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Faith and Reconciliation in the Poetry of C.S. Lewis

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Acclaimed as one of the twentieth century's most influential writers of Christian apologetics and imaginative fiction, C.S. Lewis has ministered to thousands of souls throughout the last century. Yet, from his days as a young student, Lewis most aspired to be a poet. That so few formal critiques of Lewis's poetry have been published is unfortunate as the study of his poetry so completely describes the complexities of Lewis's journey to the Christian faith, a journey that was one both of head and heart. It was this tension between logic and imagination, as well as the struggle to understand the relationship between God and pain, that are the central themes of Lewis's poetry in Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics as well as in A Grief Observed. It is in Grief though, Lewis's last major poetic work (written in poetic prose), that the threads of intellect and imagination are finally woven together to provide Lewis with a new realization of the nature of God, as well as man's relation to Him.

First, it must be noted that in 1939 a debate between Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard was published entitled The Personal Heresy: A Controversy. Lewis, although not a formal New Critic himself, felt that poetry was not meant to be read as that which is "[. . .] private and personal to the poet but what is public, common, impersonal, objective" (Lewis, Personal 19). It is also significant to mention that both Spirits and Grief were originally published under pseudonyms, a fact reflecting Lewis's wish for his person to be distanced from his poetry. Though Lewis desired for his poetry not to be read autobiographically, I conclude that his wish must not be granted in this case. A separation between Lewis and his poems would indicate a failure to observe the spiritual journey that connects the first of his major poetic works and the last, for it is in Grief that the tensions evident in Spirits are beautifully reconciled.

It was during Lewis's years under the tutelage of William Kirkpatrick, his aspirations to be a poet took concrete form. Lewis comprised poems in a variety of

different notebooks that were later collected to form the basis for Spirits. These poetic writings also continued into the years Lewis served in World War I, an experience that served to provide Lewis with an all too real picture of the deplorable state of the world (King 52). Lewis's intellect led him thus to reason that if there were a God, he must be a sadistic God. More than any other of his poetical works, Spirits (which was published in 1919) offers readers the opportunity to observe the tensions between the intellect and the imaginative mystery that so pervaded Lewis's life. In Surprised By Joy, Lewis acknowledges the tensions that were felt during this time as he writes, "Such then was the state of my imaginative life; over against it stood the life of my intellect. The two hemispheres of my mind were in sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow 'rationalism'" (161-162). Yet, in Spirits these two hemispheres could not be completely reconciled and maintain two distinct threads throughout the work.

Presented in three separate sections, the poems in Spirits fluctuate between a set that Don King refers to as "morose" (70) and another set that he refers to as "sanguine" (70). The morose poems are those in which Lewis asserts his cosmic perspective and the "rankling hate" ("Ode" 46) of a God "[. . .] he denies yet blames for man's painful condition" (King 52). Additionally, these poems are strikingly rational as opposed to the sanguine poems that embrace imaginative mystery, for these are the poems of intense longing for a distant land where Lewis will no longer feel alienated and where his deepest yearnings can be fully satisfied. It is particularly interesting to note Lewis's use of the subtitle "A Cycle of Lyrics." In a letter to his father, Lewis claimed that his reason for the subtitle was that "the book is not a collection of really independent pieces, but the working out, loosely of course and with digressions, of a general idea" (qtd. in King 60). This "idea" though is too general to bring any reconciliation to the tensions that exist in Lewis's mind. Much of the

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problem, Lewis later admits in Surprised by Joy was that “I was at this time living, like so many Atheists and Antitheists in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry with Him for creating a world” (115).

The “Prologue” poem that Lewis writes as an introduction to Spirits provides the doorway to understanding Lewis’s struggles as a frustrated dualist standing between intellect and imaginative mystery. In reference to the title, Lewis asserts that humans are spirits living in the bondage of a deplorable world under the chains of a cruel and unmerciful God. “Prologue” establishes the purpose of Lewis’s Spirits, that is to move beyond the morose world and to find the answer to the imaginative mystery. Thus, Lewis asserts that to find the answer to the imaginative mystery would resolve all other existing tensions. Lewis describes his goal writing in “Prologue”:

In my coracle of verses I will sing of lands unknown,
Flying from the scarlet city where a Lord that knows
no pity
Mocks the broken people praying round his iron
throne
—Sing about the Hidden Country fresh and full of
quiet green.
Sailing over seas uncharted to a port that none has
seen. (15-23)

Bearing such intentions in mind while reading the “Cycle of Lyrics will demonstrate in the end Lewis’s lack of success in arrival at the soul-satisfying coherence of the present tensions.

