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Aesthetics vs. Anesthesia *C.S. Lewis on the Purpose of Art*

Charlie W. Starr

Contemporary Christian culture does not know what art is for. C. S. Lewis did. First of all, he understood that Christians should not try to change culture by turning art into propaganda. The first purpose of art is not to be didactic but to be beautiful and provide pleasure and play. It may have secondary purposes—to inspire, to draw us to God—but art cannot achieve these purposes without achieving the first. Secondly, Lewis knew that we should not simply analyze art for its philosophical underpinnings. Though Lewis recognized the need for *Worldview Analysis*, this approach devalues play and reduces artistic meanings to mere philosophical statements. But meanings in artistic texts should be received with the imagination as well as the reasoning intellect. Lewis believed in the importance of receiving artistic texts rather than using them, and of perceiving them as representing two distinct communications: logos and poiema. Finally, and with marked contrast, though Lewis was against using art for propaganda, he nevertheless saw its value for moral instruction and inspiration. His ideas on the moral imagination are key to understanding moral truth and motivating moral behavior.

Aesthetics vs. Anesthesia: C. S. Lewis on the Purpose of Art

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My astonishing claim is this: Most of evangelical Christianity for the last hundred years (and longer) has gotten art and culture all wrong, but, as per usual, C. S. Lewis gets it right. We don't know what culture is for, we don't know what art is for, and we keep asking the wrong people: theologians. When we want to overcome a sickness, we go to a doctor. When we want to fix a leak, we call a plumber. We ask the experts and get the right answers. Why don't we do the same with art? We turn to Christians to find Christian answers, and rightly so. But if we want to know about art, theologians are not the experts to ask. Artists, on the other hand, frighten us. We trust so little of what they do, and they're a little weird to begin with, even the Christian ones. What we need is a Christian artist (perhaps a writer) with a background in theology—someone with the intellectual discipline of a philosopher and the critical eye, experience and imagination of an artist. If such a *Jack-of-all-trades* were to exist, we'd call him C. S. Lewis.

I. Is Art Utilitarian?

With regard to the significance of the arts or culture in general, Lewis once concluded that “culture,¹ though not in itself meritorious, was innocent and pleasant, might be a vocation for some, was helpful in bringing certain souls to Christ, and could be pursued to the glory of God.”² Though he valued culture, Lewis did not see it as a final good—an end unto itself. It is true that Lewis saw a connection between art and knowledge. In *The Great Divorce*, for example, a painter who has just come into heaven is told that “When you painted on earth...it was because you caught glimpses of Heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of your

¹ Of the various topics which could be discussed under the umbrella of cultural analysis, I here intend, following Lewis's lead, to focus on art.

² “Christianity and Culture,” 85.

painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too.”³ And such glimpses, as Lewis himself found in “inanimate nature and marvelous literature” evoke in us an experience of “intense longing,”⁴ an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.”⁵ Lewis calls this desire “Joy,”⁶ and Joy is a marker—a stab of desire whose object is not to be found on earth:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.⁷

Lewis sees the intense desire he calls Joy as an “ontological proof” for the existence of heaven and God.⁸ He says, “if we are made for heaven, the desire for our proper place will be already in us, but not yet attached to the true object....”⁹ The desire will, in fact, erupt out of earthly encounters of pleasure—encounters with beauty in nature, with sexual pleasure, and with the beauty of artistic texts, especially (for Lewis) the literature of myth and fantasy.¹⁰ But each of these earthly objects, then, can be confused for the true, heavenly object, and must be seen as merely a signpost, a hint of the real thing.¹¹ But the implication for art is that it may potentially point us to the truth of God’s existence. It did for C. S. Lewis.

³ *The Great Divorce*, 83.

⁴ *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 202.

⁵ *Surprised by Joy*, 17-18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ *Mere Christianity*, 115.

⁸ *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 205.

⁹ “The Weight of Glory,” 98.

