



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 9 | Number 3 | Issue 33, Autumn

Article 6

10-15-1982

C.S. Lewis: The Public Poet

Roland M. Kawano

Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kawano, Roland M. (1982) "C.S. Lewis: The Public Poet," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 9 : No. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol9/iss3/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to: <http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

C.S. Lewis: The Public Poet

Abstract

Contends that Lewis's distinction between Milton the private man and epic, or public, poet can be applied to Lewis himself. "The public character and convention of poetry interested [Lewis] most of all," which put him out of step with the poetry of his time, with its focus on private imagery.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Attitude toward poetry; Lewis, C.S. Poetry

C.S. Lewis: The Public Poet

Roland M. Kawano

That C. S. Lewis was unwilling to dispute publicly over controversial religious matters and that he found much of modern poetry opaque to his understanding give us a clue to the poetry that he himself wrote. Although these elements seem disparate at first, a consideration of them will show us both the kind of poetry he was interested in and the kind which he wrote. We know that Lewis emphasized the central body of Christian doctrine, yet we also recognize that this was not all that he knew of Christian belief. From his writings, we are aware of his extensive and formidable knowledge of minor and controversial areas of Christian doctrine and history. But we have learned that his public stance was not to emphasize controversy and dispute. This is a peculiar position for Lewis to hold in a day when the unique, the creative, and the original are held in such importance. Yet the man who said that to grasp and write the truth was the way to be original gives us pause. Originality or uniqueness was not in itself a canon to be aspired to. Rather it was the telling and speaking of truth itself which made any work original.

What Lewis wrote, trying to understand Milton's relation to the Arian heresy in *Paradise Lost*, may help us. When discussing the possibility of Milton's adherence to heretical doctrine, Lewis distinguished between the private mind of Milton, which may have been thinking all sorts of heresy and whimsy, and Milton's public mind. As an epic poet Milton had laid aside whatever had whimsically attracted him in his own reading and supported those principles of decorum which formed the classical, public, and objective conceptions of poetry. In this view the general end of writing was to delight and instruct the reader and to adhere to the story and form of composition. By distinguishing between the private and public character of Milton, Lewis found a way to separate what Milton might have said to friends around a fireplace from what he would have said to an audience. Lewis found that, according to the conventions Milton labored under in *Paradise Lost*, the poet had worked to produce, even calculated to produce, certain effects on his audience. It was an understanding of the conventions and the calculated effect that Lewis thought important:

In *Paradise Lost* we are given to study what the poet, with his singing robes about him, has given us. And when we study that we find that he has laid aside most of his private theological whimsies during his working hours as an epic poet. He may have been an undisciplined man; he was a very disciplined artist. Therefore, of his heresies--themselves fewer than some suppose--fewer still are paraded in *Paradise Lost*.¹

Thus, *Paradise Lost* contained the great central tradition of Christianity: "Dogmatically its invitation to join in this great ritual mimesis of the fall is one which all Christendom in all lands or ages can accept."

We can without grievance or quibbling apply this conception of the poet to Lewis himself. The public character and conventions of poetry interested him most of all; and it is this public character which we will see in his poetry. This public mind of Lewis becomes the cast and tenor of his poetry. However, today when poets find private images, images of their personal and private life more important than images belonging to the large tradition of the past, a public conception of poetry has difficulties. In the labyrinth of the private image, the public image is worn and tired; it takes more than recapitulation to refurbish this type of image.

Private images refer to the personal world of the poet, not the larger world that he has in common with most or all men. If much modern poetry is written out of the personal world, the world of private affairs and personal reading,

then the reader who will best understand the poem and the poet's intentions and understandings in the poem is he who is able, by friendship with the author, by voluminous reading, by sleuthing, or by serendipity, to know something of the labyrinthine mind and experience of the poet in making the poem. An example from a well-known poem should suffice to illustrate this. *The Wasteland* opens by giving us an image of April antithetical ("April is the cruellest month") to Chaucer's opening image in *The Canterbury Tales* ("Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote"). In Chaucer's April, life burgeoned and "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages." Eliot's April is cruel because this same life burgeons, but now men must awake from their dull wintry state to face a world that is difficult enough to encounter. Then follow eleven lines alluding to the Starnbergersee, the archduke and Marie, cousins to each other. The sense of Marie's fright, of the archduke's taking her sledding and of her going south in the winter seems to have some relation to the opening theme. But it is not very clear how. However if one had read or had known that he should read *My Past* (1916) by Countess Marie Larisch then there would have been little difficulty in following most of Eliot's allusions here.² It is particularly this kind of private conception of poetry that Lewis avoids. Yet private conceptions of poetry will be helpful to us in defining Lewis's own conception and practice of poetry.