The first poem in Lewis’s cycle, “Satan Speaks” establishes Lewis’s view of a cosmic sadist who rules the universe with unrelenting power. Using a series of rhyming couplet statements, Lewis speaks as this God stating, “I am Nature, the Mighty Mother / I am the law: ye have none other” (1-2). It is interesting to notice Lewis’s extensive use of “I Am” couplets throughout the poem, because “I Am” is traditionally spoken in reference to the God of the Old Testament. Lewis’s extensive literary readings may have exposed him to this phrase that was used by God to describe his own eternal power and unchangeable character in the third chapter of Exodus. To use this phrase repeatedly in “Satan Speaks” indicates Lewis’s firm stance that his view on the nature of God would remain unchanged.

Lewis continues Spirits with a poem entitled “Ode for New Year’s Day,” a poem most clearly and effectively summarizing Lewis’s rationalistic argument against God. Here, he follows a logical sequence by building upon the foundation of “Satan Speaks” to detail the terror that the “rankling hate of God” (“Ode” 79) has loosed on the chaotic, troubled world. It is perhaps the words of the third stanza of “Ode for New Year’s Day” that strike at the very heart of Lewis’s

rationalistic case against God, a case that will once again surface in Grief. Lewis writes:

And O, my poor Despoina, do you think he ever
hears
The wail of the hearts he has broken, the sound of human
ill? (67-70)

Thus, Lewis approaches a God who is active in sending pain and destruction and is met with nothing more than a door slammed in his face, a fact that he deeply laments.

In Lewis’s rationalistic sequence, a response must thus be issued. Lewis’s response is found in “De Profundis,” perhaps the most blasphemous of the poems in Spirits. Lewis is left with no other rationalistic, plausible response, although he dualistically acknowledges that “It is but froth of folly to rebel / For thou art Lord and hast the keys of Hell” (25-27), but young Lewis goes on to declare: “Yet I will not bow down to thee nor love thee / For looking in my own heart I can prove thee / And know this frail, bruised being is above thee. (28-30). Three times in the poem Lewis issues the cry that man ought curse the God who cares nothing for the people of the earth. It is vital here to note Lewis’s continuous dwelling on the God who does not hear and does not care.

After the establishment of the rationalistic structure of the morose poems, an examination of Lewis’s more flowing, sanguine poems is necessary. These are the poems in which Lewis describes the “homeless longing vexing me” (“In Praise” 28). In “The Roads,” the man (presumably Lewis) observes the hills of Down. Lewis describes the sight using strongly visual imagery, incorporating phrases such as the “windy uplands” (1), the “misty west” (5), and the “shadowy dell” (8). It is here that the speaker expresses his deep desire to travel the roads that weave between the hills of Down, which he assumes will lead to the source of the mysterious longing that haunts his heart.

This poem is then followed by Lewis’s “Song of the Pilgrims,” in which the pilgrims repeatedly insist “[t]hat somewhere, somewhere past the Northern snow/ Waiting for us the red-rose gardens blow” (11-12, 65-66), and in “Dungeon Grates,” the reader sees that, if only moment, the pilgrim has arrived at the source of the mystery as Lewis writes in the last line of the poem, “For we have seen the Glory—we have seen” (43), that is, where the “red-rose gardens blow” (12) Although Lewis asserts that this moment in the presence of Glory was enough to “bear all trials that come after” (39), the reader knows that this brief encounter was not lasting as is evidenced by the reoccurring struggles he experiences in Grief.

“Tu Ne Quaesieris” is the poem in which Lewis recognizes that which will bring about the needed eternal reconciliation and through which we see that the preliminary foundations for Lewis’s intellectual faith

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are established. In his critique of the poem George Sayer writes, “He realizes that, as long as he is confined to his ‘narrow self,’ there will be a conflict between his will and God’s will [. . .]” (148). Because Lewis is imprisoned within the bonds of his own self, he sees the world “[a]s through a dark glass [. . .]” (“Tu” 19). Lewis questions whether this has resulted in his vision of “[a] warped and masked reality?” (20). Through the poem Lewis acknowledges that his self-centeredness has indeed resulted in a self-constructed view of the world, writing, “And where I end will Life begin” (30). Lewis now realizes that the only way out of the “[. . .]warped and masked reality” (20) created by his subjective intellectual reasoning, is for the “searching thought” (21) of his rational mind to be “mingled in the large Divine” (22). It is this “large Divine” whom Lewis will later discover to be the answer to the mysterious longing, that is, God. Thus, Lewis’s recognition of these facts establishes the very beginnings of his intellectual faith.

