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A Larger World: C. S. Lewis on Christianity and Literature

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Abstract

Discusses Lewis’s literary criticism and his conviction that “a love for and a sound approach to literature” are crucial to the health of the individual and the Church.

Additional Keywords

Christianity and literature; Lewis, C.S.—Theory of literature

A Larger World: C. S. Lewis on Christianity and Literature

Donald T. Williams

*“Now, good Cesario, but that piece of song,
That old and antique song we heard last night,
Methought it did relieve my passion much,
More than light airs and recollected terms
Of these most brisk and giddy-paced times.”*

— Duke Orsino of Illyria
(*Twelfth Night* 2.4.1-6)

C. S. Lewis is often under-appreciated as a literary theorist. He was a historian of literature whose analyses are still indispensable to students of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance half a century later; he created a great deal of superb literature himself, in both fiction and non-fiction; and he was also the author of a number of works that deal directly with the nature and value of the products of the mind and a fruitful approach to them, from books like *An Experiment in Criticism* and *The Abolition of Man* to the numerous essays buried in various collections. But most of his scholarly writing on literature comes to us in the guise of practical criticism (*A Preface to Paradise Lost*) or literary history (*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama; The Allegory of Love*, etc.). Nevertheless, all these writings are informed by a unified approach that has been very influential, especially among Christian believers. No thinker has done more to help Evangelical Christians relate their Christian faith to culture, especially literary culture, than C. S. Lewis.

Work on various aspects of Lewis's thinking about literature has been done by scholars such as Bruce Edwards, Charles Huttar, Robert Stock, Peter Schakel, and Stephen Thorson, *inter alia*. With the exception of Edwards, they have tended to focus on only one aspect of his approach at a time. But while Edwards's very fine book *A Rhetoric of Reading: C. S. Lewis's Defense of Western Literacy* is more comprehensive, its focus is how Lewis's thinking impacts literary critics. This essay looks at what Lewis has to say to us, not as critics or scholars primarily,

but as readers. Or, to put it another way, Edwards studied Lewis's views on critical theory, on *how* to read; this essay will deal more with the question of the insights Lewis's literary theory provides on *why* we read and what we can get out of it.

The impressively integrated unity of Lewis's thinking on many topics makes it easy to miss the fact that he did mature as a Christian thinker through the years. It is easy to understand how Smith could say that Lewis's thought "appeared almost full blown in the earliest Christian writings that came from his pen" (x) so that one can ignore chronological position in the Lewis corpus without distorting his thinking, for indeed this is generally so. But, as Schakel has pointed out, this generalization is not always true and therefore needs to be demonstrated on any given point rather than merely assumed (*Reason and Imagination* xi). In this essay we will try to notice Lewis's growth while exhibiting the unity of his thinking as we pull together the many comments on the nature and purpose of reading in the Christian life that Lewis left scattered throughout his broad corpus of critical writing.

The Legitimacy of Literature

Naturally, but unfortunately, people looking to Lewis for guidance in these matters often begin (and often end) at an essay with the obvious title of "Christianity and Culture" (originally published in 1940), without realizing that significant development took place in Lewis's thought as expressed in later essays. Superficial readings of that piece have even given rise to the strange notion that Lewis had an "anti-cultural bias" (Cary 16). After all, Lewis does say that "I think we can still believe culture to be innocent after we have read the New Testament; I cannot see that we are encouraged to think it important" ("Christianity and Culture" 15). The glory of God is "the real business of life," and the salvation of souls is "our *only* means to glorifying Him" (14; emphasis added). And he adds in another essay from about the same time that "the Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world" ("Christianity and Literature" 10). Lewis would maintain his high view of the value of the salvation of a single soul—but as the *only* means of glorifying God?¹ Later essays would show an increase in balance and maturity in his views on these topics as well as continuity with the positions taken earlier.

Actually, in "Christianity and Culture," Lewis was making the point that idolization of culture (including literature) corrupts and destroys culture. He was reacting against the tendency of critics like Matthew Arnold to make culture a substitute for religion (12). Just as "Those who make religion their God will not have God for their religion" (Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, qtd. in Lewis, *Miracles* 10), so those who make culture their God will enjoy neither a relationship with God nor good literature. It was a point he would make more clearly and forcefully again later (1955) in an essay entitled "Lilies that Fester." When sophistication is valued for its own sake rather than because it can get us closer to the Goodness, Truth, or Beauty in the Text, and students are expected to feign it in order to be considered educated, it actually becomes a barrier between us and that Goodness, Truth, or Beauty, driving the true, spontaneous, and natural appreciation of literature underground while it feeds on purely specious grounds our pride. Just as theocracy is the worst form of government because it ironically destroys genuine religion, "charientocracy," the rule of the artificially "cultured," is inimical to all the goods that culture can really give.

