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Thematic Implications of C.S. Lewis' *Spirits in Bondage*

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Abstract
Speculates about reasons for comparative critical neglect of Lewis’s early poetry collection. Discusses the “main themes […] in light of the movement of the entire work.”

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. Spirits in Bondage; Lewis, C.S. Spirits in Bondage—Themes; Edith Crowe; George Bolt
The books of C.S. Lewis are widely read today, even more so than during his own lifetime. Numerous collections of Lewis' letters, essays, and poems have been published, and all of his books have remained in print - all, that is, except his first published work. The book, entitled Spirits in Bondage was published under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton in 1919 by Walter Heimann. Lewis was 20 when it came out; he was also an atheist bordering on agnosticism.

This book of poems, the full title of which is Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics, has been largely ignored by those writing about C.S. Lewis. In part, this is due to its unavailability. Yet, it is available from University Microfilms, and can be read in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and in the Wade Collection of Lewis' works at Wheaton College, both frequently consulted by writers on preparation for studies on C.S. Lewis. Second, it is a series of poems written by the pre-Christian Lewis and as such it is missing the central unifying theme in all of Lewis' writing - the Christian story-imaged, defended, and found to illuminate almost anything to which the later Lewis set his hand to write.

There is a further reason for its neglect. Lewis' words themselves have caused many, including this writer, to delay reading the work. In a letter to his friend, Arthur Greeves, of Sept. 1918 (first published in the Green and Hooper biography of C.S. Lewis), he states that the poems are 'mainly strung round the idea that I mentioned to you before - that nature is wholly diabolical and malevolent and that God, if he exists, is outside of and if opposition to the cosmic arrangements...'. This sounds most unlike anything the later Lewis wrote. We can understand his feelings about God in light of his agnosticism or atheism at that time. But, the idea that 'nature is wholly diabolical' is strikingly different from Lewis' defense of romanticism in The Pilgrim's Regress or Surprised by Joy.

Yet, after a reading of this 'cycle of lyrics' it becomes clear that although they may be 'strung round the idea' of a malevolent universe, they certainly do not end up making such a statement. That is the first surprise awaiting those that read the entire work for themselves. There is a clear movement throughout the book, leading the reader from some such idea as expressed above toward a full-blown romanticism. In using the term "romanticism," one should note the special kind of romanticism that Lewis experienced. Due to confusion in the use of the term, Lewis defined his usage in the new Preface to the 3rd edition of The Pilgrim's Regress.

What I meant was a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called "romantic" because inanimate nature and marvellous literature were among the things that evoked it... The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight... In the second place, there is a peculiar mystery about the object of this Desire. Lewis goes on to relate that at first the object may appear to be in far away places or times, in the land of Faerie, in sexual experiences, in magic, or even in knowledge of science or history. He calls these "false Florimels" and tells us that he had tried each in turn and found them not to be the source of Joy or the object of his Desire. More to the point of this essay, though, is the fact that at the time he was writing the poems in Spirits in Bondage, he informs us that it was "inanimate nature and marvellous literature" that evoked his experience of Joy.

Further surprises await the reader of the book. In several previously published comments on these poems, no mention is made of the thematic presentation of the poems. Lewis himself divides the cycle into three parts, entitled I. The Prison House, II. Hesitation, III. The Escape. Placed under these titles are poems carefully chosen to show not only the themes of each group, but the movement from one group to the other, as well.
The organization can be readily seen by a glance at the table of contents. In Part I, we find titles such as "Satan Speaks" (two times), "Night", "In Prison", "De Profundis", "Dungeon Grates". But, Part III. gives us "Song", "Resperis", "The Star Bath", "Lullaby", and "World's Desire". The contents of the poems under each heading are even more revealing. One example of some striking differences is in the number of times Satan figures in Part I, compared with not one mention of him in Part III!

With that presentation of the argument, an examination of the poems themselves is in order. It would be most advantageous for the reader to have the complete text of the book beside them for reference; that is not possible at present. However, this study was undertaken to encourage just such a reprinting as would make it possible. The poems will not be discussed as poems, but their main themes will be discussed in light of the movement of the entire work. No one poem will be dealt with at any length.

The first poem, "Satan Speaks", introduces us to the main character of Part I. The first lines show him declaring: "I am Nature, the Mighty Mother, / I am the law: ye have none other," and followed further down by the significant lines, "I am the fact and the crushing reason / To thwart your fantasy's new-born treason."3

Thus, immediately, the first poem presents the point of tension to be seen throughout Part I - that between the (apparently) bitter facts, and the much more hopeful fantasy.