¹⁰ *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

That said, Lewis did not see the purpose of art to be the production of sermonic tropes or Christian propaganda. Even as viewers of art we shouldn't look to see if there is a hidden *Christian* message in a movie or book. On the contrary, "The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way."¹² Writing specifically about literature, Lewis claims that whatever edification we get isn't about finding truth in books: "To value them chiefly for reflections which they may suggest to us or morals we may draw from them, is a flagrant instance of 'using' [texts for our own purposes] instead of 'receiving'" [them for what they are].¹³ Instead, great art is about a particular activity of imagination; it is about finding new ways of *seeing*—about seeing through the eyes of others:

The nearest I have yet got to an answer [to the question of literature's value] is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature sees the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself.... We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own.... 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.... Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend Myself; and am never more myself than when I do.¹⁴

¹² *An Experiment in Criticism*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid*, 82-83. See, especially, all of chapter eight for Lewis's discussion on the connections and disconnections between art and reality and art and truth.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 137, 140-41.

In short, Lewis very specifically rejects any view that “literature is to be valued...for telling us truths about life”¹⁵; instead, he values literature apart from its utilitarian purposes. This flies in the face of much contemporary Christian thinking about art and culture, both on popular and intellectual fronts. On the popular front are well meaning Christians who accept the model of “culture war”—we are in a battle that must be fought by governing what our kids are exposed to and protesting against films, songs and TV shows which are hostile to our point of view. On the intellectual front is an emphasis on “worldview analysis”—examining the worldviews behind artistic texts to point out there hidden assumptions or mine their truth value. And while both have their place, they fail to understand what art is for.

II. Problems with Worldview Analysis

The one time Lewis says anything about what we call worldview analysis is in his essay, “Christianity and Culture.” Here he agrees that, in a work of art,

the real beliefs may differ from the professed and may lurk in the turn of a phrase or the choice of an epithet; with the result that many preferences which seem to the ignorant to be simply ‘matters of taste’ are visible to the trained critic as choices between good and evil, or truth and error....¹⁶

But he follows this recognition by raising several questions and cautions. One is whether a man who has “had a literary training” ought also to be a judge of the worldviews he reveals. Is this not the purview of the philosopher?¹⁷ Secondly, Lewis wonders if aspects of a negative analysis have less to do with ideas and more to do with taste.¹⁸ I read Lewis here as saying that aesthetic

¹⁵ Ibid, 130.

¹⁶ “Christianity and Culture,” 86.

¹⁷ Ibid, 86-87.

¹⁸ Ibid, 87.

sensibilities are often ignored in worldview approaches to art. But to Lewis, an artistic text like a book is

both *Logos* (something said) and *Poiema* (something made). As *Logos* it tells a story, or expresses an emotion, or exhorts or pleads or describes or rebukes or excites laughter. As *Poiema*, by its aural beauties and also by the balance and contrast and the unified multiplicity of its successive parts, it is an *objet d'art*, a thing shaped so as to give great satisfaction.¹⁹

Next Lewis takes issue with an approach to art which spends so much time “reading between the lines” that it neglects “the obvious surface facts about a book.”²⁰ Is it not possible, for example, that, despite a book’s “dreadful latent materialism, it does set courage and fidelity before the reader in an attractive light, and thousands of readers will be edified...by reading it?”²¹

Lewis then questions an approach to art which removes any sense of its primary purpose:

I agree...that our leisure, even our play, is a matter of serious concern....
[However,] to do them at all, we must somehow do them as if they were not. It is a serious matter to choose wholesome recreations: but they would no longer be recreations if we pursued them seriously....For a great deal (not all) of our literature was made to be read lightly for entertainment. If we do not read it, in a sense, ‘for fun’...we are not using it as it was meant to be used, and all our criticism of it will be pure illusion. For you cannot judge any artefact except by

¹⁹ *An Experiment in Criticism*, 132. See also page 82.

²⁰ “Christianity and Culture,” 88.

²¹ *Ibid*, 89.

using it as it was intended. It is no good judging a butter-knife by seeing whether it will saw logs.²²

Finally Lewis offers the tentative suggestion that there might be

two kinds of good and bad. The first, such as virtue and vice or love and hatred, besides being good or bad themselves make the possessor good or bad. The second do not. They include such things as physical beauty or ugliness, the possession or lack of a sense of humour, strength or weakness, pleasure or pain.²³

Lewis sees potential problems with his categories, but I think it legitimate to apply them to the arts in this way: If I say a secular film is bad because it is filled with false ideas, foul language, gratuitous sex, and gory violence, and then I say a Christian film is bad because the production values are cheap, the script overly didactic, the story dull and the acting poor, I am not using the word “bad” in the same way. The former is bad for reasons involving morality and truth; the latter is bad for reasons involving aesthetics and imaginative effect.²⁴ Worldview analysis will almost always leave these latter considerations out of the equation.