In "Christianity and Culture," then, Lewis was engaged in the task of defending the *innocence* of literary pursuits. He offers four arguments in support of this conclusion. First, literary pursuits may be a way of making one's living. If John the Baptist told even soldiers and tax collectors to follow the moral law and then "sent them back to their jobs" (20), then surely a Christian may be a writer or a critic. Second, it is better that Christians participate in culture as salt and light than to abandon it to the Enemy completely. They would be an "antidote" to the abuse of culture, not by disguising homiletics and apologetics as culture but simply by doing good and wholesome work (20-21). Third, culture gives pleasure, which is a good thing in itself. Pleasure is good, and sin is accepting that good "under conditions that imply a breach of the moral law" (21). When the pleasures of culture do not violate those conditions, we may "enjoy them ourselves, and lawfully, even charitably, teach others to enjoy them" (21). Fourth, culture is a repository of the best natural or "sub-Christian" values, which, while not of saving significance, are not therefore to be despised; it can be for some a *praeparatio evangelium* (preparation for the Gospel), for "Any road out of Jerusalem may also be a road into Jerusalem" (22).

So far, so good; but in later essays Lewis would go on to develop much more fully not just the innocence but also the positive values of literary culture. Thorson points out the fact that Lewis himself was a person who had received

the benefit of the *praeparatio evangelium* from his own reading of imaginative literature ("Knowledge" 111). Perhaps it was this fact which led Lewis to go beyond his defense of culture's potential innocence in "Christianity and Culture" to articulate the much more positive view outlined below.

A Larger World

In the first place, literature enlarges our world of experience to include both more of the physical world and things not yet imagined, giving the actual world a "new dimension of depth" ("On Three Ways" 29). Poetic language can express "experience which is not available to us in normal life at all" by using "factors within our experience so that they become pointers to something outside our experience" ("The Language of Religion" 133). None of us, for example, has experienced apotheosis. But Shelley gives us an idea what it might be like with his line, "My soul is an enchanted boat" (*Prometheus Unbound* 2.5.72). Lewis insists that this is much more than just a fancy way of saying, "Gee! This is fine" (133). An enchanted boat would move effortlessly, without propulsion, to its intended destination. Because we have experienced boats which require wind, oar, or steam, we can imagine one that would not, and transfer this image by analogy to the soul, which could then be imagined as freed from its current weights and entanglements to reach unimpeded its ends: enlightenment, integration, communion, etc.

I personally have never slain a dragon nor met an elf (at least, not for certain). I have not visited another planet nor led a charge on horseback nor lived in the Middle Ages. Yet I know something of what these experiences might be like. Is this knowledge gained from literature mere illusion? Definitely not. There was a time I had not visited England but only read about it, more in books of fiction than of information. When I got there, there were surprises in store for me of course. But there was also much that was already familiar. Direct experience made small adjustments to and augmentations of my "literary" knowledge of the real England gained through vicarious experience of imagined ones, but it did not overturn it. When we experience this kind of confirmation often enough and in various ways, we learn to trust the inner consistency of reality projected by a well constructed story to give us something significant, an exploration of the potentialities of human experience of worlds actual or imagined that can ring true to reality. Literal truth is not the only kind we know or need.

The effect of this kind of reading is what Lewis called “the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors” (*Experiment* 140). An unliterary person “may be full of goodness and good sense, but he inhabits a tiny world” (140). This suffocating narrowness, the provincialism of being shut up to one’s own direct experience, literature can help us avoid. “My own eyes are not enough for me,” Lewis avers; “I would see through those of others” (140). He even wishes that animals could write books so that we could see through their eyes. And what one sees thus can be broadening and deepening indeed:

Strangeness that moves us more than fear,
Beauty that stabs with tingling spear,
Or Wonder, laying on one’s heart
That finger-tip at which we start
As if some thought too swift and shy
For reason’s grasp had just gone by. (“Expostulation” 58)