This tension is pictured for us in the poem that follows, "French Nocturne". The speaker is standing in the trenches of W.W., watching a plane fly toward the moon. He wonders if there is "In that white land some harbour of dear dreams!" But, he crushes this "False, mocking Fancy" with the brutal fact that the moon is only "a stone that catches the sun's beam." The poem concludes with the thought that man has no right to dream, since threats that "bark for slaughter: cannot sing."

"The Satyr", which follows, poignantly depicts the plight of man. Here we see an early specimen of Lewis' remarkable ability to rework old mythological images and use them for his own purposes. In this poem, the satyr is seen as a tragic figure. His "twisted shanks" and "clenched feet" are visible:

Though his brow be clear and white
And beneath it fancies bright,
Wisdom and high thoughts are woven
And the music of delight.
Yet, that white brow has two horns "bursting forth";
Faerie maidens he may meet
Fly the horns and clenched feet
But, his sad brown eyes with wonder
Seeing - stay from their retreat.

We can sympathize readily enough, as Faerie also flees man and the baser nature bursting forth in him. Following this theme, "Victory" proclaims that though "The faerie people from our woods are gone", there is still hope. Man's spirit shall rise, higher, "and higher - till the beast become a god." One cannot help being reminded of Dymer, a narrative poem and the only other book of verse Lewis published during his lifetime; it ends with a monster becoming a god.

The next few poems continue the theme. "Irish Nocturne", more subdued, laments the Irish fogs and mists that have inspired poets, but lulled men to "Lonely desire and many words and brooding and never a deed." In "Spooks", the speaker dreams he finds his beloved's face, but covers himself to be a spirit - dead, left in the street, and unseen. This is reminiscent of J.R.R. Tolkien's poem, "The Sea-Bell", "Apology" attempts to apologize for such dark verses, stating that beauty recalled in hell makes it harder to bear; it ends with the empty line, "No hope is in the dawn, and no delight." "Ode for New Year's Day" expresses his anger against the God who viciously slays beauty and is indifferent to the torment of men. He cries out:

...If only you could flee away
Into some other country beyond the rose West,

To hide in the deep forests and be forever at rest
From the rankling hate of God and the outcome world's decay!

"Night" and "To Sleep" both call for the oblivion of forgetfulness that occurs in sleep.

The heart of the argument of Part I. is seen in the next three poems. The first, "In Prison", opens with a cry "for pain of man" and moves to a vision of earth:

(I) saw our planet, far and small,
Through endless depths of nothing fall
A lonely pin-prick spark of light,
Upon the wide, enfolding night,
* * * * * * *
And if some tears be shed,
Some evil God have power,
Some crown of sorrow sit
Upon a little world for a little hour -
Who shall remember? Who shall care for it?

This vision leads naturally to "De Profundis", in which the poet invites us to "curse God most High" for He has ruined our every effort to make a better world. But, the poet pauses for a moment. It might not all be a dream; there just might be a good God. Yet, if so, he is far away. "He wanders in the depths of endless light," and man will not be heard. Abruptly, the poet turns to a different personage and says:

And Thou art nearer, Thou art very strong.
O universal strength, I know it well,
It is but folly to rebel,
For thou art Lord and hast the keys of Hell.
Yet I will not bow down to thee nor love thee,
* * * * * * *
Thou art not Lord while there are Men on earth.

Two events of importance have occurred here. First, the poet (Lewis) has introduced the possibility of a good God, though an ineffectual one. Second, he has turned from despair and anger (alone) in response to pain and evil and Satan, and has taken up a fighting stance.

As if in answer to this, in the next poem "Satan Speaks" again. "I am the Lord your God," he declares. Men are "vermin": they dream in vain. "Let that other God come" and try to steal them into light. But he is "far away" and man has "long and vainly called".

"The Witch" is a dark poem, also. The poet watches the burning of a witch, judged to be evil by the magistrates. Yet, this witch is beautiful, sincere, and in tune with the wilderness. In this poem, we find the first hints that something might be said for the romantic vision.

The hints break into the open in "Dungeon Grates" the climactic poem of Part I. The experience of Joy that Lewis described so well in his autobiography is here displayed. It begins with the piteous condition of man, so burdensome that he must die unless every now and then some flash of glory break in. This can not be sought; wisdom or prayer will not bring it.

But only the strange power
Of unsought Beauty in some casual hour
Can build a bridge of light or sound or form
To lead you out of all this strife and storm:
* * * * * * *
Only a moment!
O! but we shall keep
Our vision still.
One moment was enough,
We know we are not made of mortal stuff,
And we can bear all trials that come after,
* * * * * * *
For we have seen the Glory - we have seen.

