two lines, comma, and then the last two lines. In the second quatrain, the comma (before *and*) comes between the two verbs of a simple sentence. Admittedly the order of the words is not a prose standard: "Thus easily can Earth digest," for example, instead of "Thus Earth easily can digest"; but Lewis is not writing to Ezra Pound's *dictum*. In the third quatrain, the comma (before *for*) comes between the two clauses of a complex

sentence. The fourth quatrain is only slightly more complex: the first line, with its generalization, has a semi-colon at the end; the two scientific theories occupy, respectively, the second line and the last two lines of the quatrain: they are joined with a comma (before *or*) at the end of the second line—these two theories are one clause, with the comma between two parallel prepositional phrases.

The final quatrain provides the closure for the poem:

Hence, if belated drops yet fall
From heaven, on these her plastic power
Still works as once it worked on all
The glad rush of the golden shower.

Earth is more than just personified in this last quatrain: she seems almost deified. She works on the "belated drops" (the meteorite and its fellows) now as she worked on all "the golden shower" of material earlier as it was flung out of the sun or pulled from a star. Earlier, in the fourth quatrain, she seems to have been working before she had physical form as the Earth; she shaped the physical Earth out of the fiery material and began the processes that led to the Earth of today. (The distinction is between Gaia as goddess, shaping her own material body out of "The glad rush" of fiery material from Hyperion or from the star-goddess, and Gaia as Earth, that is at the same time being shaped, as the meteorite is shaped subsequently. Obviously, Lewis is thinking more of possible natural processes than of Greek myth—but he *does* seem to deify the Earth in the fourth and this last quatrain.)

When Lewis writes of the Earth's "plastic power," *plastic* is used in its Greek root sense of "to mold" or "to form" (called the active sense of *plastic* in English). The Earth has the power to shape or reshape the material presented to her.

The imagery of this final quatrain is based on a paradox: water images for fire. The meteorite that earlier was described as descending in "sidereal fire," is now a drop of water, of rainwater, fallen "From heaven"; it is belated, like the last few raindrops of a storm, for it follows "The glad rush of the golden shower"—the *golden* reflecting the light, the radiation, of the sun-or-star's origin of the Earth, according to Lewis's schemes. The word *shower* continues the rainwater imagery for this fiery origin. As a figure of speech, this is a metaphor, like others in the poem, although they were limited to two line units, and this extends across the quatrain; as a *paradoxical* metaphor, however, it heightens the tone of this conclusion.

Further, the syntax and flow is different from the earlier quatrains: all of them had at least a secondary pause at the end of the second line. This stanza begins with a stressed *Hence*, followed by a comma, creating an opening trochee;

the rest of that line and the first foot of the next are a subordinate clause, with the comma following the amphibrach of "From heaven," creating a second pause. But the rest of the quatrain is one unit—two clauses joined by the conjunction *as*, without internal pauses. Thus, from the second foot of the second line, the sentence flows across two ends of lines, creating "The glad rush" of the last line.

Lewis also uses stronger aural devices here, again giving an emphasis to this last quatrain. The alliteration of *Hence* and *heaven* is mild, being separated by three feet; but "plastic power," in the second line, is a plosive on two stresses in a row. In the third line, the polyptoton of *works* and *worked* is augmented by alliteration on *once*. And the fourth line not only has the alliteration of *glad* and *golden*, but also the emphatic double stress of "glad rush" in an iamb and trochee side by side.

When a reader has finished perusing this poem and admired its artistry as an epigram, he or she may well ask, "But what does it mean?" Most want poems to both be and mean, in Archibald MacLeish's terms. That is, to have aesthetic unity and harmony, on the one hand, and to have something to say, on the other. To please and to teach, in Horace's terms. The Formalistic critic expects that meaning to arise from the technique of the poem.

The most obvious answer is to say this is a poem about nature. Lewis is known as a nature-lover, and he here chooses to write on a meteorite and its relationship to the Earth. This poem, in this approach, is open to a modern environmentalist's celebration for its capitalization, its personification, its almost-deification, of Earth. Here is Gaea, of the modern writers, extolled (not quite the same as the Gaia of the classics).

Other details, which may seem strange in their emphasis to some readers—"Why so much on the origin of the Earth?"—can be defended as part of this approach. Just as the geological concerns in Tennyson's *In Memoriam* add to its complexity, so here the alternate theories of the Earth's physical origins add to the mystery of this maternal spirit. And, in a larger sense, the poem celebrates the kinship of the universe.

It must be admitted that this reading does not sound much like Lewis, less so as it progresses. But can it be refuted if one takes simply a Formalistic approach? Is it not obvious that the poem means something of this sort? Does not this reading account for the details of the poem?

It is at this point that the significance of context must be considered, for the poem's second publication was as the epigraph to Lewis's 1947 book, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*.

Here is a passage from Chapter VIII, "Miracles and the Laws of Nature"; Lewis is writing of what happens after God intervenes with a miracle:

If God annihilates or creates or deflects a unit of matter[,] He has created a new situation at that point. Immediately all Nature domiciles this new situation, makes it at home in her realm, adapts all other events to it. It finds itself conforming to all the laws. (72)

Then, as a meaningful-to-Christians example, Lewis continues:

If God creates a miraculous spermatozoon in the body of a virgin, it does not proceed to break any laws. The laws at once take it over. Nature is ready. Pregnancy follows, according to all the normal laws, and nine months later a child is born. (72)

Altogether, Lewis spends two pages of his book making this point clear. Here is another generalization:

A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without results. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to Natural law. In the forward direction [...] it is interlocked with all Nature just like any other event. Its peculiarity is that it is not in that way interlocked backward, [not] interlocked with the previous history of Nature. (73)

This discussion reveals the context for "The Meteorite," indicating that the personification of Earth is simply a rhetorical device, like the personification of Nature in the passages just quoted.