A Baptized Imagination

In the second place, this expansion of horizons makes it possible for literature to strip Christian doctrines of their “stained glass and Sunday School associations” and allow them to appear in their “real potency” (“Sometimes Fairy Stories” 37), a possibility Lewis himself magnificently realized in the Narnia books and the Space Trilogy. Why was the young Lewis so repelled by the story of a dying god in the Gospels when it moved him so deeply when he met it in pagan mythology? Partly because his guard was down when reading mythology, but just as much because of the expansion of our grasp of the potentialities of reality that we have already seen literature can give us. The sober historicity of the Gospels is valuable in one way, the imaginative realizations of literary treatments in another. So Lewis’s imagination was “baptized” by reading George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and *Lillith* before his actual conversion (Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* 181).²

This baptism of the imagination, which allows us to see Christian truths more clearly and deeply when we meet them in the Bible, can happen in two ways: first, by encountering similar or parallel ideas imaginatively fleshed out in non-Christian literature (e.g., Lewis’s encounters with the dying god in pagan myth); second, by seeing newly minted images created as deliberate incarnations of Christian ideas (e.g., Lewis’s experience of “the holy” in MacDonald). In the first case—parallel with the idea of culture as a repository

of the best “sub-Christian” ideals in “Christianity and Culture,” but going beyond it—literature can contain something like the “spilled religion” Lewis had seen in Romanticism as early as 1933. Lewis never compromises the sub-Christian nature of what one sees there. A person who has religion “ought not to spill it.” But what if one who does not have it finds it in such a messy state: “Does it follow that he who finds it spilled should avert his eyes? How if there is a man to whom these bright drops on the floor are the beginning of a trail which, duly followed, will lead him in the end to taste the cup itself?” (*Pilgrim’s Regress* 11; cf. Thorson, “Knowledge” 111). Lewis was of course himself a man who, under Tolkien’s influence, had so followed and so drunk.

Having drunk deeply both of pagan myth and Christian retelling, Lewis also became himself a master of the second way. We have seen the Cross a thousand times and may be either bored with it or hostile to it, but the Stone Table of Narnia sneaks up on us and gets under our skins, sending us back to the Cross with eyes newly opened. When we read Genesis, we Christians may get bogged down in the necessary tasks of defending the text against fragmentation from the purveyors of the Documentary Hypothesis or dismissal from adherents of the theory of Naturalistic Evolution. But when we watch the Green Lady of Perelandra debating the Un-man with the future of her still innocent race at stake, the more important issues of the other Text become real to us both afresh and in new ways. Her Floating Islands are not just an interesting feature of a fantasy landscape, but along with the Fixed Land and the coming Waves become rich and powerful natural symbols for the spiritual issues of trust and obedience.³

What is the result? Just as Maleldil makes Tinidril “older” through Ransom’s arrival, the same thing can happen to us as readers. Schakel describes this making older as having happened to Lewis himself when reading MacDonald: “when imagination as spiritual experience encountered the true divine Spirit, in the quality of Holiness, a transformation was initiated” *Imagination and the Arts* 18). As Aslan tells Edmund and Lucy, in their world he has another name. “You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there” (*The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 270).

Good “Stock” Responses

In the third place, literature can have some of the significance Lewis seemed to

deny it in “Christianity and Culture” through the creation of positive role models and the reinforcement of healthy “stock responses.” Lewis had little sympathy with the criticism of I. A. Richards and the early T. S. Eliot, influential in his time, which emphasized the importance of a finely tuned sensibility in literary taste, denigrating what were seen as crude and traditional “stock responses” as opposed to the preferred “direct free play of experience” (Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* 55). (No doubt this “direct free play of experience” was a precursor of the “free play of the mind in the text” valued by Post-Modern reader-centered critics; but that is another story.) Eliot, for example, saw the mind of the mature poet as “a finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent” 7), and valued literature for the ways in which it produces “new variations of sensibility” (“The Social Function of Poetry” 9). Lewis thought this emphasis could lead only to the kind of corrupting decadence and false sophistication he warned against in “Lilies that Fester,” and saw Eliot’s early poetry as proof that his concerns were valid. (Lewis never publicly responded to the poetry Eliot wrote later, after his conversion, which seems less deliberately and unnecessarily obscure; we can only speculate that he might have viewed it differently.) In a famous jab at “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Lewis’s *persona* claims to be

... So coarse, the things that poets see
Are obstinately invisible to me.

For twenty years, I’ve stared my level best
To see if evening—any evening—would suggest
A patient etherized upon a table;
In vain. I simply wasn’t able. (“A Confession” 1)

Huttar elucidates the sophistication of Lewis’s commentary, doubting that he actually misunderstood Eliot so far as to think the etherized patient was intended as a description of the sky rather than as a portrait of Prufrock’s sensibility, and suggesting that Lewis might have been objecting to “a widespread attitude which he finds objectionable” which the passage from “Prufrock” illustrates rather than exemplifies (96). His reading is interesting and possible. But he also rightly notes that it does not affect the “serious point” being made about language and morals (97). Whether the problem is in Prufrock or in Eliot, there is something troubling about what seemed to be a growing taste for the kind of imagery Lewis was satirizing.

