4-15-1986

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Abstract

Additional Keywords
Dance imagery in literature; Ann Chancelor; Christine Lowentrout
"I should like the Balls infinitely better,' said Caroline Bingley, 'if they were carried on in a different manner. . . . It would surely be much more rational if conversation instead of dancing made the order of the day.' 'Much more rational, I dare say,' replied her brother, 'but it would not be near so much like a Ball.'" Lewis quoted this passage from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* at least three times, in essays and letters [1]: obviously he relished it first because he enjoyed Austen, an author Jane Studdock asked for when she stayed in bed all day recuperating from the burns inflicted by Miss Hardcastle's cigars [2] (as Lewis himself, "while ill, . . . reread . . . *Sense & Sensibility*" [3] — he had learned, early on, "to make a minor illness one of the pleasures of life" [4] by spending the waking hours with a good story, or two, or three). I suspect he relished the passage also because of what it says about dance, an image he used repeatedly in his works, usually to depict that which is non-rational (he would say super-rational), imaginative, even mythical. I want here to examine his references to dance, with occasional glances at passages from Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkien akin to them, and consider their implications for Lewis's views on literature and for his world-view as a whole.

The appeal of dance for Lewis, it would seem, arises not from experience with it as an activity but from its aesthetic and imaginative impact as an idea, even as an idea or archetype. Dance had been used for hundreds of years by authors Lewis respected greatly to depict a physical and metaphysical universe Lewis emotionally longed for and spiritually lived in [5].

In the western cultural tradition music is better known than dance as an image of the orderliness and harmony of the cosmos. The image is grounded in Plato's adaptation of Pythagorean notions about the beauty and proportion of numbers to the physical universe: "On the upper surface of each circle is a siren, who goes round with them, hymning a single tone or note. The eight together form one harmony [6]". By association with the myth of Amphion's use of the lyre to erect a wall, charming rocks and thus moving them into their proper places, music became also a symbol of creation, giving order to what previously had been chaotic. Thus, in the divine creative act, the elements, scattered about "without form, and void" (Gen. 1:2), were drawn into order by the harmonizing power of music. The opening of
Dryden's "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day, 1687" (set to music expressively by Handel in 1739), expresses the myth powerfully:

From Harmony, from heav'ly Harmony
This universal Frame began
When Nature underneath a heap
Of jarring Atomes lay,
And cou'd not heave her Head,
The tuneful Voice was heard from high,
Arise ye more than dead.
Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,
In order to their stations leap,
And Musick's pow'r obey [7].

This myth is employed by Tolkien in the creation story in his Ainulindale [8] and by Lewis in The Magician's Nephew, as the Lion Aslan sings the land and creatures of Narnia into existence [9].

In an analogous and closely related myth, the universe became orderly and regular by being made to dance. Andrew Marvel's retelling of how Amphion constructed the walls of Thebes illustrates the easy transition from the one myth to the other: "The rougher universe became orderly and regular by being made to in his Ainulindale [8] and by Lewis in The Magician's Nephew, as the Lion Aslan sings the land and creatures of Narnia into existence [9]."

The important thing in all this is not the image itself, but the world view it affirms. It assumes that the universe is a cosmos, a harmonious system, and that human life, as an integral part of that whole, also has order, unity, and meaning. The universe is not doing rock or disco dancing — unpatterned, chaotic, individualistic; it echoes the stately movement of the chorus in a Greek tragedy or the stylized formality of the country dance in an Austen novel, "The ladies and gentlemen ranged as two long rows facing one another, whilst the couples at the extreme ends danced down the set [14]." Lewis, Tolkien and Williams accepted that world view -- it is one of the strongest and deepest areas of kinship among them. They could respond to such imagery with an empathy impossible for most of their compatriots at Oxford; dinosaurs can dance, though the curators of museums may not recognize or be able to enter the movements. [15]

