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An Ekphrasis by C. S. Lewis: “On a Picture by Chirico”

by Joe R. Christopher

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I. THE EKPHRASTIC POEM

Let me begin at a personal level. While I was still teaching in a university, I began going to one “literary festival” each year, because a friend of mine had started it. Since then I have upped my attendance to three such gatherings each year. One of the things that has struck me about the poetry being read at these festivals has been the occasional appearance of poems written on the topics of friends' paintings or photographs—the appearances of ekphrases, in other words. I have in mind a session that involved a group of enlarged photographs by one person being set up for display and then another person, a friend of the first, reading poems, one poem for each photograph. They were planning to publish a chapbook with the photographs and the poems set on pages opposite each other, and I assume they did.

Next, a different example. Most students (I suspect) will not get through their schooling in the United States without having read John Keats' “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” His poem describes and reacts to the pictures on the sides of a large vase. He first describes some young lovers—gods and/or humans, with the males in pursuit of the females—and at least one singer and one player of pipes, and then he describes a religious procession taking a heifer to be sacrificed. In other words, it too is an ekphrasis, although I admit I did not hear the term applied to Keats's poem when I was a student. Scholars have been bothered by the scenes that Keats describes being not a unified group, all lovers or all pious, since Greek vases are decorated thematically—perhaps he was influenced by a late Roman vase,¹ perhaps he simply combined motifs from different vases for his own

1 I have a vague memory of an essay by Gilbert Highet which gave the example of a Roman vase.

purposes. But whatever the sources, Keats is describing scenes such as exist on the vases.

Thus the type of poem I am concerned with is actually well known in educated circles, even if the Greek name of *ekphrasis* is not common outside of the current literary community. All the Greek word means is “description”; the word started out with a broader content than just a description of a work of art. It was then any written description, but *ekphrasis* has become more specialized in modern usage. This is why the current painting-or-photograph-to-poem usage may be called a subgenre. As might be expected, *Wikipedia* has an extended discussion of the term, which will be acceptable for most readers; but I would like to pause briefly on a different authority. Alastair Fowler was C. S. Lewis’s final doctoral student at Oxford University, and he later edited Lewis’s *Spenser’s Images of Life* for publication. Fowler discusses ekphrasis in his *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. He lists a series of historical variations on the descriptive type of writing, but his major emphasis is on the ekphrasis as a modern type: “the modern subgenre has primarily developed from a single influential poem, W. H. Auden’s *Musée des Beaux Arts* (1939).” Fowler goes on to enumerate characteristic features of the subgenre, as well as to mention the three paintings by Brueghel in the Belgium museum from which Auden drew his imagery (114-115; the whole discussion continues to 118). More specifically, Pieter Brueghel the Elder painted one of the three; the other two are early copies of other of his paintings made by others. For a consideration of Lewis’s poem, all of Fowler’s details are not necessary, but perhaps a few characteristic features will be useful, mainly in contrast to “On a Picture by Chirico.” Fowler writes, of the subgenre’s “casual meditation” and of its “topics [being] suffering, life’s pattern, [and] belief.” Lewis offers a narrative, rather than a meditation, but in its way his poem presents a suggestion of *past* suffering, of a pattern for a new, post-human life, and of belief, yes, but no longer in a human perspective. *If* Lewis did read Auden’s poem soon after its publication, he was not deeply enough influenced by it to write an obvious imitation. Be that as it may, this is a curious instance of Lewis writing in a modern and modernistic poetic subgenre, ten years after Auden’s influential revival. As indicated by my “if,” I do not argue that Lewis knew Auden’s poem; but he did read some of Auden’s poetry—in a 1936 letter he refers to him as “one of the few good young poets” (2:197), although his opinion was not always so favorable later (2:424). At any rate, the 1936 letter of praise is only three years before the first publication of “Musée des Beaux Arts”

II. THE PAINTER AND WHAT HE MEANT

As the title of Lewis's poem makes clear, "On a Painting by Chirico," the artist whose work Lewis is describing is De Chirico; more specifically, Giorgio de Chirico, an Italian painter of Greek birth—born 1888, died 1978. So far as I am aware, no one has identified when Lewis saw one of De Chirico's paintings, and certainly the painter's name does not appear in the indices of the three volumes of Lewis's letters. Lewis does not realize—as shown in his title—that De Chirico kept the *De* as part of his family name. I do not suggest any great mystery is involved in Lewis having seen the paintings of a twentieth-century artist. De Chirico was not an artist who produced a limited number of canvases—he was nearly a mass producer, and he also tended to repeat his topics. Perhaps one of the museums in Oxford or one of the Colleges has an example of what may be called the two-horse paintings by De Chirico;² certainly some journal may have reprinted one; some individual in Britain or Ireland who knew Lewis may at least have seen one and described it to Lewis. After all, Lewis's best friend, Arthur Greeves, was an artist and studied at one time in Paris (Hooper, "Introduction" to *They Stand Together*, 19). No doubt Lewis knew others who were interested in art.