An even stronger argument to be gleaned from Lewis regarding the problems of worldview analysis has to do with the nature of “meaning.” “What does it mean?” is a question we ask all the time, often about the symbols and images we encounter in books, songs, and movies. But do we ever ask, “What does *meaning* mean?” Usually when we ask for the meaning of a word, a line in a song, or a symbolic image, we want an explanation in words. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke journeys down into his own cave of knowledge and confronts Darth Vader. He cuts Vader’s head clean off only to find his own face looking back at him. When my daughter first saw this scene she asked me what it meant. I told her, “It means Luke’s worst enemy is

²² Ibid, 90.

²³ Ibid, 91.

²⁴ See below for why these elements matter.

himself. He has to fight his own fear and doubt before he can face the real Darth Vader. What happened in the cave was a dream or vision.” I explained the meaning in words. But movies mean more than the words in them. Their magic is in the meanings they communicate *beyond* words. Their truth is in their images and experiential quality.

In a little known essay called “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” Lewis helps us search for the meaning of *meaning*:

[I]t must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense....For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.²⁵

An obscure statement at best, what Lewis argues here, among other things, is that meaning is not the same thing as truth, the one belonging to the faculty of imagination, the other to the faculty of reason.

He discusses one major implication of this dichotomy in his essay, “Myth Became Fact,” where he makes a connection between “myth” and “reality” and then a separation of “reality” from “truth”: “What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that *about which* truth is).”²⁶ Reality (or fact) is what is; truth is a proposition *about* fact. Next, Lewis describes our earthly existence as a “valley of separation,”²⁷ or abstraction, arguing that “Myth is the mountain whence all the different streams arise which

²⁵ “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” 265.

²⁶ “Myth Became Fact,” 141.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 141*n*.

become truths down here in the valley; *in hac valle abstractionis*.”²⁸ Lewis is saying that meaning can be abstract language statements like my explanation of Luke’s internal struggle in *Empire Strikes Back*. But it can also be experiential and can precede language.

The context of the “Myth Became Fact” essay is the epistemological dilemma of thinking versus experiencing. To know by thought is to withdraw ourselves from reality. To know by experience is to be so caught up in the real that we can’t think about it clearly. Consider how we can laugh at a joke or think about why it’s funny, but we can’t do both at the same time. More importantly, our very ability to know is hampered by this bifurcation: “‘If only my toothache would stop, I could write another chapter about Pain.’ But once it stops, what do I know about pain?”²⁹ We can’t study pleasure while having sex, “repentance while repenting,” nor humor while we’re laughing hysterically, but “when else can you really know these things?”³⁰

In order to understand how limiting this dilemma really is, Lewis suggests we think about the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was allowed to lead Eurydice by the hand, but the moment he tried to turn around and see her, she disappeared. If we focus on the myth, the abstract concept of thinking versus experiencing is suddenly “imaginable.” If I take what Lewis is saying and explain it in abstract, allegorical statements, then “experience” is Orpheus holding Eurydice’s hand, “thinking” is her disappearing when he turns around to get a clear look at her, and the “myth,” apart from this explanation, is an image of these ideas which acts on our imagination *like* an experience. Lewis goes on to note that our response might be that we’ve never seen the meaning just described in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. To this he replies, “Of course not. You are not looking for an abstract ‘meaning’ at all.”³¹ If we were looking for

²⁸ Ibid, 141. The Latin means, “in this valley of separation.”

²⁹ Ibid, 140.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 141.

abstract meanings in the myth, it would stop being a myth to us and become an allegory (as I just made it above). Lewis says that, in receiving the myth as a myth,

You were not knowing, but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we *state* this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely.³²

In other words, when we take a meaning out of a myth, we turn it into an abstract statement, an idea. When we leave the meaning in the myth and do not try to turn it into language statements, the meaning remains (or at least mimics) a concrete experience. Through myth, ideas can be experienced concretely. Lewis gives a hint that this occurs in the imagination, a mode of thinking that shares qualities of both reason and experience.