There are two events in Lewis's life which help formulate for us this conception of Lewis as public poet. The first is Lewis's conversion from atheism to Christianity (c. 1931). Lewis's notebooks prior to this time, his editor tells us, are a chronicle of relentless and unrewarded efforts to publish poetry in numerous magazines. The editor gives us the impression that Lewis, filled by worldly ambition and a lust or itching to write and understand himself, was more interested in what he might become by writing than in what he wrote.³ After his conversion Lewis made an about-face and turned away from himself to all that was outside himself. The whole creation became, for him, more interesting than his Freudian depths and perturbations.⁴ Lewis's turn away from himself allows us to understand why a public poetry might be emphasized more fully than a poetry abounding with esoteric metaphors. However, even before his conversion, Lewis was speaking out against modern poetic forms and for the poetry he loved so much.⁵ Although this *volte-face* helps us understand why C. S. Lewis might have desired a public poetry over a private, this personal event is probably not as important to his public poetic emphasis as the next.

The other event was Lewis's hand in preparing the syllabus for the Final Honour School of English at Oxford. With J.R.R. Tolkien, Lewis established a syllabus which excluded the classics and included English literature (beginning with Anglo-Saxon) to 1830. Lewis emphasized both unity and continuity in the syllabus. By unity he meant studying English itself from its beginnings, exploring both its dull and exciting periods, giving the student a first hand view of the province of English. By continuity Lewis meant a study that would not emphasize certain sectors of literature to the exclusion of others, but rather the whole itself. Miss Helen Gardner recognized the one unfortunate consequence of the syllabus. To emphasize continuity and enable the student to make an extended study of earlier literature, the syllabus ended at 1830. Thus, when Victorian literature was entering the republic of scholarship, Oxford contributed little to this vast domain.⁶ In one of his papers defending this syllabus, Lewis responded to the problems entailed by arresting the study of English at 1830 by arguing that it was precisely the literature up to 1830 that allows the student to understand what is happening in the literature from 1830 to the present. If the student had only studied English from 1830 to the present, he would be constantly presented with problems, themes, and types which only a study of the earlier

literature could give. Lewis found more adequate the picture of someone studying English from its beginnings to 1830, getting the rest by himself, than someone studying literature from 1830 to the present and being ignorant of the beginnings.⁷

This emphasis on the importance of the early literatures of English helps us grasp Lewis's understanding of the poet's task to write in a public, classical, and objective frame. It was this poetry that Lewis was immersed in, a poetry often read aloud to the court audiences and gatherings in large halls which hardly permitted private images and esoteric metaphors. The earlier literature not only emphasized but fed upon stock responses to centralized conventions: "Once again, the old critics were quite right when they said that poetry 'instructed by delighting', for poetry was formerly one of the chief means whereby each new generation learned, not to copy, but by copying to make, the good stock responses."⁸ Lewis had been reiterating the necessity of the stock responses, an emphasis closely allied to his emphasis on the natural law. For it was the natural law, for Lewis ingrained in human nature, that showed a man what he ought to do, not that he always did what he ought. It was the natural law which taught the stock responses through the help of poetry, a conventionalized society, and a cosmic model which took account of the natural law. Now poetry had changed, society's conventions were no longer explicitly undergirded by religious forces or the natural law, and the model of the universe was physical and physiological in emphasis rather than metaphysical.

I think that the difference between these two worlds can be adequately focused for us in some poetic banter between Kingsley Amis and Lewis on *Beowulf*. After quoting Tolkien's line, "There is not much poetry in the world like this," Mr. Amis begins:

So, bored with dragons, he lay down to sleep,
Locking for the last time his hoard of words
(Thorkelin's transcript B), forgetting now
The hope of heathens, muddled thoughts on fate.

Councils would have to get along without him;
The peerless prince had taken his last bribe
(Zupitza's reading); useless now the byrnie
Hard and hand-locked, fit for a baseball catcher.