By De Chirico's "two horse" paintings is meant his series in which two horses—one lighter colored than the other—are on an edge of a lake or the coastline of a sea, with, most often, a section of a classical column in the sand near their feet. At least one such painting has the head of a classical statue in the sand rather than a column section; another substitutes a zebra for one of the horses. In the background on the shore is one or more classical buildings, sometimes in a ruined condition, sometimes not. Often, they are not clear enough for their condition to be certain. I do not know how many paintings De Chirico did in this series, but some brief checking of the internet under his name should turn up six or seven reproductions. The *WikiArt* collection of images related to him contains four of this series (as of 16 May 2016), and they are all given their titles in English, as translations of the original Italian. One of a palomino and a brown horse, facing to the viewer's right, is labelled simply "Two Horses by a Lake." One of a white horse and a black, both with two feathers attached by bands to their heads—two blue feathers for the white horse, two yellow for the black—and with a billowing red cloth attached to the black horse's

2 I wrote the Ashmolean Museum and asked about such a painting in its collection, but it does not possess any such (Casley).

back by a yellow strap—both horses facing the viewer's left, is titled "The Divine Horses." The other two titles are "Antique Horses on the Aegean Shore" (horses facing the viewer's right, with two parts of a column, one on the shore, one in the shallow coastal water—the light-colored horse in front, the brown with its head turned to the other) and "The Horses of Apollo" (horses slightly turned to the viewer's left but close to facing forward, with two sections of a column in the sand, the brown horse in front, the lighter in back—both have red ribbons around their bodies, backs and bellies). These four were painted in the period from 1963 through 1974, but at least one such painting is dated to 1928 ("Cavalli in riva al mare"—that is, horses on the seashore). It has a classical head in the sand; the horses, facing the viewer's left, are brown in back, white with blue shadows in front ("Giorgio De Chirico: Image Results," as of 7 June 2016). For reasons that will be apparent later, if De Chirico painted one of these scenes in which the horses were wearing crowns, that must have been the version Lewis saw. But such a version is not necessary for Lewis to have used the imagery he did.³

In some ways, De Chirico is an appropriate painter for Lewis to have been conscious of. De Chirico began his professional career as a modernist. In the years 1909 to 1919 (thus including World War I) he was part of an Italian movement called the Metaphysical School. He painted largely empty cityscapes, with shadows, and then gradually turned to "cluttered storerooms, sometimes inhabited by mannequin-like hybrid figures" (Giorgio de Chirico, *Wikipedia*, downloaded 11 February 2015). But next, in 1919 he published an article titled "The Return of Craftsmanship," in which he advocated the return to "traditional methods and iconography." He "adopted a classicizing manner" and "became an outspoken opponent of modern art." "Twenty years later he went further and "adopted a neo-Baroque style." These tidbits from the *Wikipedia* article on him suggest someone who had turned conservative, not religiously, not necessarily morally, but artistically. Lewis, if he knew about De Chirico's progress, would have approved—at least generally, in the leaving of Modernism. The actual result includes a number of thirtyish female nudes in the traditional

3 De Chirico also made at least one statuette of the two similar horses in bronze, titled "Cavalli Antichi," in an "edition" of six copies; presented (via the internet) in a show "Homage to de Chirico," curated by Anthony and Gloria Porcella, appearing at the time of this paper (7 June 2016) in the Rome and later to appear in the New York Galleria Da' d'Oro. <https://www.artsy.net/show/galleria-ca-doro-homage-da-chirico>.

style, so a moralist may have problems.