In contrast, Lewis saw the great literature of the past as a repository of cultural memory and wisdom that could help us rightly order our response to the world in terms of healthy and appropriate stock responses: love is sweet, death is bitter, virtue is lovely, children or gardens are delightful. Instead of the newer, more “sophisticated” images, it was full of “Dull things [. . .] peacocks, honey, the Great Wall, Aldebaran, / Silver weirs, new-cut grass, wave on the beach, hard gem, / The shapes of horse and woman, Athens, Troy, Jerusalem” (97).

There is more at stake here than simply our taste in imagery. The emphasis on sophisticated sensibility as a sufficient end in itself was consistent with the anti-didactic bent of modern criticism, and Lewis’s objections to this aestheticism were consonant with his defense of the older tradition in which the purpose of literature is “to delight and to teach.” The function of the poet for Lewis then is not so much the relatively trivial one of expressing ever finer shades of sensibility, but the grand one of transmitting the form of virtue received from the past. Virtue is not so much a finely as a *rightly* organized response of the whole person, including understanding, emotion, and will:

In rhetoric imagination is present for the sake of passion (and therefore in the long run for the sake of action), while in poetry passion is present for the sake of imagination and therefore, in the long run, for the sake of wisdom or spiritual health—the rightness and richness of a man’s total response to the world. (Lewis, *Preface* 54)

The Eliotian and Ricardian emphasis on sophisticated sensibility as a sufficient end in itself was also consistent with what Huttar calls the “truncated sense of what is real” that Lewis opposed in works like *Miracles* and *The Abolition of Man* (99). Richards thought there were only two kinds of language: “scientific” language which conveys information, and “emotive” language, which conveys the emotional attitude of the speaker but tells us nothing about its apparent reference (qtd. in Huttar 97). It sounds exactly like the view of Gaius and Titius that Lewis had attacked in *The Abolition of Man*—that when someone tells you that a waterfall is sublime, he appears “to be making a remark about the waterfall. [. . .] Actually [. . .] he was not making a remark about a waterfall at all, but a remark about his own feelings” (14). If this view is accepted, it follows that poetry, which is quintessentially “emotive” language, has no referent in the external world. All it can communicate is sensibility, the inner life of the speaker. But Lewis believed that the values embodied in what he called the *Tao*

have their own kind of objective reality. If sublimity could not be a real attribute of a waterfall, then neither could goodness be a real attribute of an action or of a virtue, nor evil a real attribute of an action or a vice.⁴ The modernist metaphysic—its denial of reality to anything other than atoms in motion—entails a view of literature that reduces to aestheticism, an emphasis on sophisticated emotional responses as ends in themselves. Lewis clearly saw the connection between metaphysics and literary theory, and realized that to oppose the one view logically requires one to oppose the other.

Therefore, the predominance in literature of traditional themes embodied imaginatively in traditional forms was not for Lewis an issue merely of aesthetics and sensibility but of cultural life and death. “Poetry,” Lewis argues, “was formerly one of the chief means whereby each generation learned to copy, and by copying to make the good Stock Responses. Since poetry has abandoned that office, the world has not bettered” (*Preface* 57). Hence, “Since it is so likely that they [children] will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage” (“On Three Ways” 31). And, Lewis would probably add if he were alive today, let them not all be filtered through the lens of Post-Modern ironic cynicism.

A Cure for Chronological Snobbery

Finally, literature can cure our chronological snobbery and provincialism and fortify us in the “mere Christianity” that has remained constant through the ages. The Modern age was prone to think that its advances in science and technology made it superior to previous eras, to feel it could smugly ignore the wisdom of the past. T. S. Eliot (ironically, given Lewis’s antipathy to his criticism) recognized this Modernist propensity and gave a classic response to it: “Someone said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.’ Precisely, and they are that which we know” (“Tradition” 6). Post-Modernism has this tendency in an even more pronounced form, reducing what past ages presented as attempts at rational thought to mere rhetoric and viewing all truth claims with profound suspicion. The only thing it does not seem to question is its own assumed superior standpoint that allows it to question everything else.