Indeed! After the dark and angry poems that have come before, this poem by the strength of its affirmation alone, could convince us that we, too, have seen the Glory, however short the moment.
And for the poet it is enough; the entire tone changes at this point. The rest of the poems in Part I. represent a long lyrical denouement. No longer are the thoughts dark, or full of despair. "The Philosopher" asks, "Who shall be our prophet then", and chooses youth. "The Ocean Strand" and "Noon" celebrate Summer and Midday respectively. In "Milton Read Again", Lewis gives Milton the credit for renewing his vision:

Your Spirit, Master, has been close at hand
And guided me, still pointing treasures rare,
Thick-sown where I before saw nothing fair
And finding waters in the barren land,
Barren once thought because my eyes were dim.

"Sonnet", written in praise of sleep, is full of gentle images of peaceful night, in marked contrast to the call for oblivion in the earlier poems on the same subject. Part I. ends with "The Autumn Morning". The poet believes that as "One that has honoured well / The mystic spell / Of different sun, where he sees (again):

... into this autumn day".

Yet, Hesitation is the title of Part II, and fear is the subject of the first poem, "L'Apprenti Sorcier". The speaker dreams he is standing by a mighty sea beneath a different sun, where he sees (again):

The fierce cold eyes of Godhead gleam,
Revolving hate and misery
And wars and famine yet to be.
Out of the waves "many a face and form" appear, calling to him:

"Leap in! Leap in and take thy fill
Of all the cosmic good and ill,
Be as the Living Ones and know
Enormous joy, enormous woe,

And wash from off thy filmed eyes
The cloud of cold mortality,

Or to thy shame, go slink again
Back to the narrow ways of men."
So all these mocked me as I stood
Striving to wake because I feared the flood.

Clearly, the theme of hesitation is demonstrated here, but other aspects of the poem are not so clear. Who are the "Thin, elemental people" calling to him? Is this hesitation from a true escape, or is this a call to the forgetfulness of suicide? Probably Lewis himself was not sure.

In "alexandrines" more questions arise. We are told of a dark empty house with unkempt ground and a "little silent room / Where someone's always waiting, waiting in the gloom / To draw me with an evil eye, and hold me fast - / Yet thither doom will drive me and He will win at last."

To whom does the capital He refer? Does the house represent the mind, the subconscious, the past, or a church? The questions remain.

"In Praise of Solid People" is the last of the three poems in Part II. Its tone is different - more objective, less subjective. The poet, envious of "solid folk", compares their well-ordered lives and contentment with his life of "homeless longing.../ For love that I shall never know, / And visions none can hope to see." He broods alone at night, often to the point of becoming fearful of phantoms in the shadows. For all his efforts, he finds himself:

...still no nearer to the Light,
And still no further from Myself,

Then do I envy solid folk
Who sit of evenings by the fire,
After their work and doze and smoke,
And are not fretted by desire.

Thus, as Part II. ends, we find the poet brooding, full of fear, and "fretted by desire". But, the desire is beginning to overcome his fear. When Part III. opens, the hesitation is over. Appropriately entitled Escape, Part III. shows us the poet free at last - free from dark thoughts of a malevolent universe, free to search for the meaning of his experience of Joy. To embody the goal of that search, Lewis has chosen the image of "the hidden country", but he shows us many images along the way as well.

Although his presentation of the situation and plight of man is convincingly pictured, Lewis shares with many poets of the Romantic tradition a certain vagueness concerning the goal and source of his vision. In part, this is inherent in the nature of the search, if the one relating the search does not already know the answer. It must be remembered that Spirits in Bondage was a pre-Christian work of Lewis. This vagueness in meaning can be seen as well in Dune, another pre-Christian work by Lewis. It was not until he embraced the Christian story with all its implications for mythology, that Lewis was able to image for us the significance of Joy as convincingly as his experience of Joy.

This may explain the looser organization of Part III. The order of the poems appear to be less important as Lewis has no clear "statement" to make - with one important exception, as we shall see.

The first poem, "Song of the Pilgrims", calls out:

O Dwellers at the back of the North Wind,

... we have no rest. We cannot turn again
Back to the world and all her fruitless pain,
Having once sought the land where ye remain.

But, by the very God, we know, we know
That somewhere still, beyond the Northern snow
Waiting for us the red-rose gardens blow.

Indeed, after that affirmation, the poet never looks back. In "Song", the poet defends this romantic view thus:

Faeries must be in the woods
Or the satyrs' laughing broods - Tritons in the summer seas.
Else how could the dead things be
Half so lovely as they are?

He points to the stars in the "heavenly hall" that fill us with delight:

Atoms dead could never thus
Stir the human heart of us
Unless the beauty that we see
The veil of endless beauty be,

"The ass" expresses a touch of humor, notably lacking earlier. The poet considers the mystery of the immalance of God:

Can it be true, as the wise men toll,
That you are a mask of God as well.
And, as in us, so in you no less
Speaks the eternal Loveliness(?)

