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Old Poet Remembered: The Case for the Poetry of C.S. Lewis

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The First

FRANCES WHITE EW BANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1997

Upland, Indiana

Old Poet Remembered: The Case for the Poetry of C.S. Lewis

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Old Poet Remembered:
A Case for the Poetry of C. S. Lewis
by David W. Landrum

Years ago when I was an undergraduate, I heard a lecture on C. S. Lewis by a scholar who had done a dissertation on him. At the beginning of his talk he said, "The first thing I read by Lewis was his poetry, and I did not like it at all." He later discovered the science fiction trilogy and the Narnia books and went on to become a Lewis scholar, but apparently the poetry still did not rate very highly with him. More recently, several members of a Lewis discussion group in which I participate all came to the same conclusion: C. S. Lewis' poetry is not very good, they said. Over and over I have heard this estimation of his poetical endeavors. All of this is puzzling and dismaying because through the years I have found the poetry—and here I refer to the *Collected Poems* and not so much to *Dymer* or *Spirits in Bondage*—is some of the best literature Lewis has written. I have found it academically challenging, brilliantly articulated, and personally edifying. Yet few share a similar opinion. In this short essay, I would like to speculate a bit on this state of affairs and perhaps offer some encouragement for those who enjoy Lewis to take a look at his

poetry, and perhaps to see it through new eyes.

Lewis published poetry throughout his life. Some of the works in *Collected Poems* were contained in *Pilgrim's Regress* and other largely prose works; some were found written in books or on scraps of paper amid Lewis' personal artifacts; but many were published in some of the leading literary magazines of the day. If the poetry he wrote was of low quality, apparently some editors were not that discerning. Walter Hooper lists *The Cambridge Magazine*, *The Oxford Magazine*, *Punch*, *Time and Tide*, *Nine: A Magazine of Poetry and Criticism*, *Mandrake*, *New English Weekly*, *The Cherwell*, as some of the publications in which Lewis' poems appeared.¹ It has been my experience with editors of poetry magazines that they include only the best. They are inundated with verse of an amateur, pedestrian nature by novice poets or poets with no talent. They unendingly take the wheat and not the chaff due to the fact that their periodical's reputation for excellence is always on the line. That editors accepted Lewis' poetry, that some of the best magazines

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of the day included it in their pages, is evidence of its very high quality. So when many today say that Lewis' poetry is not very good poetry I tend to believe what they really mean is that it does not seem to speak to them, is not enjoyable, strikes few responsive notes in their experience, and does not generally do for them the things that we expect poetry to do.

Several reasons bring this reaction about. A requirement for publication in such high-quality journals as *The Oxford Magazine* or *Time and Tide* would be a high degree of cultural literacy. This is certainly found in Lewis' poetry, and is perhaps one of the things that makes it inaccessible to many today. A poem like "Pindar Sang" assumes we know something about Greek poetry, Pindaric Odes, Greek mythology, the history of the Mediterranean peoples, the philosophies and morality of the ancient Dorian culture; or witness the opening lines to "The Prodigality of Firdausi":

Firdausi the strong Lion among poets,
lean of purse
And lean with age, had finished his
August mountain of verse,
The great *Shah Nameh* gleaming-
glaciated with demon wars,
Bastioned with Rustem's bitter labours
and Isfendiyar's,
Shadowed with Jamshid's grief and
glory as with eagle's wings,
Its foot-hills dewy-forested with the
amours of kings . . . (21)

Many today would not know who Firdausi was or what was the *Shah Nameh*. The other exotic names in the lines would be lost as well. Examples like this could be multiplied, from references about the poems of T. S. Eliot

and Stephane Mallarmé in "A Confession" to the allusions to Pascal, Herodotus and Sennacherib in "Sonnet." Educational emphases have changed so that classical studies are often not a part of one's education. We tend to be less widely read today than was the literary audience of Lewis' time. Often his numerous references to myth, literature, criticism, history, confuse us and leave us wondering at his plethora of allusions.

The poetry is also highly intellectual. I once debated a very well-educated pastor friend of mine on the merits of Lewis' poetry. He disliked it, he said, and much preferred the poetry contained in Tolkien's writings. I was greatly puzzled by this, since the poems embedded in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* hardly resemble poetry at all to me but seem like cute little ditties that might be sung to the accompaniment of a banjo or penny whistle. It was just this quality, however, that he valued in it: it was lyrical and had "music," as he put it. I have heard many through the years complain that Lewis' poetry lacks music, is not lyrically appealing, and somehow seems devoid of the charm and fun found in other forms of poetry.