I have not seen anything that offered De Chirico's comments on this series of his paintings of paired horses, but some points seem obvious. The classical world, the classical culture, is destroyed, as the fallen column suggests. Next, what do the two horses mean? They are impressive horses, so they seem to be a positive statement, in contrast to the broken columns. Their being divine horses and horses of Apollo suggest some sort of spiritual power to them. If one thinks of Apollo as the sun god, then these presumably are the horses which once pulled his chariot across the sky. And what does the lake or sea mean? The Aegean Sea (mentioned in one of the titles) is not between Italy and Greece, of course, but on the far side of Greece, between that country and Turkey. Perhaps it helps that Athens is on that side of the Greek nation. De Chirico may be alluding, in at least *that* one of his titles, to his background in Greece—some sort of survival of the strength of the classical world despite the loss of its physical monuments. He was not only born in Greece but he first studied art there. Admittedly, two horses may be an odd symbol for classical strength *per se*—should one think of the horses pulling the two-man chariots into battles?—but something like this seems to be hinted. However, if “Apollo's horses” (as suggested) are to be identified with the god's daily travel, then the connection is far firmer than a general association of horses with the classics would allow. In some sense, the power of the gods, if not the worship of the gods, survives. And I assume the choice of two horses implies a stallion and a mare, again the symbol of survival—that assumption is made despite the fact that horses pulling a chariot probably would have been two geldings.

In one sense, De Chirico's meaning does not matter, for Lewis's poem tells how he interprets the painting—and he is not concerned with Apollo, or the classical world specifically, so the poem stands on its own. As will be made clear later, Lewis's poem seems to be a reflection on World Wars I and II.

III. LEWIS'S STANZA FORM AND HIS STANZA SEQUENCE

Before considering what Lewis meant by his poem, I would like to discuss the formal aspects of his versification. No certain poetic form goes with the generic content in the modern version of the ekphrasis. W.H. Auden, who wrote in both free verse and traditional forms in his career, used free verse for his famous pictorial description. But, while the rhythm is that of prose, he has rhymed all but one of

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the lines—and that one, with the end word of “place,” off- rhymes with “course” and “horse” later on.⁴ The prose rhythm can be shown by the first four clauses of the poem, which cover four lines:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along[.]

One subject and verb per line: they were (never) wrong, they understood, it takes (place), someone (else) is eating, opening, or walking. But the appositive “The Old Masters” carries over into the second line, the direct object “Its human position” carries over into the third line—and after three lines of (perhaps) five stresses each, suddenly the fourth line runs technically to ten stresses and rhetorically to at least eight.

Obviously this contrasts with what Keats wrote. Keats had developed his monostrophic ode form of a quatrain and a sestet (with some minor experiments)—in effect, a shortened sonnet appearing as a stanza. He used it or some variation of it in five of his six 1819 odes.⁵ The iambic pentameter he inherited from the sonnet. The richness of imagery he had learned primarily from Shakespeare’s sonnets. “Ode to a Grecian Urn” is well enough known that it does not need quotation.

What then does Lewis do in the form of his poem? Obviously from looking at the poem, one immediately notes it is written in quatrains, the first three lines of each stanza beginning at the same point and the fourth line indented. I would suggest that these first three lines seem to be heptameters: consider the first line:

Two sóvereign hórses stánding ón the sánd. There áre no mén[.]

Seven stresses. As I have printed it here, it is an iambic heptameter line. Now, I agree that rhetorically a reader who is not delighted by meter may not accent the *on*; a reader who is trained dramatically may add stress to *two* and may shift the accent from *are* to *no*. But the

4 Technically, the rhymes of the two stanzas are ABCAEDDBFGFGE HHIJKKIJ. The off-rhyme is C and GG. Also, technically Auden ends with an off-rhyme of “shone” (long o) and “on” (short o), set between two other words ending in “n”: “green” and “seen.”

5 The five odes written in ten-or-eleven-line stanzas are “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Indolence,” “Ode on Melancholy,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” and “To Autumn.” “Ode to Psyche” is the exception to the monostrophic odes; it fits the pseudo-Pindaric (or Cowleyan) tradition in English.

underlying meter seems to be there.

Likewise I would suggest the fourth line of each stanza seems to be a hexameter: consider the last line of the second stanza:

The pléasant pástures, résonant with their stórmy chárge.

Six stresses. Despite the falling rhythms of four words in the line considered by themselves—*pleasant, pastures, resonant, and stormy*—the iambic meter for the line as a whole is basic, with, however, one substitution of an anapest for an iamb: the *-onant* of *resonant* followed by the accented *with*. A rhetorical reading may drop the accent on that *with*.