Dancing occurs on several levels in Lewis's works. First, dancing occurs as simple image -- literal dancing as part of the plot in his stories and poems. Fauns and trees dance in Prince Caspian, with Caspian and even the dwarf Trumpkin joining in [16], and Bacchus and Silenus, later, lead a romp across the countryside freeing those who have been held by the constraints of Miraz: "With leaping and dancing and singing, with music and laughter and roaring and barking and neighing, they all came to the place where Miraz's army stood flinging down their swords and holding up their hands [17]." Also, there is the dance Jill Scrubb sees when she emerges form the underworld in The Silver Chair. Fauns and dryads were doing a dance — a dance with so many complicated steps and figures that it took you some time to understand it .... Circling round and round the dancers was a ring of Dwarfs, all dressed in their finest clothes; mostly scarlet with fur-lined hoods and golden tassels and big furry top-boots. As they circled round they were all diligently throwing snowballs, ... throwing them through the dance in such perfect time with the music and with such perfect aim that if all the dancers were in exactly the right places at exactly the right moments, no one would be hit. This is called the Great Snow Dance and it is done every year in Narnia on the first moonlit night when there is snow on the ground. [18]

Dance is a central image in Lewis's unfinished poem which Walter Hooper entitled "The Nameless Isle." As the elf plays upon a magical flute, heroes and horses turned into stone are disenchanted and begin to dance: dancing "in order" and dancing in love, as they encircle the unmarred maid and bring her to the narrator, "blushing as it were a bride mortal, / To hold to her heart my head as I kneeled [19]." The members of the company at St. Anne's dance, as a festive response to the approach of the Oyarsa of Jupiter:

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The chairs were pushed back, the floor cleared. They danced. It seemed to each that the room was filled with kings and queens, that the wildness of their dance expresses heroic energy and its quieter
On the whole, however, the paucity of references to dance is as striking as the times it is used: no dances in The Pilgrim’s Regress, or Out of the Silent Planet, or The Great Divorce, or Till We Have Faces. Dance is not something Lewis thought of for himself or his characters as a desirable social activity; in each example I cited, dance is a spontaneous celebration or a ceremonial occasion — it is valued for what it expresses or stands for, rather than for what it is.

Literal images of dance lead naturally to the use of dance as metaphor. Here too the infrequency is striking. Rarely, in his poetry, for example, are there images like "Cast aloft by the fountains, with their soft foam / A tremor of light was dancing in the emerald dome [20]." Dance as a metaphor in Lewis’s works usually is a thoughtful, deliberate way to encapsulate traditional values, not a casual reference to a common social activity. This is confirmed by the use of dance as a figure in three vital passages, in That Hideous Strength, Mere Christianity, and The Problem of Pain. In the first, near the end of Ransom’s initial meeting with Jane, as they discussed obedience and marriage, Ransom says, "But you see that obedience and rule are more like a dance than a drill — especially between man and woman where the roles are always changing." (THS, p.149 [VII,2] ). The dance metaphor draws together a key theme of the novel. For Mark and Jane’s marriage serves as a paradigm of the larger struggle for independence and authority throughout the novel: of the St. Anne’s group to extend freedom within restraint, of the N.I.C.E. to have freedom without restraint. Mark and Jane must learn that obedience is different from servility and authority is different from arbitrary tyranny, and that "equality is not the deepest thing [21]." Each must recognize that humility and obedience are rooted in love, and that the source of love is Christ. "More like a dance than a drill" captures at once the contrast between St. Anne’s, and for marriage, what Lewis said in Williams and the Arthuriad about the knights of Williams’ Camelot:

There is, inside the company, no real slavery or real superiority. Slavery there becomes freedom and dominion becomes service. As willed necessity is freedom, so willed hierarchy becomes quality. [22]

The dance image projects the same ideas about marriage that Lewis expressed in Mere Christianity ("Christian wives promise to obey their husbands. In Christian marriage the man is said to be the 'head'" [23]), but conveys them a good deal less rigidly and more palatably.

The dance metaphors in Mere Christianity and The Problem of Pain are closely related. The former occurs as Lewis, attempting to clarify the difficult and abstract doctrine of the Trinity, says that "the words 'God is Love' have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons," since love is an activity between individuals. Then he continues:

In Christianity God is not a static thing — not even a person — but a dynamic, uniting activity, a life, almost a kind of dance. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance. [24]

As Lewis gropes for a way to express the inexpressible, he turns to an image which has divine associations for him because of its archetypal overtones, and which readily unites his understanding of God with the Western cultural myth. That it should even occur to him to compare God to a dance can be understood from Plato. Plato emphasizes that the act of creation involves correspondences, between the world and its pattern, and between the creation and the Creator. If creation can be viewed as a dance, so too, by correspondence, can the Creator. Lewis simply follows through and concretizes what is implicit in the Timaeus (caps. 29-30: The Dialogues of Plato, III, USO). And in doing so he relates the nature of God to the attributes of the world view dance has traditionally imaged: dance is active, orderly, hierarchical, and Lewis deliberately attaches those qualities to God. The metaphor also posits qualities about the human-divine encounter: it affirms that the human response to God must be active, involved — one can know God authentically only by entering into relation with him and participation in the activity which makes him what he is.