Finally, Lewis' poetry, like his literary criticism, is intellectually formidable. It requires a high degree of concentration to read and calls for a muster of each person's verbal, linguistic, historical, and cultural expertise. Usually, it cannot be read quickly and lightly. I would say offhand that this is a quality of most good poetry, but at the same time many today find such writing too difficult to be worth their time—and with Lewisians, this is especially true because so much genuinely enjoyable, accessible, readable material by C. S. Lewis is so readily available. One does not usually pick up *The Allegory of Love* for

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leisure reading or *The Discarded Image* as something to read to the children at night. To a degree, the same is true of the poetry. The effort required to read it discerningly is considerable.

All of the above are perhaps barriers to the enjoyment of Lewis' poetry, but all can certainly be gotten around, and I do not think such a process would require any sort of specialized training. The poetry found in *Collected Poems*, and even in *Spirits in Bondage* and *Dymer*, can bring the same sorts of emotional and intellectual rewards found in other of Lewis' writing. The literary and cultural barriers the poems seem to present are by no means insurmountable.

First of all, not every poem in Lewis' poetic *oeuvre* is obscure or difficult. Not all contain references that require a knowledge of history and literature. Some in fact do have the qualities of lyricism that we so value today. "Love's As Warm As Tears" is a good example of a Lewis poem that is simple, charming, yet profound:

Love's as warm as tears,
Love is tears:
Pressure within the brain,
Tension in the throat,
Deluge, weeks of rain,
Haystacks afloat,
Featureless seas between
Hedges, where once was green. (123)

The meaning of the lines should be apparent to anyone who has cried. The metaphors, however, take the concrete language of what happens when we cry, pressure and tension in the throat, to how we often feel in times of great sorrow or emotion: a flood something like the deluge of Noah's

days. The poem goes on to develop other similes: love is as fierce as fire, love is as fresh as Spring, love is as hard as nails, each idea developed with a similar imaginative touch, each connecting the particular dynamic of tears with more universal truths and with the operations of the Creator.

The same accessibility is apparent in "Late Summer":

I, dusty and bedraggled as I am,
Pestered with wasps and weeds and
making jam,
Blowsy and stale, my welcome long
outstayed,
Proved false in every promise that I
made,
At my beginning I believed, like you,
Something would come of all my green
and blue.
Mortals remember, looking on the
thing
I am, that I, even I, was once a spring.
(104)

Those with a basic competency in reading poetry (most who would read a volume of poems) will readily appreciate the personification of summer and the allegorical extension of late summer's nature to human experience. Many such poems—poems that require no specialized knowledge beyond the knowledge of how to read a poem—are to be found in Lewis' poetry. "Narnian Suite," "The Future of Forestry," "On Being Human," and many others in the volume of *Collected Poems* are like this. It is perhaps a pity that most of the poems beginning the volume are a bit literary. "A Confession," "A Cliche Came Out Of Its Cage," "Pindar Sang," are all near the beginning, all require some specialized academic knowledge to fully understand, and possibly turn some readers away due to this

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fact. But there are many poems that are accessible to anyone who reads and enjoys poetry.

What about those poems that require a knowledge of history or literature to fully understand? When I first read "The Prodigality of Firdausi," quoted earlier, I did not have the background to identify his references. I did not know who Firdausi was, what the *Shah Nameh* was, who were Jamshid and Isfendiyar. Yet the first stanza makes it obvious that Firdausi was a poet, that the *Shah Nameh* was the poem he wrote, that the names mentioned are characters in that poem. One discerns that the poem must have been epic in nature since it deals with war and the "amours of kings." One gets a sense that it was not only massive but dignified and stately since it is called an "August" mountain of verse, and is referred to as "the great" *Shah Nameh*. Subsequent trips to an encyclopedia of world literature confirmed all of this, but in fact I don't think any research would have been necessary to have enjoyed the poem (though it did enhance my appreciation of it). The poem explains enough that one could enjoy it without being an expert on Persian or Islamic literature. So it is with most of Lewis' historical or literary poetry.

Even a complex poem like "Pindar Sang" has a great deal to offer. Even if one did not know the historical backgrounds or the many references to myth contained in the poem, lines like the following could still speak to a reader:

Take the god's favour when it comes.
Now from one quarter, now
From another, the wing'd weathers
ride above us. Not for long,
If it grows heavy with goodness, will
fortune remain good. (16)

One could also easily discern that Pindar was a poet, that in this particular poem he is reciting before an audience and has a chorus of young men dancing as he recites the poem. A handy copy of Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* would easily identify the many mythological stories and characters the poem mentions. An encyclopedia would supply background on who Pindar was and perhaps upon his cultural milieu. Reading the poem can be educational. The same is true of many other Lewis poems.

