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Abstract

Discusses the theme of language in the Ransom trilogy. Notes Barfield's theories of language and Lewis's apparent agreement with them.

Additional Keywords

Barfield, Owen—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Theory of language; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy—Language

THE UNITY OF WORD

LANGUAGE IN C.S. LEWIS' TRILOGY

by Brian C. Bond



The tower of Babel scene at the end of *That Hideous Strength*, which represents just one more victory for Logres in its long, unending war with Britain, is the climax not only of C. S. Lewis' Trilogy, but of the theme of language that is prominent throughout. It is a theme, as both Dabney Adams Hart and Richard B. Cunningham have pointed out, that is closely allied with Lewis' theory of myth.¹ Because of the connection between myth and language, it seems best to discuss what Lewis has to say about the origin of language before we see what part it plays as one of the unifying factors in the trilogy.

Throughout his writings Lewis pays tribute to Owen Barfield. He dedicated his first scholarly work, *The Allegory of Love*, "To Owen Barfield: wisest and best of my unofficial teachers," and in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes Barfield as a "Second Friend," or one "who shares your interests" but who "disagrees with you about everything."² That this feeling was mutual is suggested by Barfield's dedication to *Poetic Diction*, published eight years before *The Allegory of Love*: "To C. S. Lewis, 'Opposition is true friendship!'"³ In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield proposes a theory of language which Lewis wholeheartedly endorsed.⁴ The basis of Barfield's theory is that human experience was once a unity by which man immediately comprehended concrete reality. Language expressed what was immediately perceived; there was neither a place nor a need for metaphorical thought:

Men do not invent those mysterious relations between separate external objects, and between objects and

feelings or ideas, which it is the function of poetry to reveal. These relations exist independently, not indeed of Thought, but of any individual thinker. And according to whether the footsteps are echoed in primitive language or, later on, in the made metaphors of poets, we hear them after a different fashion and for different reasons. The language of primitive man reports them as direct perceptual experience. The speaker has observed a unity, and is not therefore himself conscious of relation. But we, in the development of consciousness, have lost the power to see this one as one. Our sophistication, like Odin's, has cost us an eye; and now it is the language of poets, in so far as they create true metaphors, which must restore this unity conceptually, after it has been lost from perception.

Barfield goes on to discuss the two opposing principles in the development of consciousness: "Firstly, there is a force by which . . . single meanings tend to split up into a number of separate and often isolated concepts." Secondly there is "the nature of language itself at its birth. It is the principle of living unity." In this second principle is the secret of the meaning of myth: "Mythology is the ghost of concrete meaning. Connections between discrete phenomena, connections which are now apprehended as metaphor, were once perceived as immediate realities."⁵

Originally, then, there was no split between the physical and the spiritual. Lewis makes this clear in *Miracles*, while at the same time showing that he agreed with what Barfield has

said above:

To regard that earlier stage (of primitive man) as unspiritual because we find there no clear assertion of unembodied spirit, is a real misunderstanding. You might just as well call it spiritual because it contained no clear consciousness of mere matter. Mr. Barfield has shown, as regards the history of language, that words did not start by referring merely to physical objects and then get extended by metaphor to refer to emotions, mental states and the like. On the contrary, what we now call the 'literal and metaphorical' meanings have both been disengaged by analysis from an ancient unity of meaning which was neither or both.

The result of this splitting up was, as we have seen, a dualism between scientific and poetic language. The old equation between sensibles and insensibles breaks down. Good and happy are no longer equated with high and light, nor are evil and pain equated with deep and black.⁸ "It is the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms. . . . To ask how these married pairs of sensibles and insensibles first came together would be great folly; the real question is how they ever came apart."⁹

This breaking down of the ancient unity of language to the point where all communication finally disintegrates is one of the themes of *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*. Paralleling Lewis' use of medieval cosmology and Christian myth, one of the functions of language in the trilogy is to unify three novels which are not entirely coherent in terms of plot.