"Ballad Mystique" relates that others see only the poet's external situation, and do not know the consolation he finds in fantasy - whether in dream or literature is not clear. In "Night", the poet speaks of "a little Druid wood" where others have been charmed by faeries and have "passed beyond the mist / And found the Country-under-wave..."

The poem, "Oxford", might seem out of place among intense romantic longings - to many representing a bastion of fact and reason - but Lewis sees it differently. He finds it "a place of vision and of loosening chains", a place of "peace / And discipline and dreaming and desire...barred against despair". Lewis does exalt knowledge and the ability of man in "Hymn (For Boys' Voices)"

Human children every day
Could play at games the faeries play
If they were but shown the way.

We could revel day and night
In all power and all delight
If we learned to think aright.
"Our Daily Bread" is significant for its foreshadowing of Lewis' later life and works:

In many vulgar and habitual place,
I catch a sight of lands beyond the wall,
I see a strange god's face.
And some day this will work upon me so
I shall arise and leave both friends and home
And over many lands a pilgrimage go
Through alien woods and foam
Seeking the last steep edges of the earth
Whence I may leap into the gulf of light
Therein, before my narrowing self had birth,
Part of me lived aright.

The meaning of "How He Saw Angus the God" will be left to the reader to pursue. Early one morning, the speaker steals out to a mountain wood to commune with nature:

Looking upon the dappled, early sky,
When suddenly, from out the shining air
A god came flashing by.
But, when I followed him beyond the wood,
Lo! he was changed into a solemn bull
That there upon the open pasture stood
And browsed his lazy full.

"The Roads" returns us to the quest for the hidden country, while "Hesperus" reveals the poet's longing to find his "heart's delight." "The Star Bath" and "Lullaby" are remarkable for their imagery, but they must be read entirely for proper appreciation.

"Tu Ne Queseris!" is the climactic poem of Part III. Previously, the longing and the search have been described, and images along the way have been shown to us. But, the search has been unsuccessful. Now, the poet comes to the heart of the matter:

Yet, what were endless lives to me
If still my narrow self I be
* * * * * * * * 
Deluded, thwarted, striving self
That through the window of my self
As through a dark glass scarce can see
A warped and masked reality?
But when this searching thought of mine
Is mingled in the large Divine,
* * * * * * * * 
And my dead sin and foolishness
Grow one with Nature's whole distress,
To perfect being I shall win,
And where I end will Life begin.

Previously, he had extolled man's ability to eventually find his dreams, if only he could learn and be "shown the way" (in "boys' voices" it was noted). He had been unable to understand the lack of success. Now, presumably older, he turns and finds the cause in his own self. This is the first mention of Self in the book, and it is strategically placed, near the end of Part III. To be sure, there is something inadequate with the solution proposed. There doesn't seem to be any real content in lines such as "mingled in the large Divine" or "grow one with Nature's whole distress." But, Lewis has come a big step forward in his search for the answer to man's alienation from the glory he only occasionally glimpsed.

The last two poems present to us the same image, that of a castle of hope. "World's Desire" describes a desolate wild country with a roaring river crashing down a great ravine:

...upon the further side of the barren, sharp
With the sunlight on its turrets is the castle seen

But within the sacred court, hidden high upon
the mountain,
Wandering in the castle gardens lovely folk
enough there be,
Breathing in another air, drinking of a purer
fountain
And among that folk, beloved, there's a place
for you and me.

If, in "World's Desire" the poet affirms his hope, in "Death in Battle" his faith is rewarded. As the title implies, the speaker is tolling in battle. "But, the heat and the pain together suddenly fell away. / All's cool and green." He cries out:

Open the gates for me,
Open the gates of the peaceful castle, rosy in
the West,
In the sweet dim isle of Apples over the wide
sea's breast,
Open the gates for me!

The final "statement", then, is one of hope. Part I, The Prison House, fills the first half of the book, and recapitulates the movement of Part I, with better results. In Part II, Hesitation, we see his desire almost overcome by returning fear. But from the beginning of Part III, Escape, he never looks back. The dark verses do not return. His experience of beauty, joy, and longing sustain him on the search for his heart's desire. Only after the poet comes to realize his own unworthiness for it, does he allow himself to affirm, and find, a place in paradise.

Lewis himself summarizes it thus in these lines from the Prologue:

In my coracle of verses I will sing of lands
unknown,
Flying from the scarlet city where a Lord
that knows no pity
Mocked the broken people praying round his
iron throne,
- Sing about the Hidden Country fresh and
full of quiet green,
Sailing over seas uncharted to a port that
none has seen.

Footnotes
1. Roger Lancelyn Green & Walter Hooper, C.S. Lewis, A
2. C.S. Lewis, The Pilgrim's Regress (Grand Rapids: Wm.
3. Clive Hamilton, Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics
(London: William Heinemann, 1919). As each of the
poems will be mentioned no page references will be
given.