[Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever)

Volume 2 *A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis & Friends* — Article 3

11-1999

Confrontation and Retreat: The Rhetoric of Persona in the Writings of C.S. Lewis

David Landry
Cornerstone College

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, History Commons, Philosophy Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

Landry, David (1999) "Confrontation and Retreat: The Rhetoric of Persona in the Writings of C.S. Lewis," *Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016*: Vol. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol2/iss1/3

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inklings Forever: Published Colloquium Proceedings 1997-2016 by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume II

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 1999

Upland, Indiana

Confrontation and Retreat: The Rhetoric of Persona in the Writings of C.S. Lewis

David Landry

Landry, David. "Confrontation and Retreat: The Rhetoric of Persona in the Writings of C.S. Lewis." Inklings Forever 2 (1999) www.taylor.edu/cslewis

Confrontation and Retreat: the Rhetoric of Persona in the Writings of C.S. Lewis

by David Landry

C. S Lewis wrote in a variety of genres—fiction, children's literature, poetry, essay, theological discourse, criticism—but in the midst of this diversity of production, certain rhetorical habits can be observed that provide a unity amid these very different fields of literary endeavor. One trend in particular, found throughout Lewis' prose work, in his fiction and apologetics, even to a degree in his literary criticism, is the tendency to alternate between a combative, critical voice that confronts a given theory, attitude, or practice, and a voice that seeks refuge in imaginative expression. This dualistic modulation of voice shapes much of what Lewis wrote and is characteristic of the man who was called "Oxford's Bonny fighter"[1] but who also sought, throughout his life, the rather phantasmic entity he called "joy."

Due to time constraints, this paper will examine how the rhetorical habit of confrontation and retreat is manifested in Lewis's poetry. Though perhaps the least studied of Lewis's literary endeavors, his poetry is of particular significance to those who wish to understand him because poetry was the medium of expression Lewis most favored and most desired to utilize as a means of expressing his thought, and because the poems he wrote are often the ground in which his rhetorical stances are most observable.

Biographer A. N. Wilson once noted that one of Lewis's frequent practices as an apologist was to abandon "the depth and range of his historical imagination in favour of a style reminiscent of the Belfast police court," alternating between articulate and eloquent argument and bullying.[2] Though Wilson is not well thought of among many Lewis scholars (and with good reason), I believe that at least here his point is well taken. The tendency Wilson mentions is frequently found, for example, in the collected *Poems*. Two broad groups of poems are resident within that work. One group consists of poems that are confrontational. They have a judgmental, combative tone which ranges from sharp wit to pure sarcasm and insult. Another group is not

[1]See Walter Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," in *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como. New York: Macmillan, 1979, 137-85.

[2]Wilson, A. N., *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Norton, 1990, 164.

combative or critical but revels in the beautiful felicities of the imaginative realm, of fairy worlds, outer space, the good, the beautiful, and the religious. *Poems* alternates between these two extremes. This is not to say that only these varieties of verse are found in the collection, but one of the two varieties, combative and imaginative, are to be frequently found throughout the collection.

Opening the volume of collected poetry and reading through, one is struck with a series of combative poems near the beginning. Lewis, of course, did not designate the arrangement of the poems; they were edited by Walter Hooper, but the vociferous manner in which Lewis engaged ideas, movements, literary trends he thought inimical to humanness is firmly illustrated early in the volume. It begins with "A Confession," a poem in which Lewis laments his position as a more traditional poet in the world of symbolism and modernism expressed by such poets as Eliot and Mallermé:

> I am so coarse, the things that poets
> see
> Are obstinately invisible to me.
> For twenty years I've stared my level
> best
> To see if evening—any evening—
> would suggest
> A patient etherized upon a table;
> In vain. I simply wasn't able.[3]

After this criticism of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he goes on to question other images from modern verse, putting forth his inability to "see" these things—to recognize them as legitimate representations of reality. His persona is the focus of the poem, and his puzzlement at descriptions of dawn as resembling "a chilblain on a cocktail-shaker's nose" or the moon as "a hump-backed crone," lends the poem a humorous tone that offsets its otherwise vituperative voice. The persona is the bewildered innocent wandering through the strange landscapes of modern poetic image.