The first aspect of *Out of the Silent Planet* which causes the reader to think in terms of language is learning that Ransom is a philologist. Later we find out that he is well-known among scholars --he wrote the book, *Dialect and Semantics* (T. 189)¹⁰--but the immediate value of his occupation is that, in *Out of the Silent Planet*, we see him studying the language of Malacandra with the awareness which would be lacking in the non-specialist. After he had arrived on Malacandra, and has managed to escape from the two scientists who kidnapped him, Ransom wanders about the planet. In fear of meeting any other creature--for he believes he has been brought to Malacandra as a sacrifice--Ransom finally is confronted by what he later learns is a *hross*:

Then something happened which completely altered his state of mind. The creature, which was still steaming and shaking itself on the back and had obviously not seen him, opened its mouth and began to make noises. The creature was talking. It had a language. (Q. 55)

Ransom is overwhelmed when he realizes this fact. First, he gets carried away and sees himself writing a Malacandrian grammar. "An introduction to the Malacandrian language -- The Lunar Verb-- A Concise Martian-English Dictionary. . . the titles fitted through his mind." He considers that 'the very form of the language itself, the principle being all possible languages, might fall into his hands' (Q. 55). A far-fetched thought, but very nearly true, for the language which he first hears spoken on Malacandra is *Old Solar*, the language common to the universe.

Soon Ransom gets down to the serious business of learning this new language:

'Malacandra?' he said in an inquiring voice. The *hross* rolled its eyes and waved its arms, obviously in an effort to indicate the whole landscape. Ransom was get-

ting on well. Handra was earth the element; Malac-andra the 'earth' or planet as a whole. Soon he would find out what Malac meant. In the meantime 'H disappears after C' he noted, and made his first step in Malacandrian phonetics. (Q. 57)

Some of the vocabulary of this new language would be familiar to any reader of Lewis' trilogy. Words like *Perelandra* and *Thulcandra* obviously, and *eldil* and *Oyarsa*, are all *Old Solar*. One is tempted to make an etymological study of these and other words, but in one of his letters Lewis indicates that it would not be worthwhile:

There is no conscious connection between any of the phonetic elements in my 'Old Solar' words and those of any actual language. I am always playing with syllables and fitting them together (purely by ear) to see if I can hatch up new words that please me. I want them to have an emotional, not intellectual, suggestiveness; the heaviness of glund for as huge a planet as Jupiter, the vibrating, tintillating quality of *virtrilitha* for the subtlety of Mercury, the liquidity. . . of *Maledil*. The only exception I am aware of is *hnau* which may (but I don't know) have been influenced by Greek nouns.¹¹

Hnau, Ransom learns later in *Out of the Silent Planet*, is a term which includes all rational creatures except those having spiritual rather than material bodies:

It became clear that *Maledil* was a spirit without body, parts or passions.

'He is not *hnau*,' said the *hrossa*.

'What is *hnau*,' asked Ransom.

'You are *hnau*,' said the *hrossa*. The *seroni* are *hnau*.

The *pniftriggi* are *hnau*. (Q. 68)

Soon after recovering from the shock that *hrossa* can speak, Ransom next discovers that all the creatures listed above speak the same language. Unlike the development in language from unity toward disunity which Barfield describes in *Poetic Diction*, all the rational creatures on Malacandra speak *Old Solar*. "Once we all had different speeches and we still have at home. But everyone had learned the speech of the *hrossa*" (Q. 114). The reason why everyone has learned this particular language is that the *hrossa* are the poets of Malacandra. They still retain the ability to see the unity of the world about them, and the Malacandrians are wise enough to recognize this ability. The *pniftriggi*, who are sculptors, describe the *hrossa* as the great speakers and singers. They have more words and better. No one learns the speech of my people, for what we have to say is said in stone and suns' blood and stars' milk and all can see them. No one learns the *seroni*'s speech, for you can change their knowledge into any words and it is still the same. You cannot do that with the songs of the *hrossa*. (Q. 114)