I have been careful to say that the first three lines of each stanza *seem* to be iambic, but I would now like to modify that, suggesting the impulse in the first line to stress the *no* is correct. Lewis is writing a longer line than is often used in English poetry. He needs to make certain that the lines do not break into smaller units, since English poetry usually consists of four-stress and five-stress lines, tetrameters and pentameters; he needs ways to emphasize his lines as units. In order to do this, he rhymes the second and third lines of each stanza to give emphasis to the lines' ends—*war* and *shore* in the first—but he also does something else to end each of those three lines. He ends each of the unindented lines with a spondee—two accents—usually but not always preceded by a pyrrhic (a contraction of the Latin *pyrrhichius*)—two unaccented syllables. The examples when this is clearest are the third line (“on a báre shóre”), the sixth (“in the greát déarth”), the ninth (“for the fírst tíme”), the tenth (“of the báy, vást”), the fifteenth (“when a dáy shóne”), and the eighteenth (“from the fár síde”). But a reader will find all of the long lines end in spondees. (The only certain example of a line in which there is only one unaccented syllable before the spondee is the second: “thóusand yéars' wár. “On the other hand, the fourteenth line has three unstressed syllables before the spondee: “délicate alárm's góne.” The fifteenth line is more uncertain, partly due to it having fifteen syllables, but it also seems—rather awkwardly—to have three unstressed syllables before the spondee “Éden when a dáy shóne.”) It would be easy to stress that “when,” but I, at least, would then end up with eight stresses in the line. (Only in one case, to be quoted below, do I find Lewis actually having eight accents in a long line.)

It should be noted that the pyrrhic + spondee (together called an ionic foot *a minore*) shows up occasionally in iambic poetry as a substitution for two iambs, but Lewis is doing more than just an

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occasional substitution.

Let me now complicate the metrics one time more. I picked lines that read as iambics to illustrate the meter, but sometimes Lewis is more irregular than my statement suggests. Here is the example with what seems to be not seven but eight stresses: “Déath-shárp across great séas, a séminal bréeze from the fár side” (l.18). Perhaps Lewis was just enjoying the writing of three spondees into one line. I have used that one line to suggest the irregularities; but, since I marked the meter of the fourth line of one stanza above, to show the nearly iambic meter, let me add markings to the other fourth lines, to show, more thoroughly, that Lewis is often to a mild degree irregular but mainly iambic:

Are rólled in a cóld évening when thére is ráin in the áir. (l.4)

An iamb, a pyrrhic + a spondee, a fourth paeon, an iamb, and an anapest. (The accent on “there” is to set up the rhyme with “air.” Otherwise, one might well accent “when.”)

They hált smélling the sált in the áir, and whínny with their líps. (l.12)

An iamb, a trochee, an iamb, an anapest, an iamb, a fourth paeon. (Although I call the first four syllables an iamb + a trochee, the effect is a spondee between two unaccented syllables. If one wants classical terminology, the four syllables become an antipast.)

Fírst upon tóssing mánes and glóssy flánk at pláy. (l.16)

A trochee, an iamb, an iamb, an iamb, an iamb, an iamb.

The óffer, is it? The próphecy, of a Hóuyhnhnm’s lánd? (l.20)

An iamb, an iamb, an anapest, a light iamb, an anapest, an iamb. (According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Houyhnhnm” is pronounced *hwíhn m*, although it looks to me as if Swift had intended three syllables—a drawn-out whinny. If so, “-hnhnm’s land” would be an anapest. A word about that sudden introduction of “light iamb”: the English tend to not stress the ends of polysyllabic words such as “prophecy,” so I may be giving an American stress upon that ending. If so, perhaps instead the “of” following gets a mild stress, or a theoretic stress, or a rhetorical stress. Then one would call the fourth foot an anapest and the fifth an iamb, reversing the way they are noted here. Or one could call the fourth foot a pyrrhic and the fifth an anapest, making the line short one of the usual six stresses.)

My major point is that Lewis is writing, according to my scansion of the fourth lines—in which I am establishing metrical feet based on

the positioning of the stresses—in a six-stress line, most often in an iambic rhythm, but always with one or more different metrical feet in a line. Scansion is something of an art, not a pure science, so another might mark the stresses differently or divide the feet differently. But I think my basic point is solid enough. Lewis, whether or not he was closely analytic about his meter, seems to have planned six stresses per fourth line and wanted enough of an iambic rhythm to fit his ear for the English language. He was not rigid about the number of syllables per line being twelve, as pure iambs would call for (cf. the chart in end-note 6). My analysis of the longer lines—those of seven stresses basically—has not been as thorough, but I believe it would have a similar result: five iambs and a pyrrhic + spondee as the underlying pattern, but with one or more variations in each line.