When we receive myth as story, we are experiencing a principle concretely. Only when we put the experience into words does the principle become abstract. But if we can know a principle either concretely or by abstraction, then meaning can be either concrete or abstract. This agrees with the statement in the “Bluspels” essay that meaning is the necessary antecedent to truth.³³ Some meanings are abstract propositions—word statements like my explanation of the scene from *Empire Strikes Back*. But there are other kinds of meanings which can only be grasped in the experiential imagination. Such meanings, the kind we get in myth for example, come prior to abstraction and apart from language. From them we do not get truths *about* reality but *tastes* of reality itself.

Think of some favorite song, the kind that “blows you away” the first time you hear it. It moves you. You connect to it. It evokes feelings and thoughts you can’t quite describe. Recall

³² Ibid.

³³ “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” 265.

next how a month or two (or six) later you actually bother to pay attention to the lyrics, and you finally figure out what the song was saying. In one sense you knew all along what the song was about. You understood meanings in it that couldn't be put into words—meanings in the music itself or in the way a certain phrase touched your heart or connected with memories. The analysis of the lyrics was your reasoning self becoming aware of abstract, propositional meanings that your experiential self had not encountered. To use Lewis's terminology, you first *tasted* the song, then you came to *know* it. But to abandon the taste—the meanings which still cannot be put into words even after some analysis—is to abandon meanings which are certainly there.

The very nature of meaning in art is that many of its meanings will not be philosophically reduceable. In an essay called "The Language of Religion," Lewis points out that, far from being able to quantify reality in terms of the specialized languages of science or theology, most of experience can only be communicated with plain or poetic language: "Now it seems to me a mistake to think that our experience in general can be communicated by precise and literal language....The truth seems to me the opposite...."³⁴ Even a theologically accurate phrase like, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" is a metaphor.³⁵ It is true, but it is not literal. The relationship had between Christ and the Father in the Trinity is not the exact same as the relationship had between a man and his son. There was a time in which my son did not exist. Then he came into existence. But the First and Second Persons of the Trinity have co-existed eternally. We may attempt to convert the metaphor into a theological abstraction like, "There is between Jesus and God an asymmetrical, social, harmonious relation involving homogeneity,"³⁶ but in doing so the meaning will be all but lost to us. Lewis concludes that the "very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by

³⁴ "The Language of Religion," 263.

³⁵ Ibid, 262.

³⁶ Ibid.

hints, similes, metaphors, and the use of those emotions...which are pointers to it.”³⁷ If life itself is seldom reduceable to the abstract language of philosophy and theology, how much more must our approach to the arts be one which recognizes meanings that cannot be stated in any terms—or, at best, in poetic terms—let alone the terms of worldview analysis. Human knowing simply doesn’t operate that way, and human art belongs more to the realms of concrete experience and analogical imagination.

For Lewis, meaning is *connection*, the perception of a relationship. But we can’t think of meaning as solely an explanation in words. When we break out of that thinking, we begin to see art’s purpose and methods. Art communicates experiences more than abstract truths and meanings more than philosophical positions. The meanings in art may be born of language, and such meanings may be translate into truth statements. But many of the meanings will exist apart from language. Many of them will be mythic, analogical, experiential, emotional, unconscious, semi-conscious, without clear definition, and even accidental.

Here, then, is the problem for worldview analysis: if the only thing we look for in examining an art form is a series of abstract, philosophical truth statements, we are missing both the power and purpose of art. I am not saying we should forget about examining worldviews in art (and neither did Lewis in “Christianity and Culture”). I am saying that worldview analysis *tends* to look for philosophical thought systems and nothing else. Students taught this approach to art end up with a myopic critical vision. Imagine reducing the art of cooking to mere nutrition. We certainly need to know about it in order to be healthy, but if the joy of taste is sacrificed to nutritional facts, then food is reduced to a burden our taste buds must merely endure. Food needs to have flavor! And art needs to delight and to give us tastes of the real. This means it should first be approached experientially and imaginatively before it is ever viewed philosophically.

³⁷ Ibid, 265.

III. Art's Purposes

None of this is to say that Lewis completely rejects the “using” of art in education. Though he primarily values art apart from its truth-bearing potentials, he nevertheless strikes a balance for us between our desires to enjoy art for what it is on the one hand and use it for edification on the other:

The purpose of education has been described by Milton as that of fitting a man “to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices both private and public, of peace and war.”...Aristotle would substantially agree with this, but would add the conception that it should also be a preparation for leisure....