The whole dance, or drama, or pattern of this three-Personal life is to be played out in each one of us; or (putting it the other way around) each one of us has got to enter that pattern, take his place in that dance. There is no other way to the happiness for which we were made. (MC, p.153 [IV,4],)

Similarly, in The Problem of Pain, in writing about the hellish quality of selfhood and the heavenly quality of self-giving, Lewis writes: "But when [the golden apple of selfhood] flies to and fro among the players too swift for eye to follow, and the great master Himself leads the revelry, giving Himself eternally to His creatures in the generation, and back to Himself in the sacrifice, of the Word, the indeed the eternal dance 'makes heaven drowse with the harmony.'" [25]

In Letters to Malcolm Lewis (or rather the persona he creates) half-apologizes for his use of such "frivolous" figures of speech for spiritual matters: "There! I've done it again. I know that my tendency to images like play and dance for the highest things is a stumbling-block to you." But he further explains and justifies them because no "serious" imagery from our world can convey at all adequately the utter beauty and blissfulness of Heaven. In particular, it cannot possibly convey heaven's reconciliation of what on earth are direct opposites, "of boundless freedom with order — with the most delicately adjusted, supple, intricate, and beautiful order [26]." Lewis’s attempts to convey all this in That Hideous Strength and Mere Christianity use the metaphor of dance, with its combining of spontaneity and pattern, inadequate though he knows that figure ultimately must be.

The most important allusions to dance in Lewis’s works are symbolic uses which draw upon or reestablish mythology of the cosmic dance, that to which Doctor Cornelius refers when he assures Caspian that the stars Tarva and Alambil are not going to collide: "Nay, dear Prince,... the great lords of the upper sky know the steps of their dance too well for that [27]." Lewis is celebrating the same dance that Plato and Davies celebrated, but he does so with an emphasis not in Plato or Davies — that the Creator does not just choreograph a clock dance and then lean back to admire its color and beauty; rather, the Creator enters the dance as a participant. Thus in Miracles Lewis writes "the partner who bows to Man in one movement of the dance receives Man’s reverences in another [28]." So it is in the magnificent scene in the final chapter of Perelandra. Near the end of his stay on Perelandra,
Ransom, confused by the complexity of all that he has experienced since his arrival on the planet, doubting for the moment the coherence of things and fearful they are mere chaos and chance, is allowed a glimpse of the Great Dance.

What had begun as speech was turned into sight, or into something that can be remembered only as if it were seeing. He thought he saw the Great Dance. It seemed to be woven out of the intertwining undulation of many cords or bands of light, leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arabesques and flower-like subtleties. Each figure as he looked at it became the master-figure or focus of the whole spectacle, by means of which his eye disentangled all else and brought it into unity — only to be itself entangled when he looked to what he had taken for a mere marginal decorations and found that there also the same hegemony was claimed, and the claim made good, yet the former pattern not thereby dispossessed but finding in its new subordination a significance greater than that which it had abdicated. [29]

In this almost mystical vision, Ransom is shown, not what the universe looks like, but the Truth about what it actually is like.

The same is true of the image of reality in Charles Williams' The Greater Trumps. In this novel about the vain desire to control the action of the universe, a set of magical figurines moving about on a gold-covered table in a secret room of a secluded house corresponds to the rhythm and patterns of the cosmos:

Upon that plate of gold were a number of little figures, each about three inches high, also of gold, it seemed, very wonderfully wrought.... They were all in movement. Gently and continuously they went, immingling, unresting — as if to some complicated measure, and as if of their own volition. There must have been nearly a hundred of them, and from the golden plate upon which they went came a slight sound of music — more like an echo than a sound — sometimes quickening, sometimes slowing, to which the golden figures kept a duteous rhythm, or perhaps the faint sound itself was but their harmonized movement upon their field. [30]

The table and figures are microcosmic symbols of "the created dance" (P. 153), of "the everlasting dance" (p. 21; also 80,94) in which everything takes part (pp. 30, 80, 94). Henry explains to Nancy that "all things are in their season the breaking into flower of the whole design to which all else had been directed. Thus each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it.... Blessed be He!" (Ibid, p. 217.)

