

C.S. LEWIS AND THE THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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LEFT
Author and Cambridge
on C.S. Lewis”
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1958

Every other spring semester for the past seven years I have found myself in front of a class of 70 undergraduate students discussing questions like “What shall an Oyarsa do with a bent hnau?” Or, “how is John’s Island an ectype of the Landlord’s castle archetype?” Or, “what is the goal of the Lowerarchy when it comes to the patient’s experience of pleasure?” Or, “what does the Green Lady mean when she says she grows older more quickly than she can bear?”

There may be some C. S. Lewis fans who recognize these references to *Out of the Silent Planet*, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *Perelandra*. I teach a course entitled “Transfiguration in the Fiction of C. S. Lewis,” and it has proven popular with the undergrads. Half of the students enrolled are not theology majors, and cannot check off any requirements box by taking this course, but do so for pure intellectual pleasure. Josef Pieper notes that the word “scholar” comes from the Greek word *skole* which means “leisure” – much to the surprise of any students’ busy calendar. Aristotle said the servile arts are utilitarian for being concerned with an end beyond themselves, but the liberal arts are concerned with knowledge as an end in itself. So even though my syllabus puts students through the pace of a book a week (that is on Tuesdays; on Thursdays we read additional selections from Lewis’ nonfiction), I consider it a *leisurely* course. A liberal arts course. A scholarly course.

Persuading my students that this course is leisurely might actually be easier than persuading some academic colleagues that this course is scholarly. Scholarship is supposed to be erudite, complex, arcane, bookish, eggheaded, and Lewis is not this. At least not in the corpus I’m talking about here. (I did become interested at one point in Lewis’ day job at Oxford and read the books he had written that better fit our expectation of what an academic should produce: a detailed analysis of two dozen allegories of courtly love, a masterful summary of the medieval world view, and an etymological study of individual English words.)

I will not here bore the reader with too much personal detail, but the point I am making might come clearer if I use myself as an example. I read C. S. Lewis when I was in high school, but then in college I became a philosophy major and stopped, because I thought I should put away

childish things. I permitted myself Lewis' fiction for illustrative purposes, but serious philosophy occurred on a different plane. I did not give him a serious second look until doctoral study, under the influence of my mentor Paul Holmer. In class he would orally tell the story that he briefly summarizes in the preface of his book, *C. S. Lewis: the Shape of His Faith and Thought*.

This book is written partly to discharge a debt incurred during the early days of World War II. An angry and impetuous letter was sent to Mr. C. S. Lewis at Oxford. A lengthy response came; it was so full of charity and plain wisdom that it made at least this then frustrated and distraught student see very clearly how tangled his own life actually was. That was many years ago; and a lifetime of concern with logical issues, on the one side, and moral and religious-Christian concerns, on the other, have made Lewis's writings, of all kinds, both more interesting and more profound than they initially seemed to me. (*The Shape*, ix)

Some years after Holmer received this kind response he audited a seminar with Lewis at Oxford, and integrated some of those insights into his own work, which, in turn, rubbed off on me.

This essay is about how the theological imagination is captured by Lewis' use of imagination, fiction, and story, but I want to begin by establishing the purpose of theology. So if you will permit me to tarry a moment longer on this scaffolding I will soon turn to my main point. Holmer continues to be our guide.

Most people are familiar with the fact that C. S. Lewis spoke of a "mere Christianity." And the majority of these people believe that what Lewis meant by the phrase was some sort of stripped Christianity that is simple and not complex, heartfelt and not intellectual. They suppose it intends to ignore the hard doctrines, since these are unimportant to the average Christian, anyway; it exchanges a simple mood for a complex thought; it focuses only upon the most basic doctrines for the sake of ecumenical relations. None of this is what Holmer thinks Lewis meant by mere Christianity.

Holmer used to speak about two kinds of knowledge. One consists of statements that may simply be taken from the book – what 2+2 equals, the date of the Revolutionary war, how many atoms a certain molecule has, etc. This comes from a pile of facts that grows the larger as generation after generation tosses new discoveries upon it. We can see farther from our higher perch. So we believe ourselves smarter than Newton because we live later than him, and have more information. But are we smarter than Socrates for the fact that we live later than him?