Yet, it is in Lewis’s last major poetic work, Grief, that Lewis truly goes beyond intellectual faith and moves toward a faith that also embraces the inclinations of the heart. In contrast to the formal, rhyming verses of Spirits, Grief is a heartfelt stream-of-consciousness type work written in free verse. While the lines of poems in Spirits are outlined in precise symmetry, the heartfelt emotions of Grief are described by Lewis as “[. . .] a throw-up from my unconscious” (461). Due to the death of his wife, Lewis reverts back to similar views of God that were demonstrated in Spirits, but it is in Grief that the intellectual faith partially established in Spirits (later more fully established in The Problem of Pain) is finally synthesized with the abstract concept of imaginative mystery.

We here must look back to Lewis’s “Satan Speaks.” Now a believer in Christ, though struggling once again to make sense of God’s nature because of the intense pain of losing his wife, Lewis has omitted his definitive “I Am” statements. Grief is instead peppered with inconclusive statements used to describe God, the majority of which are followed by question marks. In his descriptions, Lewis purports that God may be a “clown” (446) or even a “spiteful imbecile” (450), thus indicating Lewis’s openness for understanding.

While many of the blasphemous descriptions of God’s nature so strongly used in Spirits reappear in Grief, they appear here in a questioning manner rather than with such blasphemous finality. Several times throughout Grief, Lewis proposes God as a “Cosmic Sadist” (450) a view strikingly similar to that purported in “Ode for New Year’s Day” when Lewis describes the “red God” (47) who “[s]hall pour red wrath upon us over a world deform” (23). Lewis, by this time holding onto the threads of his belief in God, is wrestling once again with the concept of a God who would allow such things to happen. Lewis even purports at this point that God not only allows these horrible things to happen but

causes them to happen, writing, “[. . .] she [Joy] was in God’s hands all the time and I have seen what they did to her here [. . .] If God’s goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine” (449-450). Lewis, in Grief even furthers the possibility of a sadistic God writing, “I am more afraid that we are really rats in a trap. Or worse still, rats in a laboratory” (450).

The rationalistic argument used by Lewis against God in “Ode for New Year’s Day” is also clearly connected to Grief. Lewis writes concerning this uncaring God, “But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. And after that, silence” (444). Yet, the closed door lasts not long for Lewis as he comes to a key realization near the end of Grief. This realization establishes the actual role of truth concerning God’s relationship to pain, and, ultimately, the full development of Lewis’s faith as he finally understands the ways in which the intellect merges with the imagination.

Lewis admits very conclusively his understanding of why the door always seemed to be locked in the following words: “The notes have been about myself, and about H. and about God. In that order. The order and the proportions exactly what they ought not to have been” (Lewis, Grief 459). Thus, Lewis understands that all of his rationally developed viewpoints concerning the nature of God were unjust because they had been developed only from Lewis’s personal reality, an understanding that had its foundations in “Tu Ne Quaesieris.” Lewis’s viewpoints were unjust because they ignored the possibility that the reality of this “sadistic” God may, in fact be very different than Lewis’s personal reality. Just as Lewis realized intellectually in “Tu Ne Quaesieris,” he now takes the intellectual and imaginative step out of himself and, consequently out of his “[. . .] warped and masked reality” (“Tu” 20). To repudiate his own selfishness and acknowledge that God must be the central character is to step out of the masked reality into the fullness of the light of Glory. Here, Lewis admits that he is taking the leap into the “[. . .] imaginative activity of an idea which I have theoretically admitted-the idea that I, or any mortal at any time, may be utterly mistaken as to the situation he is really in” (Lewis, Grief 459). Thus, the intellectual faith that had its foundations in “Tu Ne Quaesieris” is combined with the faith of the heart, and the incredible results of reconciliation follow.