The part that language plays in *Out of the Silent Planet* comes to a climax during the great meeting at the conclusion of the book among Oyarsa, Ransom, and scientist Weston. Weston and his partner have killed one of the *hrossa*, and Oyarsa, realizing that Weston is bent *hnau*, has him brought before a large gathering of *hrossa*, *seroni*, and *pniftriggi*. The occasion is the funeral procession for the murdered *hross*, but this leads to a long discussion among these three. Oyarsa learns a great deal about Thulcandra (including the story of Christ). He takes this opportunity to do so because he has had no other communication with the silent planet. Arguing against Oyarsa, who represents the unity of the universe, Weston persists in claiming that everything must bow to the advancement of science. If necessary, the Malacandrians will be killed in the name of progress. Oyarsa, of course, wins the argument. Weston, as an outsider, does not know *Old Solar*, and is forced to use Ransom as a (reliable) interpreter. Oyarsa, in complete control, says of the beaten Weston: "He is now only a talking animal and in my world he could do no more evil than an animal" (Q. 139).

In *Perelandra*, Weston becomes a talking spirit. Before he leaves Earth to travel to *Perelandra* the bent *eldil* enter his body and soon after his arrival have taken it over completely. The use of language in this second volume continues the theme with which *Out of the Silent Planet* had been concluded, i.e., language used for argumentative rather than poetic purposes. In the interim between the time when he was on Malacandra and the time when he arrives on *Perelandra*, Weston has learned *Old Solar*. And it is through the means of speech that he tempts the Green Lady to leave the



floating islands and spend the night on the Fixed-Land. His arguments are always countered by Ransom, but Weston is the more persuasive in his reasoning and Ransom finally must resort to physical force.

During the first part of *Perelandra* when Ransom, Weston and the Green Lady are all discussing the role of the first woman on *Perelandra*, the Green Lady of course learns a great deal. She is constantly making statements like: "I was young yesterday," or "You make me grow older more quickly than I can bear." The emphasis is on language as communication. At the same time, one realizes that language can express falsehood as well as truth, and that the innocent have no way of telling the difference between them. When falsehood begins to gain the upper hand, the truth has no choice but to use force, and in using this force, it has no assurance that it will win. It is when Ransom comes to this realization that he finally understands the significance of his name. A voice calls out to him: "It is not for nothing that you are named Ransom." Ransom knows that the voice is not his own, for he also knows that his name is derived from *Ranolf's* son and has no other meaning:

To connect the name Ransom with the act of ransoming would have been for him a mere pun. But even his voluble self did not now dare to suggest that the Voice was making a play upon words. All in a moment of time he perceived that what was, to human philologists, a merely accidental resemblance of two sounds, was in truth no accident. The whole distinction between fact and myth, was purely terrestrial. (P. 147)

Perelandra, however, does not end on the note of language used for argument, but rather on language used correctly as the medium of poetry and music. Ransom, the new "Adam and Eve," and all the powers of the universe come together after evil has been driven away from the planet. For a year they participate in "the Great Game, of the Great Dance":

The voice that spoke next seemed to be that of Mars, but Ransom was not certain. And who spoke after that, he does not know at all. For in the conversation that followed—if it can be called a conversation—though he believes that he himself sometimes was the speaker, he never knew which words were his or another's, or even whether a man or an eldill was talking. The speeches followed one another—if, indeed, they did not all take place at the same time—like the parts of a music. . . . (P. 214)

That *Hiddeous Strength* also ends with a great dance. But rather than taking place on a mountain top as in *Perelandra*, this dance takes place on the hill at St. Anne's in England, the headquarters of Logres. All the animals who had been kept for experimentation at Belbury, the headquarters of N.I.C.E., are set free and congregate at St. Anne's. "The elephants are dancing." And "Perelandra is all about us and Man is no longer isolated. We are now as we ought to be—between the angels who are our elder brothers and the beasts who are our jesters, servants and play-fellows" (P. 378).

