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A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
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Stealing Past Watchful Dragons: The Aesthetic as Apologetic in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis

Eric Maxfield

**Stealing Past Watchful Dragons: The Aesthetic as Apologetic
in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis**
by Eric Maxfield

C.S. Lewis made significant contributions to the field of apologetics, his “lunatic—liar—lord” trilemma perhaps being his best known argument. As a practicing apologist, he had significant influence through his writing and broadcasting and he continues to be quoted innumerable times both for what he says and how well he says it. The “how well he says it” will be the main point of this essay. Lewis’s genius as an apologist stems not only from his brilliance and keen insight into the human condition but also from his talent as an artist. His aesthetic sensitivity and expression make his works enjoyable to read. To be sure, he makes his points clear and his wording flows well, but he does much more than that. Through images and story, he gains admission to the reader’s consideration and grants the reader entrance into a hint of joy itself.

Most apologetic writing is styled to address rational objections to belief head-on, assuming the audience’s primary need is to move through intellectual obstacles. Little concern is shown for aesthetics except as an accessory, a dressing up of a primarily rationalistic, cognitive means to an end. The aim is to clearly answer objections and to present a convincing case to the minds of an intended audience. While these techniques and assumptions are often appropriate, not all people are helped by a carefully reasoned, logically compelling presentation. For some, such an approach is repellant. The mere

mention of “Christian Apologetics” arouses feelings of resentment and defensiveness, if not despair, in many people who have felt they were victims of aggressive proselytism. Since this method fails to address underlying issues, wounds, and recollections of bad experiences, logical arguments from would-be evangelists, no matter how innocently or sincerely spoken, are no longer admitted for consideration.

C.S. Lewis engaged in various modes of apologetic work and was keenly aware of the value and limitations of rational argument. Moreover, Lewis did not shy away from challenging opposing views head-on and adjured other apologists to do likewise with persistence:

One of the great difficulties is to keep before the audience’s mind the question of Truth. . . . You have to keep forcing them back, and again back, to the real point. Only thus will you be able to undermine . . . [t]heir belief that a certain amount of “religion” is desirable but one mustn’t carry it too far. One must keep on pointing out that Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.¹

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While such an approach typifies much of his writing and speaking, it was not the only approach he took. He recognized potential for aesthetic appeals to serve as powerful apologetics, making their way past his readers' prejudices and awakening an almost intangible desire for God.

Aesthetic channels are widely, though variously, recognized as contributing to knowledge. Many would agree that art and contemplation of beauty have the potential to enrich and deepen one's understanding. Some argue that such aesthetic knowing is merely a different route, even sometimes a faster or more accessible one, to an end reachable by rational thought or other experience. Others hold that art, contemplation, imagination and ecstasy lead us to knowledge which cannot be deduced or inferred from other knowledge but which, however clumsily, can be expressed propositionally. Finally, a controversial minority view suggests that the aesthetic holds exclusive claim to the knowledge and expression of some truths.²

One contribution of aesthetics to knowing occurs as one is enabled not only to know facts about another's worldview but to enter into it and so to share in the quality of another's experience. C. Day Lewis states that a poem "does not merely embody a complex of experiences; it *is* an experience: and thus the kind of knowing it offers is different from the knowledge we should get from a number of case-histories illustrating the same sequence of mental events."³ C.S. Lewis agrees and describes the purpose and value of reading imaginative work:

In reading imaginative work, I suggest, we should be much less concerned with altering our own opinions—though this of course is

sometimes their effect—than with entering fully into the opinions, and therefore also the attitudes, feelings and total experience, of other men. Who in his ordinary senses would try to decide between the claims of materialism and theism by reading Lucretius and Dante? But who in his literary senses would not delightedly learn from them a great deal about what it is like to be a materialist or a theist?⁴

Along the same lines he writes,

The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of "commenting on life," can add to it.⁵

C.S. Lewis hungers for the unique enrichment literature brings. "My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented . . . [I]n reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself."⁶ Thus, in reading a work of literature, through the use of the imagination one experiences what Gadamer terms a "fusing of horizons," and thereby gains new insights and

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a qualitative appreciation of another's perceptions and worldview.

Lewis discusses receptivity as an important element in participating in this unique aesthetic power. He echoes Augustine's famous distinction between "use" and "enjoyment" of the beautiful:

A work of (whatever) art can be either 'received' or 'used'. When we 'receive' it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to a pattern invented by the artist. When we 'use' it we treat it as assistance for our own activities 'Using' is inferior to 'reception' because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.⁷

Concerning one's purposes in reading, he adds,

The failure [to maintain inner, receptive silence] is greatly aggravated if, while we read, we know that we are under some obligation to express a judgement; as when we read a book in order to review it, or a friend's MS. in order to advise him. Then the pencil gets to work on the margin and phrases of censure or approval begin forming themselves in our mind. All this activity impedes reception.⁸

Meaningful evaluation, Lewis contends, must be based on the work's effectiveness, which is itself dependent in part upon the reader, specifically upon his receptive silence. How

much more must receptivity to new ideas in general be impeded when non-sympathetic readers encounter non-fictional, direct polemics! When reading non-fiction, one is predisposed to read for ideas or to understand an argument. But when the personal stakes are high enough or prejudices are strong enough, all but the most earnestly inquiring minds will set to work at once tearing apart ideas and building such a heap of counter-arguments that it becomes nearly impossible to see and understand the new perspective. Here, I believe, is where various forms of art, including fictional literature prove to be immensely helpful.