That question is a hook to bring us into a second kind of knowledge. About it Holmer used to say in class, “You cannot peddle truth or happiness. What a thought cost in the first instance, it will cost in the second.” The thinker must make some attempt at the truth if this second kind of knowledge is to be had. Therefore, what is at stake is not simply the clarity of the thought, but the condition of the subject grasping it. And this was Holmer’s concern throughout his career: “What we know depends upon the kind of person we have made of ourselves. The world’s infinite riches, its values and worths, its pleasures and depths can be found only if we are qualified subjects” (*The Shape*, 90).

Now this is the home where Holmer locates Lewis’ concept of mere Christianity:

Lewis knew how tempting it was in Christian circles to move with the times. ... A certain kind of ‘theology’ was written, trying to translate, usually by both elimination and a reshuffling of the issues under new concepts, the major primary teachings. ... The picture is dismal, for it means that we are invariably imprisoned in these large philosophical or quasi-theological views before we can speak about specific Christian issues. There seems to be no primary language at all. All apprehension and knowing of Christian things is via the theology or the second-level discourse. (*The Shape*, 100)

Lewis would prefer us to concentrate on the freight, not the boxcar that is hauling it. “Christianity is, as Lewis saw it, early and late, just about the last subject in which to attempt originality” (*The Shape*, 101).

But this still does not quite get us to the point. We have to get from the subject thought about to the subject who is thinking. Holmer suggests that the mere Christianity of which Lewis speaks “requires not translation into a new and better conceptual system; it enjoins a refashioning of the individual” (*Ibid*). When Lewis speaks about mere Christianity he does not have in mind the watering down of the subject of knowledge to the lowest common denominator, he has in mind the conversion of the knowing subject to a newfound capacity. “It is too simple to say that this is only a matter of stressing the minimal teachings or the lowest common denominator. The form of one’s thought has to be different even to get at that ‘mere’ Christianity” (*The Shape*, 97). A kind of orthodoxy and ordering of our reflection is required, and when we achieve it then mere Christianity turns out to be “that kind of ordering and enlivening of our lives that means that daily existence becomes a joy ...” (*The Shape*, 115).

Lewis is interested in affecting the form of a person's thought. But how does one go about that? How can one school not only the intellect, but the whole person, the emotions and imagination, as well? We have already seen that Lewis will not pin his hopes upon one more shuffle of the intellectual notecards on the table; his goal is not one more new and up-to-date conceptualization (moving the freight to the latest boxcar). But then how? Holmer answers the question by borrowing a metaphor from another philosopher whom he spent his life studying, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein was a linguistic philosopher who reflected on how language met up with reality. In his early work, the *Tractatus*, he tried to show the limits of language, and wrote in the preface, "The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence." But the later Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*) saw that language is much richer – and a bit sloppier – than he originally thought when he tried to make it mimic mathematical precision. Holmer joins others in thinking that Wittgenstein was distinguishing between what can be said, and what cannot be said *but only shown*. The whole point is that the inexpressible, that which is really important, cannot be said by natural sciences, it can only be shown by music, art, literature, religion, etc.

Some things cannot be said, they can only be shown. Holmer can borrow this insight to say about Lewis,

In brief, then, Lewis's literature shows us something without quite arguing it. ... Lewis would have it that literature actually creates thoughts in us; it is not only about thoughts, it causes them to exist. It is as if literature is not a description of emotions; rather, it so describes states of affairs that the ordinate emotions are invested in us. Literature is not about existence so much as it is an addition to it. It gives us experiences, feelings, moral pangs, wishes, hopes that we have never had ... [Literature] communicates in such a way that, when successful, it creates new capabilities and capacities, powers and a kind of roominess in the human personality. One becomes susceptible to new competencies, new functions, new pathos and possibilities. (*The Shape*, 20)

Combine all this when we arrive at the threshold of the Chronicles of Narnia: Lewis is *showing* truth to the reader. He is not describing it, circling it, propositionalizing it, categorizing it, filing it, footnoting it, or recounting it. He is showing it. He is showing a truth to us in order to create new capacities in us. He does not describe emotions in his fiction; he tries to create a sentiment in the reader. This is what

he, Tolkien, and the other Inklings hatched together in their meetings at the Eagle and Child pub (the “Bird and Baby,” as they called it). Where, they asked, was the mythology today that would create sentiments of heroism and virtue? If it was not forthcoming, they would have to write it themselves.