There is another side, however, to the persona's critique. He also sets forth what he considers to be a proper set of representations. Unlike the bizarre, unusual descriptions he finds in modern poetry, there are more legitimate ones, and throughout "A Confession," the speaker will contrast these to the verbal pictures he does not like and does not deem proper. In comparison to the evening as an etherized patient, he states

> To me each evening looked far more
> Like the departure from a silent, yet
> a crowded, shore
> Of a ship whose freight was
> everything, leaving behind
> Gracefully, finally, without farewells,
> marooned mankind.[4]

In the other stanzas of the poem, he enumerates what he believes to be valid representations and metaphor. The catalogue he gives at the end of the poem, is of beautiful and exquisite items that were the standard traffic of poets in previous eras: ". . . peacocks, honey, the Great Wall, Aldebaran, / Silver weirs, new-cut grass, wave on the beach, hard gem, / The shapes of horse and woman, Athens, Troy, Jerusalem." These

---

[3]C.S. Lewis, *Poems*, ed. Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt, 1964, 1.

[4]*Poems*, 1.

items are part of what he calls "stock responses" (now considered "dull things" in modernism, he asserts). They constitute what the main character of the poem and certainly what Lewis believed essential to the creation of beautiful and acceptable literary products. The basic rhetorical structure of the poem involves an alteration between the modernist images the persona detests and the stock images he reveres.

The voice of the poem is confrontational. It criticizes and challenges trends in contemporary literature. Images of patients etherized upon tables or waterfalls compared to torn underclothes come in for the persona's censure, and the "stock" responses by which he refers to the traditions of the past receive his approval. At one level the poem is reactionary. At another level, however, it reveals some of the deep-seated antipathy and genuine fear Lewis felt at the direction he thought modern Western society was taking.

Throughout Lewis's poetry, the reader will encounter this sort of vociferous rhetoric directed at things he despised. "A Confession" is mollified by the humorous device of a self-depreciating, curmudgeonly narrator, but in other poems the attack is frontal and rather vicious. In "A Cliché Came Out Of Its Cage," the narrator calls his auditor an "inordinate liar" and ends by saying, "You have Vichy Water in your veins." "On A Vulgar Error" begins, "No. It's an impudent falsehood. Men did not / Invariably think the newer way / Prosaic, mad, inelegant, or what not," and lambastes "our guides," which seems to mean modern critics and historians; "Pan's Purge," starts off "I dreamt that all the planning of peremptory humanity / Had crushed Nature finally beneath the foot of Man"; "The *Saboteuse*," "Evolutionary Hymn," "Prelude to Space," "Science-Fiction Cradlesong," "The Future of Forestry," "The Condemned," "The Genuine Article," and many other poems, contain this combative censure in varying degrees. At its most vicious it is seen in lines such as these, from *"Odora Canum Vis: A defence of certain modern biographers and critics"*:

> Come now, don't be too eager to condemn
> Our little smut-hounds if they wag their tails
> (Or shake like jellies as the tails wag them)
> The moment the least whiff of sex assails
> Their quivering snouts. Such conduct after all,
> Though comic, is in them quite natural.[5]

Modern critics, presumably Freudian or phenomenological, are later characterized as those who know "Neither God, hunger, thought, nor battle," and the sarcastic ending of the poem notes, "The dead are all before you, take your pick. / Fetch! Paid for! Slaver, snuff, defile and lick."[6] The critical procedures of a biography or historical study that would dwell on the sexuality of the subject classifies such a biographer or critic, in Lewis's thinking, as one who has stepped outside the realm of acceptable human action and has embraced attitudes or notions that are not in keeping with the moral order the universe manifests. Such a person becomes a smelly little dog. The narrator's reaction is to insult

---

[5] *Poems*, 59.

[6] *Poems*, 59.

and vilify these modern critics, just as he insulted the auditor in "A Cliché Came Out Of Its Cage."

Lewis was essentially conservative, in the older sense of the word: he wished to preserve those things from the past that he considered valuable, even vital, to the quality of life and the proper ordering of society. His aversion to ideas he believed inimical to all that is good was intense. This habit contrasts, however, with a retreat to areas of personal space where existed images of the things Lewis valued and thought imparted to the human soul grace, loveliness, and dignity.