Lewis's comments about his own fiction bear witness to this conviction. He says the impetus for *Out of the Silent Planet* grew out of evangelistic/apologetic intentions: "I like the whole planetary idea as a *mythology* and simply wished to conquer for my own (Christian) point of view what has always been used by the opposite side."⁹ Further, he states elsewhere,

What set me about writing the book was the discovery that a pupil of mine took all that dream of interplanetary colonisation quite seriously, and the realisation that thousands of people in one form or another depend on some hope of perpetuating and improving the human species for the whole meaning of the universe—that a 'scientific' hope of defeating death is a real rival to Christianity . . . I believe this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelisation of England: any amount of theology can be smuggled into people's minds

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under cover of romance without their knowing it.¹⁰

Lest he be misconstrued as an apologist who sought to squeeze his arguments into a fictional form so that they would be read unawares, viewing the fictional genre as a mere platform, we should observe that Lewis, when working as a fiction writer, saw himself functioning first as an artist. To refute the assumption by some that his impetus for writing “children’s fiction” was to target Christian propaganda at them, Lewis writes that the inception for his Narnia project was the creative bubbling up of ideas and images which lent themselves to the Form of the Fairy Tale. “At first there wasn’t even anything Christian about them; that element pushed itself in of its own accord. It was part of the bubbling.”¹¹ But once he had decided to write in that form, his convictions and awareness of the needs and experiences of his expected readership came into the mix:

I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralyzed 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.¹²

Lewis added that he did not intend the Narnia works only for children but saw their potential for stealing past the inhibitions of adults.¹³ He writes concerning them, “The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child’s mind may exist in a grown-up’s mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means.”¹⁴

As hinted at briefly in the quote above, Lewis’s personal journey to faith required transcending strong, anti-Christian inhibitions borne from childhood experiences. As a child, John, representing Lewis in his allegory *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, found himself oppressed by an impossible set of rules, inconsistencies between stated belief and associated feelings (“the landlord (God) is very kind” versus everyone’s living in terror of the landlord), and dishonest answers to honest questions. Uncomfortable clothes were the most prominent association with religious activities. Later in his life he is overjoyed with the suggestion that “there is no landlord.” But what he needed to know was that there *is* a landlord, but not the one of John’s misconceptions. Because of his own experience, Lewis was well acquainted with the need for this kind of subtle and sensitive approach to apologetics and, because of his intelligence and creativity, was exceptionally qualified to carry it out.

At a number of points Lewis identifies the problem of not having felt what he was told he should feel. His fiction, however, allows readers an encounter with characters exemplifying or even embodying God himself

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after stripping away the uncomfortable clothes, negative associations, and disappointments. Lewis comments on the reason for the effectiveness of his fiction,

[T]he reason why the Passion of Aslan (lion-symbol of Christ) sometimes moves people more than the real story in the Gospels is . . . that it takes them off their guard. In reading the real story, the fatal knowledge that one *ought* to feel in a certain way often inhibits the feeling.¹⁵

Lewis's *Letters to Children* bears witness to the effectiveness of his Narnia series on children. One example, in response to a mother's concern that her 9-year old son found himself loving Aslan more than Jesus, Lewis writes,

1. Even if he was loving Aslan more than Jesus (I'll explain in a moment why he can't really be doing this) he would not be an idol-worshipper. If he was an idol-worshipper he'd be doing it on purpose, whereas he's now doing it because he can't help doing it, and trying hard not to do it. But God knows quite well how hard we find it to love Him more than anyone or anything else, and He won't be angry with us as long as we are trying. And He will help us.

2. But Laurence can't *really* love Aslan more than Jesus, even if he feels that's what he is doing. For the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. So that when

Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before.¹⁶

So, herein lies what I recognize as one category of genius in Lewis's aesthetic apologetic. By infusing vivid images and characters with biblical content and recounting the essence of the Christian myth, Lewis produced a series of works with not only immediate aesthetic appeal but also with a complete and attractive presentation of the gospel. Readers who share his faith convictions have reveled in his retelling of truths familiar to them. Other readers, whether skeptically defensive or calloused in indifference towards Christianity, are given a taste of glory and an inside understanding of truth which was heretofore inaccessible to them. Those who have missed the message for any of a host of reasons suddenly find themselves *in* it. Those who would have continued to keep the door to "Christian dogma" bolted fast for reasons other than the truthfulness of the dogma itself—one might say their peephole has become smudged—gladly welcome in by the side door, the aesthetic door, that which is good, beautiful, and beautifully true. Through Lewis's fiction they catch a glimpse of joy as it really is.