Lewis credited Owen Barfield with “destroying forever” in Lewis’s own mind this “‘chronological snobbery,’ the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone

out of date is on that account discredited” (*Surprised* 207).⁵ Lewis summarizes Barfield’s argument thus:

You must find out why it went out of date. Was it ever refuted (and if so by whom, where, and how conclusively) or did it merely die away as fashions do? If the latter, this tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. From seeing this, one passes to the realization that our own age is also “a period,” and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them. (208)

The reduction of our own age to the status of a “period” with its own illusions bears a surface resemblance to some Post-Modern analyses which also rightly refuse to “privilege” modern points of view, “situating” all truth claims as mere expressions of their time and place. But there is a major difference. Post-Modernist nihilism disallows any legitimate truth claims and thus dissolves our own claims to enlightenment, finding the Modern age as benighted (if not more so) as any other. Lewis, instead of lowering our own age to the level of the benighted past, finds previous ages as potentially enlightened (and therefore enlightening) as our own, though at different points. He is able to do this because for him and Barfield warranted belief was still theoretically possible, making questions like “Who refuted it? When? How?” relevant. Many Post-Modern versions of the attack on chronological snobbery are therefore stultifying, ultimately making progress toward enlightenment impossible. Lewis and Barfield, on the other hand, are liberating, freeing us from the shackles of our own limitations to learn without prejudice from the wisdom of the ages.

This rejection of chronological snobbery became a cornerstone of Lewis’s own thinking that informs his popular apologetics as well as his literary criticism and was a source of much of their strength. He made a classic application of it to our reading in his famous essay “On the Reading of Old Books.” Every age, he noted, makes its own errors. Those of the past are at least different from ours and mostly have already been seen through. They are thus not a danger to us and are not likely uncritically to reinforce our own mistakes. Those readers who are exposed only to the spirit of the age in which they live have no protection against its errors. But those who live with the literature of the past discover a place to stand that gives them some critical distance from their own period, and more: “a standard of plain, central Christianity (‘mere Christianity’ as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in their proper

perspective” (201). Therefore, to avoid becoming captives of the spirit of the age, we must “keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds” by reading old books (202). (The books of the future would achieve the same end, but are unfortunately not available.) As with St. Athanasius, who clung to Trinitarian orthodoxy when it was unfashionable to do so, it is the glory of these old books that they did not move with the times, and their reward is that they therefore remain for all time.

Summary

In Lewis’s mature thinking, then, the study of literature is not only innocent but essential to a full and rich life, particularly a full and rich Christian life. While he remained adamantly opposed to aestheticism or to any notion that becoming more cultured necessarily makes one a better person (“Lilies that Fester”), he explored a number of ways in which culture, particularly literature, can contribute to a good life well lived to the glory of God. Thorson captures the balance nicely: “Although Lewis refused to call aesthetic and imaginative experiences spiritual, he did not empty them of spiritual significance” (“Knowledge” 111). Literature can expand the horizons of and deepen our capacity for experience, it can open our eyes to Christian truths which might otherwise have escaped us or had less impact had we read only the Bible, it can transmit and reinforce the collective experience and wisdom of human civilization, and it can be the great antidote to the spirit of the age. But it does not confer these benefits automatically, *ex opere operato*; if we read as aesthetes rather than humble receivers of the author’s intent, or as self-conscious pursuers of culture rather than seekers of truth, it can have the very opposite effect and be a horribly corrupting influence (“Lilies,” *Experiment*).

If Lewis was right, few things could be more crucial to the health of a culture—or to the health of the Church within that culture—than having a love for and a sound approach to literature. As the academic study of literature as a discipline has become more ideologically bound and politicized than ever, his voice desperately needs to be heard again, like a John the Baptist crying in the wilderness and calling us back to sanity.⁶ And with these matters, readers of any religious persuasion, but especially those who share Lewis’s Christian world view, must be concerned.

Notes

- ¹See Mills for an excellent treatment of the importance of this theme in Lewis's life, especially the essays by Mitchell, Blamires, and Edwards.
- ²See Schakel, *Imagination and the Arts*, especially chapters 1 and 9, for a fuller discussion of Lewis's views on imagination.
- ³See Stock for some interesting development of this fact.
- ⁴See Stock for useful further discussion of how "stock responses" relate to the Natural Law of *Mere Christianity* and the *Tao of Abolition of Man*.
- ⁵See Thorson, "Lewis and Barfield" for the history of Barfield's influence on Lewis.
- ⁶See Williams, esp. *Inklings*, Intro. and chps. 1, 2, 7, and Edwards *in toto* for extended treatment of this theme.

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