In the poetry this reparation to the imaginative past is most clearly seen. "A Confession" reveals the artifacts to which Lewis was attracted and of which he thought the stuff of poetry should be constructed. The poems he wrote that are *not* confrontational, that are descriptive or reflective, find their material in several areas. Poems about religion, science-fiction and fantasy, and about the beautiful and delicate, form the haven in which his writing need not be combative, only celebratory. *"Le Roi S'Amuse,"* a poem about the creation of the universe, draws upon traditional ideas of creation and to colorful, romantic images much like those contained in the last lines of "A Confession":

> Jove gazed
> On woven mazes
> Of patterned movement as the atoms
> whirled.
> His glanced turned
> Into dancing, burn
> Colour-gods who rushed upon that
> sullen world,
> Waking, re-making, exalting it
> anew—
> Silver and purple, shrill-voice yellow,
> turgid crimson, and virgin blue.
>
> Jove stared
> On overbearing
> And aching splendour of the naked
> rocks.
> Where his gaze smote,
> Hazily floated
> To mount the thistledown in
> countless flocks,
> Fruit-loving, root-loving gods, cool
> and green.
> Of feathery grasses, heather and
> orchard, pollen'd lily, the olive and
> the bean.[7]

The poem continues in this manner for four more stanzas as Jove creates animals, mythical creatures, Aphrodite and Athene, the Behemoth, all creation "the throng that was his and no longer he."[8] Such poems are found in abundance in *Poems*. They are imaginative exercises relying on beautiful images, designed to create the "stock responses" Lewis thought were so vital to the proper moral training of the human soul.

The same impulse is seen in some of the poems dealing with religion. "The Turn of the Tide," a poem about the incarnation, is replete with lines such as "And now divinely deep, and louder, with the sweep / And quiver of inebriating sound, / The vibrant dithyramb . . ." and "A paradox, an ambiguous bliss. / Heaven danced to it and burned."[9] "Late Summer," "Adam at Night," "The Birth of Language,"

---

[7]*Poems*, 23.

[8]*Poems*, 24.

[9]*Poems, 50, 51.*

"The Planets," "The Nativity" and many others do not argue, confront, or attack, but celebrate, laud, praise, contemplate.

Theological poems can be confrontational, and in many of Lewis's poems on religious subjects, the rhetorical habit we have noted earlier manifests itself as well, usually in the form of absolutist, either/or statements. The poem "Wormwood," originally in the text of *Pilgrim's Regress*, illustrates Lewis's theological stance in plainest terms:

> Thou only art alternative to God, oh, dark
> And burning island among spirits, tenth hierarch,
> Wormwood, immortal Satan, Ahriman, alone
> Second to Him to whom no second else were known . . .

The narrator of this poem goes on to expostulate how only Satan is worth following if one does not follow God:

> Therefore, except the temperance of the eternal love
> Only thy absolute lust is worth the thinking of.
> All else is weak, disguising of the wishful heart,
> All that seemed earth is Hell, or Heaven. God is: thou art:
> The rest, illusion . . . .[10]

The language of the poem is dark and disturbing, and in the last line the narrator asks, "Lord, open not too often my weak eyes to this." The either/or truth presented here, the choice of God or Satan, is a very chilling one, and not a pleasant thing to contemplate. However, is the choice as stark and absolute as is expressed here? Can everything be categorized as belonging to the light or the bitterness of "Wormwood"? Such a viewpoint would tend to lead to the manacheanism so characteristic of much of Protestantism fundamentalism or the totalizing theology apparent in some phases of Roman Catholicism, and away from the more accommodating path of classical Anglicanism, a tradition to which Lewis was very firmly committed. Elsewhere in his theological writings, such absolutist modes of thought are not present. In *The Great Divorce*, for example, the finality of one's damnation is not made absolute until the very end. Those who loved even such elementary things as light, art, friendship, still have a vague chance of getting to the bright lands of heaven. Theologians like Hooker, Andrewes, and Laud objected strenuously to the tendency of Puritans and of Roman Catholics to be absolute in their theological pronouncements, and Lewis seems to be firmly in their camp.[11]

At other times, however, as illustrated above, Lewis tended toward the absolutism his own theological allegiance seems to disapprove. This paradox is perhaps answered in the observations on his habits of thought outlined already. The impulse to vilify, confront, condemn, oppose the other side then retreat to a safe and congenial personal space, was so strong that it would occasionally bleed over into theological considerations.

[10] *Poems*, 87.

[11] See Lewis's discussion of theologians in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (Excluding Drama)*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1944, 438-63. His sympathies clearly lie with the Anglicans.