A second and more unique contribution of C.S. Lewis to apologetics in the aesthetic mode occurs in his development of and appeal to the idea of *Sehnsucht*, an intense longing. It formed a significant part of his own experience in life and appears at various levels throughout much of his writing. Regarding apologetics, it is this longing which draws people toward God, though many seek to satisfy it with other things and find themselves cheated. Part of the effectiveness of his fiction as apologetic

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devices results from his effective arousal of that longing in his readers and tastes of what it might be like to have that longing satisfied.

Lewis's idea of *Sehnsucht* is reminiscent of Augustine's "Our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee," but differs in that *Sehnsucht* does not anticipate fulfillment in this life but rather increases itself as it approaches its object. In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he says the desire is for "something possessed, if at all, only in the act of desiring it, and lost so quickly that the craving itself becomes craved."¹⁷ It is not longing for longing's sake alone, but the longing is a joy for Lewis.

He recalls his first awareness of this longing at a point early in his childhood. After describing the meagerly aesthetic environment of his family's first house he writes,

[E]very day there were what we called "the Green Hills"; that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing—*Sehnsucht*; made me, for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower.¹⁸

Lewis recounts a number of moments, triggered by observing the beauty of nature or through reading, when he experienced recurring senses of this poignant longing. He defines their common quality as

. . . that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both

from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.¹⁹

Lewis argues that this longing is present in all people. He says, "the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience."²⁰ Then he shows how this universal longing suggests the existence of its object:

A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread . . . But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will.²¹

According to Lewis, not all are aware of this longing, so it needs to be awakened in them. This is, in part, a function of the

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aesthetic. In *The Weight of Glory* he writes, teasingly and yet soberly,

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.²²

Too often, Lewis observes, we find ourselves seeking to find full joy through things on earth. The resulting disappointment sends some on an endless, futile journey of grasping after the wind while others simply repress or let die that which could lead them to life.

Lewis regards *Sehnsucht* as a drawing force that functions as a combination of what theologians elsewhere have discussed in terms of general revelation.

I am quite ready to describe *Sehnsucht* as "spilled religion," provided it is not forgotten that the spilled drops may be full of blessing to the unconverted man who licks them up, and therefore begins to search for the cup whence they were spilled. For the drops will be taken by some whose stomachs are not yet sound enough for the full draught.²³

Anything that helps awaken this longing or offers sips of this Joy serves as a powerful apologetic. Lewis's fiction does both, as a memorable quotation from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* illustrates:

Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns the whole dream into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realise that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.²⁴

He writes of *Sehnsucht* as a longing to get on the inside, to be part of the dance. The longing to get *in*, common to all, is something the aesthetic mode of communication teases at without offering a deceptive substitute for the Real. Poetry, myth, etc., bring a reader part way in while at the same time intensifying the longing-joy they begin to satisfy. An encounter with the beautiful through an aesthetic

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apologetic echoes louder and louder the repeated cry "further up and further in!" found near the close of *The Last Battle*.

In summary, the importance of *Sehnsucht* for apologetics is multifaceted: First, the longing motivates a search for its object. Second, the longing itself helps prove the existence of its object. Furthermore, there may exist a need to help awaken it within a person. Finally, once a person is aware of longing, it can be shown how the gospel fulfills it.

The aesthetic mode of knowing brings unique contributions to epistemology. C.S. Lewis works effectively as an apologist within this mode through his works of fiction, surmounting a shortfall of traditional apologetic approaches. He achieves this as his stories, imbued with Christian truth, circumvent intellectual and emotional barriers and present fresh and compelling tastes of Reality. Through evoking and addressing his audience's innate longing for the transcendent, he orients their deepest affections towards God.

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Notes

1. C.S. Lewis, "God in the Dock," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970a), 101.
2. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa, eds., *A Companion to Epistemology*, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 255 "literature and knowledge."
3. C. Day Lewis, *The Poet's Way of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 6.
4. C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 85-86.
5. C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to be Said," *New York Times Book Review*, Childrens' Book Section, November 18, 1956, 3.
6. C.S. Lewis, *Experiment*, 140-141.
7. *Ibid.*, 88.
8. *Ibid.*, 93.
9. C.S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982a), preface xvii.
10. *Ibid.*
11. C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories . . .," 3.
12. *Ibid.*
13. In response to attacks on Fairy Tales in contemporary literary criticism Lewis writes, "I was therefore writing "for children" only in the sense that I excluded what I thought they would not like or understand; not in the sense of writing what I intended to be below adult attention . . . and whether the opinion condemns or acquits my own work, it certainly is my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then." *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. C.S. Lewis, Letters quoted in Peter Kreeft, *C.S. Lewis: A Critical Essay* by Peter Kreeft, ed. Roderick Jellema, *Contemporary Writers in Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 37.
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18. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The shape of my early life* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 14.
19. *Ibid.*, 23-24.
20. C.S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 10.
21. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1980), 30.
22. *Ibid.*, 29.
23. Wayne Martindale and Jerry Root, eds., *The Quotable Lewis* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1989), 352.
24. C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970b), 64-65.