The last volume of the trilogy, which Lewis subtitled "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups," takes place in a world similar to that described by scientific thought in the sixteenth century:

By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. The world was emptied, first of her indwelling spirits, then of her occult sympathies and antipathies, finally of her colours, smells, and tastes. . . . Man with his new powers became rich like Midas but all that he touched had gone dead and cold. 12

In such a world as this (*That Hiddeous Strength* roughly takes place after the Second World War), language becomes misused, and the focus is on smooth, argumentative talk such as Weston spoke on *Perelandra*. The medium, in order to reach a mass audience, becomes the newspaper editorial. Lewis actually disliked newspapers, 13 and in *That Hiddeous Strength* the newspaper becomes the voice of N.I.C.E. Ransom says at one point: "They have an engine called the Press whereby people are deceived" (T. 292). Almost as effective as the editorial is the speech. And it is during a speech given by the titular head of N.I.C.E. that Merlin inflicts the curse of Babel, which brings the theme of language together with the motifs of Christian tradition and medieval cosmology.

That the legend of the Tower of Babel involves Christianity and language is obvious. In Lewis' terms it also involves the Medieval Model of the universe for Mercury is the lord of Meaning, 14 When the community at Logres is about to go out in search of



Merlin, who has awakened and is wandering about the woods, Dimble demonstrates his knowledge of Old Solar or "The Great Tongue." As he speaks, the words do not sound like his at all:

For this was the language spoken before the Fall and beyond the Moon and the meanings were not given to the syllables by chance, or skill, or long tradition, but truly inherent in the little waterdrop. This was Language herself, as she first sprang at Maleldil's bidding out of the molten quicksilver of the star called Mercury on Earth, but Virtrilbia in Deep Heaven. (T. 229)

And for Ransom, the thoughts that race through his mind when Virtrilbia comes into his room in order to give Merlin the power of destroying language are heavenly pleasure. "He found himself sitting within the very heart of language, in the white-hot furnace of essential speech" (T. 322).

The inflicting of the curse of Babel upon N.I.C.E. brings this discussion around full circle. Old Solar was introduced in *Out of the Silent Planet*, and remains a constant throughout the trilogy in contrast to the way language is actually used after utility has been lost. Only by destroying language which is used exclusively for evil purposes can the ancient unity, as described by both Barfield and Lewis, be restored.

Footnotes

- 1 Dabney Adams Hart, "C. S. Lewis's Defense of Poesie" (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1959), particularly pp. 322-340, and Richard B. Cunningham, *C. S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 70-73.
- 2 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), p. 189.
- 3 Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1964).
- 4 Lewis writes in *Joy*: "Much of the thought which he (Barfield) afterward put into *Poetic Diction* had already become mine before that important little book appeared" (p. 200). Also see W. S. Norwood, Jr., "C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, and the Modern Myth," *Midwest Quarterly*, VIII (1966), 278-291.
- 5 *Poetic Diction*, pp. 86-87.
- 6 *Poetic Diction*, pp. 88 and 92.
- 7 C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 79.
- 8 See Cunningham, p. 71.
- 9 C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1968), p. 44.
- 10 C. S. Lewis, *That Hiddeous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 189. Hereafter references to the Macmillan paperback editions of Lewis' trilogy will be abbreviated in the text as follows: *Out of the Silent Planet*, O; *Perelandra*, P; and *That Hiddeous Strength*, T.
- 11 W. H. Lewis, ed., *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt, 1966), pp. 283-284.
- 12 C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1954), pp. 3-4.
- 13 See *Joy*, p. 159.
- 14 Lewis writes in *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge U. P., 1967), p. 107 that in *Maritima Capella's De Nuptiis*, Mercury "is the bridegroom of Philologia-- who is Learning or even Literature rather than what we call 'philology'."