This tendency toward confrontation then retreat was undoubtedly shaped by the experiences C.S. Lewis had early in life. As a child, he tended to dwell in an imaginative world of books and drawing due to his natural disposition as well as a physical handicap that made him clumsy at sports.[12] Lewis writes, "at the age of six, seven, and eight . . . I was living almost entirely in my imagination; or at least that the imaginative experience of those years now seems to me more important than anything else."[13] The world he and is brother created, *Boxen*, was a complete world with a history, travel manuals, maps, even a relief map. Like the Brontë children, Lewis and his brother found refuge and repose in this imaginary site that Lewis only refers to as "Animal-Land" in his biography. Added to this was the developing longing for "joy," "a painful longing, a nostalgia, a romantic memory of an episode or event that seemed charged by some unearthly flavor."[14] His vision of the "green hills" beyond the nursery windows was also intertwined with his quest for "joy."

It is a mistake to fall into psychological determinism when speculating on the origins of a writer's rhetoric or thought.[15] All the same, it seems obvious that these and later events shaped Lewis's habits of expression. A series of ugly, shattering experiences intruded into young C.S. Lewis's world of Irish landscapes, Boxen, reading and the longing for joy. His brother went away to school. Soon the death of his mother followed. Lewis recalls, "against all the subsequent paraphernalia of coffin, flowers, hearse, and funeral I reacted with horror."[16] This traumatizing event involved not only the loss of his mother but estrangement from his father. Soon after, he was sent away to boarding school, the atmosphere of which was a source of unspeakable oppression to Lewis.

Lewis mentions that his adverse reactions to such things often took the form of discourse. He notes that he "lectured" one of his aunts on the absurdity of wearing mourning clothes. He and his brother petitioned his father that they be sent to another school. Eventually this trend toward expressing dislike would emerge in the vituperative speech Lewis often directed at positions or individuals who represent any sort of threat to him; and the thing to which he would retreat for solace—the world of Animal-Land, Arthur legends, northern-ness, of the beautiful and noble—also takes form in the beautiful images of his poetry, fiction, and in the orderly structures of proper theology or of good literature.

Others have noted this tendency in the persona(e) C.S. Lewis created. Stephen Medcalf has commented upon "the extraordinary contrast in him [Lewis] of clear, aggressive intellect both with an immense receptiveness to literature and friendship and with an enormously active involuntary imagination: the imagination which gave him vivid dreams and those sharp, bright pictures that provided the starting points of his

---

[12] This was a slight deformity of the thumb. See *Surprised by Joy*, 12.

[13] *Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early World.* New York: Harcourt, 1955, 15.

[14] *C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table*, xxvii.

[15] For a prime example of such excess see David Holboure's *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe*. London: Associated University Presses, 1991.

[16] *Surprised by Joy*, 20.

stories."[17] The clear, aggressive intellect could be very aggressive. Walter Hooper reports that some of the debates he engaged in with atheists were "positively gladiatorial" and that "students turned out in vast numbers every Monday evening to watch Lewis's memorable knockdown-drag-out performance at the Socratic [debating society]."[18] This aspect constituted the part of Lewis that informed his confrontational side. His receptiveness to literature and his imagination carved out realms of intellectual repose for him.

The poem, "Stephen to Lazarus" perhaps best illustrates and sums up Lewis's rhetorical stance and his attitude toward controversy. Stephen questions Lazarus in this poem and notes

> But was I the first martyr, who
> Gave up no more than life, while
> you,
> Already free among the dead,
> Your rags stripped off, your fetters
> shed,
> Surrendered what all other men
> Irrevocably keep, and when
> Your battered ship at anchor lay
> Seemingly safe in the dark bay
> No ripple stirs, obediently
> Put out a second time to sea
> Well knowing that your death (in
> vain
> Died once) must all be died again?

Lazarus's final rest after death is interrupted and he must return to the world, to life's thousand natural shocks, and eventually to death again. He does, however, "obediently put out . . . to sea." So it was, I think, with Lewis, always willing to make perilous voyages and fight enemies on the dark waters of controversy, but always longing for the safe harbor, the bay where "no ripple stirs," where all controversies are finally laid to rest and the beauty of imagination has become a final reality.

---

[17] Stephen Medcalf, "Language and Self-Consciousness: The Making and Breaking of C.S. Lewis's Personae," in *Word and Story in C.S. Lewis,* ed. Peter J. Schakel and Charles A. Huttar. Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1991, 109-144.

[18] Hooper, "Oxford's Bonny Fighter," 145.