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Abstract
Relates Lewis's treatment of Reason and Imagination in his poem "Reason" to discoveries about right brain/left brain operation.

Additional Keywords
Lewis, C.S. “Reason” (poem); Christine Smith; Bonnie GoodKnight
GETTING IT TOGETHER: Lewis and the Two Hemispheres of Knowing

by Kathryn Lindskoog

Greek mythology, brain physiology, and epistemology are not my areas of expertise. But I have fallen in love with a mysterious sixteen-line poem by C.S. Lewis which catalogues me into all three areas. This neglected poem is found on page 81 of Poems under the misleading title "Reason." A correct title would be "Reason and Imagination." It is intensely personal and practical. Furthermore, we can see a level of meaning in it in the 1970's that we could not have seen ten years ago.

In this poem the virgin goddess in armor, Athene, personifies reason. Lewis refers to the Acropolis, the highest point in Athens, where her colossal statue stood. (Of course the entire city of Athens was named for its protector Athene.) Readers of Till We Have Faces recognize the wisdom of Athens in the figure of the Fox. Readers of The Pilgrim's Regress recognize Athens in the armed virgin named Reason.

Following are the lines and fragments of lines that refer to reason in this poem:

Set on the soul's acropolis the reason stands
A virgin, arm'd, commercing with celestial light,
And he who sins against her has defiled her
Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;
So clear is reason...
Tempt not Athene...
...mild...
...height
...intellectual sight

In this poem the mother goddess Demeter personifies imagination. In Greek mythology Demeter stood for harvest and fertility. No Greek city was named after her, but the Eleusinian Mysteries were inaugurated in her honor. The story was that Demeter wandered to Eleusis while grieving for her daughter Persephone who had been abducted to the underworld by Pluto. Processions of Athenians used to travel the twelve miles to Eleusis for an annual fall festival. We know little about the secret Eleusinian Mysteries. Demeter is more mysterious than Athene.

Following are the lines and fragments of lines that refer to imagination in Lewis' poem:

...But how dark, imagining,
Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night:
Dark in her brow, the beauty of her eyes with sleep
Is loaded, and her pains are long, and her delight.
...Wound not in her fertile pains
Demeter, nor rebel against her mother-right.
...mother
...depth...
...imagination's dim exploring touch

In the last six lines of this undated poem Lewis wishes that Athene and Demeter would agree with each other in his own mind. He wishes that his two modes of knowing, reason and imagination, would together teach him the truth. Only then can Lewis wholly say that he believes. Neither mental function is complete without the other. I don't think it is accidental that Lewis put reason first in this poem. In Twentieth Century Western culture we are not used to considering imagination a bona fide way of knowing.

I am not aware of a figure typifying imagination in Lewis' fiction. But I am reminded of Orual's question in Till We Have Faces: "Why must holy places be dark places?" and the confession of her teacher the Fox, "I never told her why the old Priest got something from the dark House that I never got from my trim sentences...Of course, I didn't know...I don't know now." In Till We Have Faces Christ-like Psyche chose to descend to the underworld of Demeter's daughter Persephone to get beauty from death to bring back up for others. And in The Pilgrim's Regress John had to descend into catacombs under the earth where he learned many mysteries and died many deaths. It was down there that the voice of God said to him about mythology, "It is but truth; not fact: an image, not the very real...this is the veil under which I have chosen to appear even from the first until now. For this end I made your senses and for this end your imagination, that you might see My face and live...was there any age in any land when men did not know that corn and wine were the blood and body of a dying and yet living God?"

Madeline L'Engle, author of A Wrinkle in Time, stated in her non-fiction book A Circle of Quiet, "It is....through the world of the imagination which takes us beyond the restrictions of provable fact, that we touch the hem of truth." (p. 112)

Paul Tournier, in his 1974 book The Naming of Persons, talks about that same "dim exploring touch":

Nevertheless, St. Paul knows that the most convincing revelations cannot be formulated in intellectual discourses or in didactic texts. Such was the revelation which overtook him on the Damascus road. After all his polemics in the second letter to the Corinthians, it is to that ineffable experience that he points in order to establish his spiritual authority (II Cor. 12:2-4). And he points out that he felt it, not as an intellectual and intelligible instruction, but as an almost physical experience: "whether still in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows" he writes. There could be no clearer indication that what happened was not on the level of lucid thought, but on the mysterious level of the incarnate person. Is it not of that same level that we are speaking -- profound, obscure and organic -- when we refer to the recording of the mother's voice on the mind of the child she is carrying in her womb? (p. 96)

Neither Madeleine L'Engle, Paul Tournier, or C.S. Lewis devalues reason one iota. Following is the entire text of Lewis' poem on the subject:
Set on the soul’s acropolis the reason stands
A virgin, arm’d, commencing with celestial light.
And he who sins against her has defiled his own
Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;
So clear is reason. But how dark, imagining,
Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night:
Dark is her brow, the beauty of her eyes with sleep
Is loaded, and her pains are long, and her delight.
Tempt not Athene. Wound not, in her fertile pains
Demeter, nor rebel against her mother-right.

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother,
Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?
Who make imagination’s dim exploring touch
Ever report the same as intellectual sight?
Then could I truly say, and not deceive,
Then wholly say, that I BELIEVE.