As Williams uses his dancing figures to emblemize the hierarchy and wholeless, so does Lewis:

"Where Maleldil is, there is the centre. He is in every place.... Each thing was made for Him. He is the centre. Because we are with Him, each of us is at the centre."

"Each grain is at the centre. The Dust is at the centre. The Worlds are at the centre. The beasts are at the centre. The ancient peoples are there. The race that sinned is there. For and Tindril are there. The gods are there also. Blessed be He!" (Perelandra, pp. 216-217.)

As Williams uses his movements of the figures across the golden board to epitomize correspondence, relation and truth, so does Lewis:

"All that is, is made senseless to the darkest mind, because there are more plans than it looked for. Set your eyes on one movement and it will lead you through all patterns and it will seem to you the master movement. But the seeming will be true. Let no mouth open to gainsay it. There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no centre because it is all centre. Blessed be He!" (Ibid. p. 218.)

The kinship of these dancers, of Lewis with Williams, is evident; and though Tolkien's characters dance even less than Lewis's, Tolkien too moves in step with the cosmological and social values the Great Dance embodies. Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams, in their fiction and other writings take for granted the truth and relevance of the Old Western model Lewis describes in The Discarded Image. That model affirms a universe full of life sympathetic with and interacting with other levels of life; and elaborate cosmology with a hierarchy of created orders, physical and spiritual; all of it unified by a single supernatural reality whose Good and presence are sought by the immortal souls of people finding and accepting their place in the whole [32]. Tolkien and Williams would agree with Lewis that the universe is best conceived of "as a dance, a festival, a symphony, a ritual, a carnival, or all these in one [33]."

The Great Dance passage in Perelandra expresses all this in high literary and imaginative art: nearly pure poetry, but also nearly pure myth. Beyond imagining the Old Western myth, dance images myth itself. Myth is not nearly so rational as conversation, or as realistic fiction, but is much more like a ball: it is imagination in motion, it reflects wholeness, unity, and harmonic pattern; it celebrates the richness and plurality of things. As Thomas Howard puts it, the human spirit at its best is impatient with the small and local and fragmented. Through the mythic imagination it seeks for the perfection it believes in and behind things — truth, beauty, goodness, wholeness, form, order, the eternal [34]. This is the dance in which Lewis, Tolkien, and Williams — and the
best of more recent mythopoeticists — are participating: the term myth means, etymologically, word as in "thing said, fact, matter, purpose, design," and thus the plot of a narrative work. Myth, then, is the reality at the heart of things, the "thing said" which all people deep inside long to hear. Those who love myth hear that word spoken through stories, settings, and images which reach far into the past and deep into the individual and collective psyche, which move and challenge and uplift and reassure, which, in Thomas Howard's words, somehow resonate with echoes from the story which in Lewis and Tolkien and Williams' view, is the only story there is, finally [35]. That word, that myth, is a dance — full of life, joy, motion, and meaning. If myth is a dance, it is participatory — one must enter the dance. A wallflower doesn't know the dance — only a visual image, a shadow, of the real thing. To experience the dance one must step into it, yield to its rhythms, become involved imaginatively and emotionally. That is our challenge and opportunity in the next few days — to enter the dance, to extend our understanding of the kinships within the manifold and intricate movements of the dance, and to appreciate more fully the kinships between those who lead us in the dance. You've come to a ball: dancing, not conversation, is the order of the day — today, this weekend, and forever.

NOTES


[10] Prince Caspian, p. 198 [Ch. 14]; also pp. 191-198 passim.


[18] The Problem of Pain (1940; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 153 [Ch. 10]. Lewis also uses dance, in a metaphor closely related to this one, for the object of Joy, that is, the heavenly world and the presence of God: "For a few minutes [in an experience of joy] we have had the illusion of belonging to that world. Now we wake to find that it is no such thing... We have not been accepted, welcomed, or taken into the dance" (The Weight of Glory, The Weight of Glory and other Addresses, rev. ed., ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 141.


[20] Prince Caspian, pp. 45-46 [Ch. 4]. See also the opening lines of "Le Roi S'amuse," Poems. p.23.


[22] Prince Caspian, pp. 45-46 [Ch. 4]. See also the opening lines of "Le Roi S'amuse," Poems. p.23.


Notes