For the printing of "The Meteorite" as an epigraph to *Miracles* reveals that the poem is based on an analogy. As a miracle is caused by God, so the meteorite comes from "heaven" (line 18), a word that is stressed by the comma-created pause after it. The other terms used for its origin also apply: it comes from "outer space" (line 12), which suggests something beyond ordinary space; it comes as a "translunary guest" (line 7), and in Ptolemaic astronomy, as has been said, the realm beyond the moon was regular and unchanging in its patterns, while mutability ruled the realm below the moon. *Sidereal* (line 6), in referring to the stars or the constellations, also refers to this outer realm. All four of these terms suggest the divine: like the meteorite coming from heaven, a miracle has its origin in Heaven, in the divine, in God. Once the meteorite lands on earth, moss, wind, and rain affect it; once the miraculous occurs, then the laws of nature affect it—the water turned to wine is drunk and digested.

Similarly, the accounts of the origin of the earth seem to be analogies in which the sun stands for God. In one account of creation, the earth is spun out of the sun, just as God creates the physical universe out of Himself—by His command, more exactly. (Lewis, in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, discusses John Milton's literal belief that God made the universe out of Himself, considering

Milton obscurely heretical about the point [87-88].) In the other account, the sun pulls the matter for the earth out of a passing star—perhaps this is a more Neo-Platonic version, with God creating the solar system by means of a demiurge.

The end of the poem, “The glad rush of a golden shower” (line 20), refers more-or-less literally, as has been said, to the development of the earth—“the golden shower,” while using a rain metaphor, describes the incandescent material from the sun or the star that will cool into the earth. The meteorite comes to earth as “sidereal fire” (line 6). In the analogy, since the sun seems to stand for God, this golden fire seems to be the mark of a divine work, whether the original creation or a later miracle.

In short, although C.S. Lewis was a lover of nature, as some of the details in the poem show, he was also a lover of allegory, both as a scholar in *The Allegory of Love* (1936) and as a creative writer in *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1933). In this poem he creates an analogy between a meteorite and a miracle—and what is an extended analogy, as this is, but an allegory?

Again, the thesis of this essay is that “The Meteorite,” if published by itself, especially if Lewis’s name were not attached, would not be—indeed, could not be—recognized as a religious allegory. Even with Lewis’s name attached, the poem has not attracted attention, presumably because it seems to be a simply descriptive epigram. (Don W. King, in his basic study of Lewis’s poetry, lists its original publication and its reappearances in books of Lewis’s poetry, with no mention of its appearance in *Miracles* [369].) However, it is only because of the publication of the poem in the context of *Miracles*, with its illuminating discussion of miracles and the laws of nature, that the allegorical meaning can be demonstrated. If this is true, then this calls into question the whole Formalistic approach to a poem in and by itself, valuable as the Formalistic discussions are in understanding artistry. The context is vital to understand the type of meaning the artistry supports.

Appendix

Three Variations in the Text of “The Meteorite”

“The Meteorite” (20 lines) was first published in *Time and Tide* in 1946. This version, without variations, was reprinted in *Poems* in 1964. This unchanged nature is indicated in Walter Hooper’s appendix to *Poems* (141); it has been confirmed by an inspection of a photocopy of the 1946 version supplied by the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois. (The author thanks Marie E. Benware and Marjorie L. Mead for the copy of the poem.) The version printed in *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis* (1994) was also the 1946 version.

Meanwhile, a slightly different version was published as the epigraph to *Miracles* in 1947. This chart gives the variations:

Line 7:	1946	make the translunary
	1947	make her translunary
Line 8:	1946	Thus native to an
	1947	The native of an

How is a scholar to decide between these three small differences? (The common reader will not consider them significant enough to worry about.) Why has Walter Hooper reprinted the earlier version?

(1) Hooper does not mention the version in *Miracles* at all in his preface or appendix to *Poems*, and he may simply have overlooked it at the time. After all, *Poems* was the first book by Lewis that he edited, and he may not have had a firm grasp on the details of Lewis's publications yet. (And since the 1994 collection keeps the first version, if Hooper ever noticed the differences, he may have considered them inconsequential.)

(2) It is possible that Hooper had some reason for thinking the earlier version was in the book, but delays in publication had allowed the publication of a revised version in a journal before the book appeared. This is undercut, however, by the acknowledgement printed below the poem in *Miracles*: "(Reprinted by permission of *Time and Tide*)." Since Lewis added the credit line, surely he could have added any revisions. On the other hand, authors have done odder things than adding a credit line to an unrevised poem.

(3) Finally, it must be admitted that Walter Hooper's account of his editing in his preface to *Poems* does not give reassurance that he always decided on the best version: "It was not always easy to determine his [that is, Lewis's] final version of a poem, especially if there were slightly different versions or if the poem had already appeared in print" (vii). Why a poem's appearance in print would cause difficulties in determination is not clear. Indeed, autograph corrections on a printed version might well be decisive. But, in his book on Lewis's poetry, Don W. King's discussion of the three variant versions of "As the Ruin Falls" shows some of the difficulties Hooper faced (16-19).

At any rate, it has seemed best in this essay to cite the text in *Miracles*, the last version published in Lewis's lifetime.

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