Imagination, so far as it is concerned with images,
lives in the right hemisphere of the brain, which is spatial and mute. No computer can simulate the processes of the right hemisphere; when we compare the brain to a computer we are talking about the left hemisphere. Damage to the right hemisphere can destroy a person’s ability to recognize faces; Lewis probably didn’t know that when he wrote Till We Have Faces, but it fits. The right hemisphere seems to be where dreams all take places, and it is our source of intuition. Lewis himself said that his fiction all began with images that sprang into his consciousness unbidden. That is where the image of the faun in the snowy woods came from that gave rise to all of Narnia.

Robert Ornstein, author of The Psychology of Consciousness, claims that “It is the polarity and the integration of these two modes of consciousness, the complementary workings of the intellect and the intuitive, which underlie our highest achievements.” (p. 64) On page 67 he offers an extraordinary chart showing the polarity he meant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(SOURCE)</th>
<th>(ATHENE)</th>
<th>(DEMETER)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many sources</td>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackburn</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Sensuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppenheimer</td>
<td>Time, History</td>
<td>Eternity, Timelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deikman</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polanyi</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levy, Sperry</td>
<td>Analytic</td>
<td>Gestalt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donheoff</td>
<td>Right (side of)</td>
<td>Left (side of) body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many sources</td>
<td>Left hemisphere</td>
<td>Right hemisphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogen</td>
<td>Propositional</td>
<td>Appositional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee</td>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Nonlinear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luria</td>
<td>Sequential</td>
<td>Simultaneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semmes</td>
<td>Focal</td>
<td>Diffuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Ching</td>
<td>The Creative</td>
<td>The Receptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heaven</td>
<td>earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Ching</td>
<td>Masculine, Yang</td>
<td>Feminine, Yin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Ching</td>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Ching</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many sources</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>Spatial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many sources</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vedanta</td>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>Manas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jung</td>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>Accidental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon</td>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ornstein’s contention is that a complete human consciousness involves the polarity and integration of the two modes, just as a complete day includes the daylight and the darkness.

In the human body, the Corpus Callosum is the only connection between the right and left brain hemispheres. There is no integration physically without it. It is an inconceivably complex bundle of nerves coordinating the two halves of the brain. Or as some people say today, the two brains! There are bizarre studies of fascinating “split-brain” people who have had the Corpus Callosum severed. But we all see around us (or within us) people with intact Corpus Callosums who overvalue the left hemisphere functions at the expense of the right hemisphere functions. That is bizarre too. C. S. Lewis was speaking for the need of all men when he wrote that he wanted the benefits of both. In my opinion he received and shared the benefits of both.

To digress for a moment, does this new physiology tell us that reason is nothing but left hemisphere cortical activity and imagination is nothing but right hemisphere cortical activity? Lewis has warned us about the words "nothing but". In his essay "Transposition" he attacked this kind of reductionism:
"physiology never can find anything in thought except twitches of the grey matter." (The Weight of Glory, p. 25) "...it seems to me very likely that the real relation between mind and body is one of Transposition. We are certain that, in this life at any rate, thought is intimately connected with the brain. The theory that thought therefore is merely a movement in the brain is, in my opinion, nonsense..." (The Weight of Glory, p. 24)

Lewis went on in that essay to suggest that Transposition may throw a new light on the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. He leads us to wonder if the resurrected human brain will be our organ of transcendent and supernatural spiritual experiences; if our human brain will in heaven perceive God directly.

However, he warns us "There will always be evidence, and every month fresh evidence, to show that religion is only psychological, justice only self-protection, politics only economics, love only lust, and thought itself only cerebral biochemistry." (The Weight of Glory, pp. 28-29) I clearly remember the day in November, 1963, when John Kennedy's grey matter was spattered on a street in Dallas, and C. S. Lewis' grey matter died within his cranium the same hour.

Since then there has been a slight shift away from the behaviorism that Lewis detested. I think that Lewis would have appreciated somewhat the claim of Roger Sperry, Hixon Professor of Psychobiology at Cal Tech:

After more than 50 years of strict behaviorist avoidance of such terms as "mental imagery" and visual, verbal, auditory "images," in the past five years these terms have come into wide usage as explanatory constructs in the literature on cognition, perception, and other higher functions.

The revised interpretation brings the conscious mind into the causal sequence in human decision making—and therefore into behavior generally—and thus back into the role of experimental science from which it has long been excluded. This swing in psychology and neuroscience away from hard-core materialism and reductionism toward a new, more acceptable brand of mentalism tends now to restore to the scientific image of human nature some of the dignity, freedom, and other humanistic attributes of which it had been deprived by the behavioristic approach. (Saturday Review, 8/9/75, p. 33)

In The Pilgrim's Regress, Lewis' first prose fiction, he seems to say, "Tempt not Athene"; Reason is a great heroine. But in Till We Have Faces, his last prose fiction, he seems to say "Wound not, in her fertile pains, Demeter". The main character, Orual, was outraged that deity draws near at times in dreams and visions but refuses to answer our clear questions. At last she understands.

"I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words..."

Orual desired that her story should be read in rational Greece. Lewis apparently desired that Till We Have Faces be read in our own faceless left-hemisphere culture.

Perhaps it is C. S. Lewis himself who for some of us is at least a partial answer to his question:

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother, Who make in me a concord of the depth and height? Who make imagination's dim exploring touch Ever report the same as intellectual sight? Then could I truly say, and not deceive, Then wholly say, that I BELIEVE.

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