In his book *Abolition of Man*, Lewis speaks of the fact that our schools have neglected to train such sentiment. “St Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it. Aristotle says that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought” (*Abolition*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics*, 700). The capacitation of a student to feel these sentiments is the purpose of a good education because “The head rules the belly through the chest – the seat, as Alanus tells us, of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habit into stable sentiments” (Ibid, 704). However, we have become a generation of what he calls “Men Without Chests”, and he thinks it an outrage that they be spoken of as intellectuals. In fact, “their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so” (Ibid, 704).

Perhaps the clearest account Lewis gave of his intentions was given, fittingly enough, not to the Academy but to a group of fifth graders who wrote him in 1954. Lewis always answered with a handwritten note any letter he received, whether it be from an angry philosopher or from a fifth-grader. The following passage is contained in a collection entitled *Letters to Children*, and he always truthfully answered every question.

I am so glad you liked the Narnian books and it was very kind of you to write and tell me. . . . You are mistaken when you think that everything in the books “represent” something in this world. Things do that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* but I’m not writing in that way. I did not say to myself “let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia”: I said “Let us *suppose* that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion that there, and then imagine what would happen.” If you think about it, you will see that it is a quite different thing. . . .

I’m tall, fat, rather bald, red-faced, double-chinned, black-haired, have a deep voice, and wear glasses for reading. . . . Best love to you all. When you say your prayers sometimes ask God to bless me.

Yours ever,
C. S. Lewis

He further makes it clear that he does not write fairy tale merely as illustration in an essay he entitled “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said.”

Some people seem to think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument; then collected information about child-psychology and decided what age group I’d write for; then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out ‘allegories’ to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. (Essay in the collection entitled *Of Other Worlds*, 36)

In his own account of his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*, he says it was the atmosphere of a certain faerie romance by George MacDonald, *Phantastes*, that got under his skin.

I did not yet know (and I was long in learning) the name of the new quality, the bright shadow, that rested on the travels of Anodos. I do now. It was Holiness. . . . That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*. (*Surprised by Joy*, 179)

The whole atmosphere of the piece worked on him, and Lewis wants to create whole atmospheres to work on us. “Baptizing imaginations” seems a pretty good way to describe it. And he does recognize the value this could serve.

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or about the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. (*Of Other Worlds*, 27)

Making things appear in their real potency for the first time is something I hope for my students’ experience. Chesterton said “The success of any work of art is achieved when we say of any subject, a tree or a cloud or a human character, ‘I have seen that a thousand times and I never saw it before.’” In his stories we see the doctrines of creation, sin, salvation history, the incarnation, the sacrificial crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension, Christ leading his Church, the demand of the virtuous life, the sinister qualities of temptation, the malicious intents of Satan, the necessary ascetical discipline, the creation of a new habitus within, and a hundred more, and are driven to say “I never saw it before.”

So my class conducts its lessons in doctrine in a strange language, one hardly intelligible to a visitor who was not up to speed.

- “How can you say the Island is all bad when longing for the Island has brought me this far?”
- (Screwtape) “We must face the fact that all the talk about the Enemy’s love for men... is not mere propaganda but an appalling truth. He really does want to feel the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself.”
- Heaven will hurt the ghosts from the grey town until they become solider. “It will hurt at first, until your feet are hardened.”
- The eldila council was astonished at what they’ve heard of human history. “It is because every one of them wants to be a little Oyarsa himself.”
- This was enchanted Turkish Delight and “anyone who had once tasted it would want more and more of it, and would even, if they were allowed, go on eating it till they killed themselves.”

Lewis thought that everything in creation had a sacramental scent, even though we have been told for three-hundred years that this material world is all there is. He would awaken this sense of the eternal, if we would allow. His images and characters and narratives create in us a sentiment of longing, because all things in this world point beyond themselves.

They are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited. Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years. Almost our whole education has been directed to silencing this shy, persistent, inner voice; almost all our modern philosophies have been devised to convince us that the good of man is to be found on this earth. (“The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, 6-7)

This mere Christianity is designed to break our enchantment.