The poetry can also be enlightening to those who are very familiar with the fiction and prose works of C. S. Lewis for the simple reason that the poems he wrote often exemplify, condense, essentialize his basic ideas. If one is familiar with the space trilogy, a poem like "The Planets" will cover familiar territory and can be something of a gloss, an explanatory text, that will enhance a reading of the science fiction trilogy. If one remembers the emphasis on language contained in the science fiction, especially in *That Hideous Strength*, "The Birth of Language" will clarify what may be a bit obscure in the novel. "A Confession" sheds light on the talk of "stock responses" in *The Abolition of Man*. The list could be expanded greatly.

The manner in which Lewis' philosophical notions are often plain and apparent in the poetry may be illustrated in detail by taking a close look "The Salamander":

I stared into the fire; blue waves
Of shuddering heat that rose and fell,
And blazing ships and blinding caves,
Canyons and streets and hills of hell;
Then presently amidst it all
I saw a living creature crawl.

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Forward it crept and pushed its snout
Between the bars, and with sad eyes
Into my quiet room looked out,
As men looked out upon the skies;
And from its scalding throat there
came a faint voice hissing like a flame:
'This is the end, the stratosphere,
The rime of the world where all life
dies,
The vertigo of space, the fear
Of nothingness; before me lies
Blank silence, distances untold
Of unimaginable cold.

'Faint lights that fitfully appear
Far off in that immense abyss
Are but reflections cast from here,
There is no other fire but this,
This speck of life, this fading spark
Nestled amid the boundless dark.

'Blind Nature's measureless rebuke
To all we value, I received
Long since (though wishes bait the
hook
With tales our ancestors believed)
And now can face with fearless eye
Negation's final sovereignty.' (72-73)

The salamander lives in the fire. Its environment and, apparently, its own condition, are hellish. Yet when it looks out of its infernal world into the cozy, comfortable lodgings ("quiet room") of the narrator, this creature sees desolation, emptiness and vacancy. It believes its own realm of fire and heat is heaven, and the world outside is "the abyss" beyond which is nothing and of which it is foolish to believe anything supernal.

The poem embodies more than one of Lewis' cosmological and metaphysical

viewpoints. The idea that space is an empty, barren expanse of nothingness is a thoroughly modern view, and a view that Lewis disputed. He took the older view that earth was the dregs of the universe and that beyond its limits was the joyous cosmos, playground of benign spirits, zone of celestial influence. Ransom experiences this in *Out of the Silent Planet* when he embarks in Weston's space ship. He experiences a new vigor and strength. He is guardedly told by Weston that this is the effect of certain "rays" that do not normally reach earth but were penetrating the space ship. Ransom, however, eventually realizes that it is the ebb and flow of a non-fallen environment that causes him to feel so healthy and vital. He reflects in the following manner on what he has discovered:

[A] nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of "Space": at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affect him till now--now that the very name "Space" seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam.²

The attitude of modern human beings, like that of the salamander in the poem, is that their own world is wonderful and ideal, when in fact it is rather hellish; that beyond their world is a vast stretch of vacancy and deadness; and that anyone who would see it otherwise is romantic and fondly deluded. What is discussed in the novel is also a theme in the poem, "The Salamander," but in the poem it is expressed

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more succinctly and in language that is more compressed and dramatic.

Further, the idea of what hell is, of what constitutes the conditions of damnation, is contained in "The Salamander." Lewis' idea of hell, advanced in works like *The Great Divorce* and *The Problem of Pain*, was that it was metaphysical, not ethical; that is, one went there because of the condition of the spirit, not for transgression of specific commands and dictums. A person goes to hell because his or her state of being has become turned away from God, hardened to him, out of touch with the things of heaven. Hence, the people in hell, while they may not exactly like where they are, at least know they belong there and end up opting to stay there. Heaven is too terrifying a place for those who have made themselves fit for hell. Their condition, in fact, becomes rather like the mythical creature in "The Salamander." A quiet, cozy room looks to the salamander like a cold barren place because it is so accustomed to its own hellish environment of flame and fire. Like damned souls, the salamander is content to live where it lives and to ridicule anyone who might say there is a desirable and comfortable world outside the limits of the furnace where he dwells. Like the modern skeptic, or the inhabitant of the infernal city, the salamander has created a reality that excludes everything outside its limits, making it blind to the more voluble, pleasant world lying just beyond its own infernal neighborhood.