Bathed in the light of this new revelation, Lewis continues in Grief to examine the role of God as the great “religious iconoclast” (460). Lewis’s new understanding of the True reality, which is outside of himself and inside God, opens the door that had been

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bolted for so long. As Lewis states in his famous sermon “The Weight of Glory”:

Apparently, then, our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fantasy, but the truest index of our *real* situation. And to be at last summoned inside would be both glory and honour beyond all our merits and also the healing of that old ache. (104)

The opening of the door casts the light of Glory over all that Lewis has called “reality” and over all that on which he has based his fundamental concepts of God.

Here, the great “iconoclast” shines his light over the green hills of Down, the satyrs, and the wider oceans of Lewis’s “The Roads” and reveals that in the True reality, they are simply images. These images are a lesser form of something much greater and serve merely as links between Lewis’s selfishly conceived reality and the True reality. In “The Weight of Glory,” Lewis captures this idea beautifully as he states, “It is not the physical images [the hills, the satyrs, the oceans] that I am speaking of, but that indescribable something of which they become for a moment the messengers” (103). Through the shattering of the “dark glass” (“Tu” 19) by the iconoclast, the messengers are no longer needed because Lewis is able to see the very Thing himself. Thus, he writes in the last chapter of *Grief*, “I need Christ not something that resembles Him” (459). Brought finally into the fullness of that land beyond “[. . .] the Northern snow / where red-roses gardens blow” (“Song of the Pilgrims” 65-66), Lewis states, “I mustn’t sit down content with the phantasmagoria [the compilation of Lewis’s thoughts, passions, and imaginings] itself and worship that for Him [. . .] Not my idea of God, but God” (Lewis, *Grief* 460).

It is here that Lewis’s rational mind is satisfied. Total oneness with the great creator of the imaginative mystery has made Lewis understand that rationality is no longer of any matter. Frustrated dualism is out the door and Lewis stands in the open door looking at the loving God. In response to the difficulties voiced in both *Spirits* and *Grief* concerning the relationship between God and pain, Lewis writes:

When I lay these questions before God, I get no answer. But a rather special sort of “No answer.” It is not the locked door. It is more like a silent, certainly not uncompassionate gaze. As though he shook His head not in refusal but waving the question. Like, “Peace, child, you don’t understand.” (460)

A great contrast to Lewis’s God in “De Profundis” who mockingly laughed at the attempts of men to “gather wisdom rare,” (8) Lewis’s arrival at the great Romancer himself, who has been wooing Lewis with his messengers of the longing, has revealed more completely that which intelligence really is. In one of the last stanza-paragraphs of *Grief* Lewis reveals his new definition of “pure intelligence” (462). He writes that it is that which “[w]e cannot understand. The best is perhaps what we understand the least” (462). It is here when Lewis has finally finished his pilgrim journey on “The Roads” that he has found Heaven and the “homelessness” that once vexed him is cured (Lewis, “In Praise” 28). As Lewis writes concerning the tensions between intellect and romance and the concurrent tension of God and pain: “Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem” (461).

Thus, Lewis realizes that which he could not fully understand until his selfish reality had been shattered. His spirit, released from bondage is set free, and he has found the Truest of all realities. Indeed, as Lewis comes to understand, no longer must he merely be “one / with the eternal stream of loveliness” for only a brief moment (Lewis, “Dungeon” 28-29). Instead, the last stanza-paragraph of *Grief* pictures the eternal reconciliation through Lewis’s account of his wife in Heaven. Like Joy, his arrival at this understanding leads him to say, “I am at peace with God” (*Grief* 462). The “overstrong desire / to swim forever [. . .]” in the loveliness of the eternal stream is thus fulfilled entirely in the presence of the Lord. Lewis illustrates this beautiful truth through Joy as Lewis writes, “Then she turned herself back toward the eternal fountain” (462). Through the process of his grief, Lewis comes to these realizations, concluding that there in the rose-red garden that he always knew existed, he stands like Joy, smiling toward the Object Himself Who has been calling. It is in this True reality that Lewis is disinterested in looking back to the physical world. Here, he is without even a hint of desire to ask meaningless questions, because he is one forever with the eternal peace-giving “[. . .] stream of loveliness” (Lewis, “Dungeon” 30).

It is evident from the study of Lewis’s poetry that his journey to faith was not a simple one. Living in the War era of England was difficult under any circumstances, but Lewis was one individual whose struggle was particularly difficult. Viewed within the broad context of twentieth century literature, Lewis’s poetry may play a seemingly insignificant role due to its lack of popularity, but it is in his poetry that the true struggle of every modern man lays. His journey through disillusionment provides a unique picture of the power of God in the midst of a seemingly chaotic world.

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