Vocational training, on the other hand, prepares the pupil not for leisure, but for work; it aims at making not a good man but a good banker, a good electrician, a good scavenger, or a good surgeon. You see at once that education is essentially for freemen and vocational training for slaves....If education is beaten by training, civilization dies.³⁸

Christian thinking about the arts—here I mean the thinking of American, Protestant, Conservative, Evangelical Christianity—has suffered from pragmatism and didacticism. Rather than “enjoy” or “appreciate” art, we “use” it like dishes and cars to serve functions we consider important. What Lewis is saying is that, if art can serve the Kingdom of God, it is a good thing, but art created *for the purpose of* spreading the Kingdom of God (which is to say, art created for any purpose other than what art is for) will generally be bad, that is, inartistic. To use Lewis’s terms, art thus becomes vocational, training beats education, and civilization (as it might be influenced by Christians) dies. Bad Christian art ends up defeating its own purposes. It doesn’t reach anyone, and it quickly fades into obscurity.

³⁸ “Our English Syllabus,” 81-82.

Imagine a young man who wants to be a missionary doctor but who is so completely interested in spreading the gospel that he doesn't work hard at first becoming a good physician. Suppose that, with a little bit of training and a lot of funding from equally zealous Christians, he manages to get out to a third world country and practice medicine. In the field he tries his best as a doctor, but he just isn't very good at it—perhaps he is especially bad at administering anesthesia—and the consequences are dire. Of course he won't have any success in reaching people for Christ when he has failed them first at what he claimed to be—a physician.

Sound ridiculous? Yet this is exactly what goes on in Christian film making all the time: people zealous to spread the gospel, who don't know enough about making movies, produce celluloid sermons instead of real films. But before a movie can teach truth it must first be what films are: stories that enlighten, engage, show beauty, entertain, capture our imaginations, and put us through experiences. It is by happy coincidence and thanks to Lewis's unusual spelling of the word "anaesthetics"³⁹ that I learned the words "aesthetic" (the study of beauty), and "anesthetic" (the thing we most want the doctor to give us when going under the knife) come from the same root word, having to do with feeling or sensation. I am convinced that much of modern Christianity suffers from an anesthetic view of art. The result is Christian art which bores us to sleep.

Contrary to an anesthetic, utilitarian view of art, Lewis, like his friend Tolkien, valued the making of fairy tale stories (for example) especially when produced as an act of "sub-creation," of doing on a finite level what God did infinitely at the creation.⁴⁰ The purpose of such sub-creation is not to make something to be used for other purposes, but to participate in pleasure and worship in acting out in ourselves the Divine impulse of creativity given us as bearers of the

³⁹ 26 October 1955; *Collected Letters* 3, 667.

⁴⁰ See especially Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" 74-75, 86-89.

image of God.⁴¹ Applied to the arts in general, the point is that we make art for the delight of making. That act alone is sufficient reason for a book's, painting's, or movie's existence—it is made out of delight, out of a God given desire to imitate Him. It is an act of worship.

But the by-product of such activity is art that *can* have an effect on our civilization. Lewis concludes that, to be truly effective in affecting culture, we must stop making the affecting of culture our first goal:⁴² “We must attack the enemy's lines of communication, [this is true. But w]hat we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent.”⁴³ Recall Lewis's statement that leisure and play are of serious concern, but we cannot approach them too seriously.⁴⁴ Here he is saying the same thing about art. Unless we are doing it in our leisure, with a sense of play, and out of our God given creative (or sub-creative) impulses, it will not be good art. All we have to do is think of the difference between *The Passion of the Christ* and *Facing the Giants* for the point to become obvious. Admittedly, it is also counter-intuitive. But this, according to Lewis, is because we live in a fallen world in which play is frivolous:

Dance and game *are* frivolous, unimportant down here; for “down here” is not their natural place. Here they are a moment's rest from the life we were placed here to live. But in this world everything is upside down. That which, if it could be prolonged here, would be a truancy, is likest that which in a better country is the End of ends. Joy is the serious business of Heaven.⁴⁵

And art, then, can perhaps only be serious when it is created in play.

⁴¹ “On Three Ways of Writing for Children,” 509.

⁴² See below for Lewis's own example of how the Narnia books came into being.