One more example of this (though many could be illustrated) is the idea of the incarnation in the poem "The Turn of the Tide." This long Christmas poem begins at Bethlehem with a deadness and a stillness sweeping out from there and covering the entire earth. For a moment, everything on

earth stops; not only this, but the deadness goes out through the entire solar system and the universe. For a moment it is as if all has died; the angels wonder if it is the end. What has happened is that Christ has left heaven to be born; his temporary abdication of his task of "holding all things together" has just for a moment been relinquished, and the universe goes dead.

But not for long. Soon "the shock / Of returning life" corrects this; but there is something unique and different in what returns to once again enliven creation:

Then pulsing into space with delicate,
 dulcet pace
Came a music, infinitely small
And clear. But it swelled and drew
nearer and held
All worlds in the sharpness of its call ...
Such a note as neither Throne nor
Potentate had known
Since the Word first founded the abyss,
But this time it was changed in a mystery,
estranged,
A paradox, an ambiguous bliss. (50)

According to Job, all the Sons of the Morning (stars? angels?) sang for joy when the earth was created. This song is somewhat like that, but different: it is mysterious, estranged, a paradox, an "ambiguous bliss." The change is due to the incarnation, the fact that the Word has become flesh, a human being.

In Lewis' imaginative world, the incarnation was a profound event that affected not just the earth but the universe. It altered the manner in which we are able to perceive God. A short discussion in *That Hideous Strength* parallels the ideas set forth in the

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above portion of the poem. In speaking of the Oyeresu, Ivy Maggs makes the following comment:

“Do you know . . . that’s a thing I don’t quite understand. They’re so eerie, these ones that come to visit you. I wouldn’t go near that part of the house if I thought there was anything there, not if you paid me a hundred pounds. But I don’t feel like that about God. But He ought to be worse, if you see what I mean.”

Ransom’s reply is instructive:

“He once was . . . You are quite right about the Powers. Angels in general are not good company for men in general, even when they are good angels and good men. It’s all in St. Paul. But as for Maleldil Himself, all that has changed: it was changed by what happened at Bethlehem.”³

The image of God that made Jacob call him “the Fear of his Father Isaac” (Genesis 31:53), the terror and apprehension of the Divine, has been modified, changed, made into something sweet and ambiguous by the incarnation. The image of the incarnation presented in “The Turn of the Tide” thus enhances one’s appreciation for the intergalactic implications the incarnation presents in the space trilogy. In the very moving ending of the poem, after life has returned and the creatures of earth and beings throughout the universe are dancing in celebration:

So death lay in arrest. But at
 Bethlehem the bless’d
Nothing greater could be heard
Than a dry wind in the thorn, the cry of
 the One new-born,
And cattle in the stall as they stirred.(51)

Not all the poems are as easy as the ones listed in this article. Admittedly, some require a *very* great knowledge of literature and culture to comprehend. “The Ballade of Dead Gentlemen” (42) is one still beyond me. I know it is a parody of a poem called “The Ballade of Dead Ladies” by the French poet Francios Villon about the famous *femmes fatales* of history. Lewis writes about famous cuckolds and henpecked husbands in his poem. Still, I cannot identify “Monsieur Cliquot, Mr. Tanqueray, Mr. Beeton,” and many of the other men he lists (I do know who Zebedee, Mr. Grundy and the *King* of Sheba are); the repeated line in French that forms the refrain, “*Mais ou sont messieurs les maris?*” has been translated “But where are those men, those husbands?” by some of my students and colleagues. Still, there is so much obscure reference present that I probably cannot completely appreciate the poem fully. There will be works in the *Collected Poems* that defy our knowledge. All the same, so many other poems can be found that are enjoyable and understandable that I am willing to skip this one or put it off for another day. And I hope someday to research the poem and discover who all these very interesting husbands were.

The poetry of C. S. Lewis is rich and varied and can provide a wealth of knowledge and can greatly enhance our understanding of his other works. Lewis’ original ambition was to be a poet, and though he succeeded much more as a writer of prose, his love of poetry is quite evident throughout his work. He wrote many poems, interestingly, about poets, such as “The Prodigality of Firdausi,” “Pindar Sang,” “To Andrew Marvell,” and some poems about poetry like “A Confession” and “Old Poets Remembered.” This is an area of

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C. S. Lewis' writing that has been largely neglected, both by readers and critics. The time has come for this state to be corrected and for Lewis to be appreciated as a poet.

Notes

¹C.S. Lewis, *Collected Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt/Brace, 1964, pp. 139-42. All subsequent references will be included in the text of the article.

²C.S. Lewis *Out of the Silent Planet*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.

³C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*. New York: Macmillan, 1946, p. 262.