Consider now what this king had not done:
Never was human, never lay with women
(Weak conjugation), never saw quite straight
Children of men or the bright bowl of heaven.

Someone has told us this man was a hero.
But what have we to learn in following
His tedious journey to his ancestors
(An instance of Old English harking-back)?⁹

Through his jesting, Mr. Amis is posing some important questions and judgments. His questions are those a modern would ask an ancient. If Mr. Amis was an ancient or if he was sympathetic to the interests and the concerns of *Beowulf* and the ancient literatures, he would probably pose different questions. Mr. Amis first judges *Beowulf* inhuman and thus in some sense inadequate because sexual relations were not central to him, as they seem to us moderns. He also asks what importance might there lie in studying the old literatures, in journeying back to *Beowulf* and his ancestors. The second question Lewis spent a lifetime answering. The first Lewis responded to with this double couplet:

Why is to fight (if such our fate)
Less 'human' than to copulate,
When Gib the cat, I'll take my oath,¹⁰
Wins higher marks than you for both?

Notes

I. Introductory

¹C.S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942; rpt. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1961), p. 92.

²See George L. K. Morris, "Marie, Marie, Hold on Tight," T. S. Eliot, ed. Hugh Kenner (Englewood-Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), pp. 86-88.

³Walter Hooper, "Preface," *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), p. ix.

⁴Chad Walsh, "C. S. Lewis: The Man and the Mystery," *Shadows of Imagination*, ed. M. R. Hillegas (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 9, 10.

⁵Walter Hooper, "Preface," *Selected Literary Essays*, p. viii.

⁶Helen Gardner, "Clive Staples Lewis, 1898-1963," *The Proceedings of the British Academy*, 51 (1965), 422, 423.

⁷C. S. Lewis, "Our English Syllabus," *Rehabilitations* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), pp. 90-1. This essay and "The Idea of an 'English School'," are the two defenses Lewis gave for the Final Honour School of English Syllabus.

⁸C. S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, p. 57.

⁹Kingsley Amis, "Beowulf," *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (Jan. 1954), 85.

¹⁰C. S. Lewis, "To Mr. Kingsley Amis on His Late Verses," *Essays in Criticism*, 4 (April 1954), 190. This is one of the six poems not printed in the posthumous *Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper.

Special Events

ANNOUNCEMENT of a Special Session on J. R. R. Tolkien at the Annual Meeting of the Missouri Philological Association, March 24-26, 1983 at Missouri Western State College, St. Joseph, Missouri. The aim of the session is to reach an understanding of Tolkien's achievement as it stands ten years after his death and as it is likely to develop thereafter. Send abstracts and requests for conference information to: Barbara Gitenstein, Dept. of English, Central Missouri State Univ., Warrensburg, Missouri 64093. Deadline for abstracts is Dec. 10, 1982. Send requests regarding session information to the session chairman: Dale W. Simpson, Dept. of English, Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri 64801.

BATTLE STRATEGY continued from page 19

The whole creature seemed to be cracking and splitting under his blows (p. 156).

But just as with Grendel, Weston retreats. *Beowulf*, however, had severed Grendel's arm from his body, and the enemy of the Danish people ran away to die. With the later attack by the monster's mother, *Beowulf* realizes that he must face another enemy, and he meets her in her sea-cave. To do battle with her, *Beowulf* must plunge into the water, facing both her and other sea-enemies along his descending journey. So too must Ransom make this sea journey and descend into a kind of hell in order to completely rid *Perelandra* of the devilish scourge. In part of the flight with the sea-witch, *Beowulf* is straddled by her and she attempts to kill him with her dagger. In *Perelandra* it is Ransom who is actually astride his enemy's chest, squeezing its throat with both hands. And when the enemies are killed, both heroes address themselves to a kind of head-booty: *Beowulf* severs Grendel's head from his body to take it to Heorot; Ransom, to assure himself that Satan in the body of Weston is truly dead, hurls a stone as hard as he can into the Un-man's face, smashing it beyond all recognition, leaving it with hardly anything that could be called a head. Both heroes then have faced and defeated almost overwhelming enemies, both emerging victorious to become kings in their own right--appropriate examples of those heroes which blend physical strength with wisdom.