⁴³ “Christian Apologetics,” 150. Lewis also says, “It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it is the materialistic assumptions in all the other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him [the anti-Christian]. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian” (Ibid).

⁴⁴ “Christianity and Culture,” 90.

⁴⁵ *Letters to Malcolm*, 92-93.

IV. The Moral Imagination

Once again, though Lewis believed literature and other arts were not meant to be “used” for their truth value but “received” for their experiential delight, he did acknowledge the important relationship between art and moral development.

In an essay called “Horrid Red Things,” Lewis argues that one of the things Christians must do to reach “modern” people is to “try to teach them something about the difference between thinking and imagining.”⁴⁶ He illustrates:

I once heard a lady tell her daughter that if you ate too many aspirin tablets you would die. “But why?” asked the child. “If you squash them you don’t find any horrid red things inside them.” Obviously, when this child thought of poison she not only had an attendant image of “horrid red things”, but she actually believed that poison was red. And this is an error...[However,] If I, staying at the house, had raised a glass of what looked like water to my lips, and the child had said, “Don’t drink that. Mummie says it’s poisonous,” I should have been foolish to disregard the warning....There is thus a distinction not only between thought and imagination in general, but even between thought and those images which the thinker (falsely) believes to be true.⁴⁷

You see, the little girl clearly knew that poison was a bad thing, but she also thought that it was red. She had a right idea and a wrong image. And this wrong image could clearly lead the little

⁴⁶ ““Horrid Red Things,”” 128.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 128-29.

girl to someday taking poison, not because she thinks poison good, but because the object she's about to swallow doesn't *look* poisonous to her.

Lewis presents this dichotomy again in *The Screwtape Letters* where a newly converted Christian is floundering in a sea of images confused with ideas. Elder demon Screwtape writes to his pupil Wormwood about how best to tempt his patient:

At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of 'Christians' in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial. His mind is full of togas and sandals and armour and bare legs and the mere fact that the other people in church wear modern clothes is a real—though of course an unconscious—difficulty to him.⁴⁸

Consider how the American church today, without quite knowing how it was working, has had some success in reversing this trend through converting the classical worship service into the contemporary celebration of song and music. Removing the *images* that got in the way of belief—stained-glass stuffiness, hardened pews and faces, boring liturgy and pasted smiles—the church in the last thirty years has been able to draw people to the truth of Christ, not by restructuring Christian content, as liberal Christianity attempted to do, but by reconstructing the imaginative art forms (primarily in music and architecture) by which it is presented.

Lewis saw this exact need. At the writing of the Narnia books, there were those who believed that Lewis began by asking himself how he could share Christ with children which he thought best doable through fairy tales. Then he supposedly drew up a list of Christian truths he wanted to share with kids and put them into allegories. Says Lewis,

This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. Everything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion.

⁴⁸ *The Screwtape Letters*, 12-13.

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.⁴⁹

Notice how Lewis here follows his own advice regarding the earlier point that we should not make art for the purpose of affecting culture, but rather culture will be affected if we make good art.

More important to the current point is what Lewis says came after the "bubbling," after he recognized that fairy tales were the best *form* he could find for all the creative energy he was about to unleash on paper:

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....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?⁵⁰

Lewis achieved this in Narnia and the church has begun to do the same in our culture, making some inroads in music if still falling short in literature, film and other art forms.

The point is a simple one: human beings pursue knowledge of the real through two modes of thought: reason and imagination. The first deals in abstract language and propositional statements. The second deals in images and concrete (even vicarious) experiences. Both matter

⁴⁹ "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said," 527.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 527-28.

for knowing, but imagination has been ignored or reduced in importance since the Enlightenment, and imagination is *definitely* more important in moral education than is reason.

This is Lewis's point in *The Abolition of Man*:

St. Augustine defines virtue as *ordo amoris*, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind and 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. When the age for reflective thought comes, the pupil who has been thus trained in 'ordinate affections' or 'just sentiments' will easily find the first principles in Ethics: but to the corrupt man they will never be visible at all and he can make no progress in that science. Plato before him had said the same. The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likeable, disgusting, and hateful. . . . All this before he is of an age to reason; so that when Reason at length comes to him, then, bred as he has been, he will hold out his hands in welcome and recognize her because of the affinity he bears to her.⁵¹

In plainer words: an imaginative understanding of goodness—one gleaned from story, song, beauty, an education that ties real qualities of the real to the feelings they ought to invoke—must precede a reasoned knowledge of moral precepts. Or, to use my anesthesia metaphor, a true aesthetic recognizes that good art teaches us how we ought to feel about things—objects, places, experiences—while bad art anesthetizes us to the good which ought to govern us. Lewis calls the

⁵¹ *The Abolition of Man*, 26-27.

products of such bad education, “Men without Chests.”⁵² I might call them patients etherized on an operating table.⁵³

Teach second graders the Ten Commandments all you want; it’s the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal that they’ll hold onto when someone questions commandment one before them. Lewis says that “no justification of virtue will enable a man to be virtuous. Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism.”⁵⁴ If reason is to rule the appetites, it can only do so through the power of a third element, an imaginative sense of what’s *right* or *ought to be* or (the technical term that I use), *cool*.

Coolness is what drew many of us to Christ. Whether it was the experience of a weekend long Christian Rave, the raucous joy of an Alt-Band concert praising God, the fantasy story by Lewis or Tolkien that drew our curiosity, the wise mentor, the high school friend who seemed to have it all together, the hip youth minister or the tattooed-and-pierced coffee house friend who *showed* the *beauty* or *nobility* of Christ to us *before* we ever thought Christianity might be true—that was what drew us first.

In the passage on the creation of the Narnia stories above, Lewis connects story to stealing “past watchful dragons,” that is to recovering right moral sensibilities through imagination as well as envisioning Christianity by the same. His own poster child for the failure of abstract, storyless ethical education which leaves imagination and right response to experience out of the equation appears in his Narnia novel, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. It begins, “There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.”⁵⁵ Eustace is the worst kind of child Lewis could imagine: one raised by “modern” parents. Eustace hates fairy-

⁵² Ibid, 34.

⁵³ To paraphrase Eliot’s “Prufrock.”

⁵⁴ *The Abolition of Man*, 33-34.

⁵⁵ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, 1.

tales, preferring books of information containing “pictures of grain elevators or of fat foreign children doing exercises in model schools.”⁵⁶ Eustace is pretentious, petty, spiteful, and selfish. He is cruel to animals (even talking ones), steals water on a sea voyage when low supplies demand strict rations, acts a coward while hiding behind the self-righteousness of claiming to be a pacifist, and complains when the only girl on the voyage gets the only private cabin.

Eustace’s problem is that he hasn’t read any imaginative books like fairy-tales or adventure stories and so hasn’t received proper moral instruction. He doesn’t even recognize a dragon when he sees one because “he had read none of the right books.”⁵⁷ Upon approaching a dragon’s cave, Eustace is confused by what he finds there. Says Lewis: “Most of us know what we should expect to find in a dragon’s lair, but, as I said before, Eustace had read only the wrong books. They had a lot to say about exports and imports and governments and drains, but they were weak on dragons.”⁵⁸ Later in the novel, Eustace’s cousin Edmund is able to solve a mystery because he is the “only one of the party who had read several detective stories.”⁵⁹ In other words, his imagination has been trained through the experience of fiction so that, in his thinking, he is capable of seeing what others cannot.

What Eustace most needs is to experience reality so that he can know with his heart and not just his head; however, because he is too far gone into the abstract, theoretical shadow world of facts, figures, and practical applications, he needs more than just a dose of reality. He needs a higher reality, a world of the fantastic far more real than his own. He gets Narnia. Eustace is pulled into Narnia where, having learned before only in the abstract, about lifeless things, he can now learn by concrete experience of the really real. It takes becoming a dragon himself, and then

⁵⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 89.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 92.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 131.

being “undragoned” by Aslan, but Eustace does finally learn what his cold, analytical heart had been missing.

Art can be analyzed for its philosophical underpinnings and used to teach. It can glorify God, speak truth, and be used to build His Kingdom. It can even be used for moral development and instruction. But it can be used for none of these purposes if they become our primary reasons for making art or receiving it. C. S. Lewis is clear: we make art out of pleasure, for play, out of our leisure, and because we bear the creative impulse of a creative God. And we read, view, and listen to art because it’s fun, it gives us new experiences, it delights our imaginations, and it gives us greater vision. It doesn’t drug us to sleep; it wakes us to the full.

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