The third thing Lewis does to strengthen his long lines—both the heptameters and the hexameters—is build internal rhymes whenever he can manage it. They do not appear in any set pattern, but they help keep lines from breaking down into patterns simply because they unify lines without appearing regularly. In what was quoted above, “great seas, a seminal breeze, “ in the eighteenth line, rhymes the stresses in the third and fifth metrical feet. In the first line, one finds “horses standing on the sand,” rhyming the stressed syllables of the fourth and fifth feet. In the second line, “the houses fallen, a thousand years’ war” rhymes the stressed syllables of the third and fifth feet, as did the eighteenth. In the third line, “graves, and bones, and waves” rhymes the stressed syllables of the third and fifth feet again. In the fourth line, “rolled in a cold evening” rhymes the first and second stressed syllables. Later in that same fourth line, one finds “there is rain in the air,” rhyming the fourth and sixth stressed syllables. (Not all of the subsequent lines have internal rhymes, but most do.)

These comments are intended to touch on the technical aspects which are unusual in this poem, most of them going beyond the standard versification in what is now called “formal poetry,” meaning poetry with regular meter, regular stanzas if stanzas are used, and a standard amount of alliteration and assonance. I assume Lewis basically invented the form of “On a Picture by Chirico”; but, since he sometimes used forms invented by his friends, such as in his “March for Strings, Kettledrums, and Sixty-three Dwarfs “which is an adaptation of the verse form invented by J.R.R. Tolkien for his “Errantry,” I may just be ignorant of the precise source. However it *does* seem rather like the long lines, reversed, of Lewis’s “On the Death of Charles Williams, “which consisted of lines with three spondees

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in the first part, followed by two iambs and/or anapests. *That* form Lewis adapted from Owen Barfield's "The Mermaid" (2: 665), except that Barfield had only one foot, iambic or anapestic, after the three spondees. If this conjecture is correct, then Lewis's poem derives its form, in part, in an inverted way, from Barfield.

But one should also note that classical meters had several verse forms ending in spondees (of duration, of course, not stress): the dactylic hexameter, the scazon, and the Sapphic stanza. None of these are identical to Lewis's poem in meaningful ways. If one looks at just the last four syllables of a dactylic hexameter line, one finds two short syllables and then two long syllables, parallel to two unstressed syllables and two stressed syllables in English. But, of course, this ignores the fact that the two short syllables are only the last part of a dactyl. Lewis *could* have been influenced by those four classical syllables, but it certainly is not provable. The dactyls of the dactylic hexameter line are what he would have been taught as a boy. The scazon also has a barely possible influence. It has the same number of metrical feet as the short lines of Lewis's poem, and the scazon is normally iambic before its closing spondee. The length and the iambic aspect are interesting, but Lewis's short lines do not end in spondees—in contrast to the three longer lines in each quatrain. Perhaps Lewis's longer line could be considered as like a scazon with a pyrrhic foot inserted before the closing spondee—but that is the same as saying the longer line is *not exactly* that of a scazon. At best, the classical models of ending lines with spondees may have encouraged Lewis to experiment with the accentual equivalent. (Something about the Sapphic stanza will be said below.)

The effect of the poem's artistry is intended, of course, to make the poem memorable. Auden's decision to rhyme his free verse poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" formalizes the comments about the master artists. Keats' invention of the ten-line stanza for "Ode on a Grecian Urn" enabled him to be descriptive with sensuous details, while not using a small sonnet sequence that would not have felt like stanzas in a unified poem. Because of the pentameter lines, Keats has space to ask rhetorical questions, write apostrophes to the figures on the urn, including one to the unseen town of those in the religious procession, and invent a speech by the urn at the end of the poem—in other words, to describe, to emphasize, and to elaborate rhetorically. In short, the ten lines of iambic pentameter, when combined with any needed numbers of stanzas, allowed him to develop his lyric topic in a more leisurely way than, for example, a smaller stanza would have

permitted. Lewis's quatrains may hint at a classical lyric form, with three long lines and an indented line, as is done in the Sapphic stanza. But the classical poem has basically three lines of eleven syllables and a final line of five—which is far shorter than Lewis's poem with all of its lines usually running fourteen or fifteen syllables, despite the indented appearance.⁶ Lewis's choice of longer lines allows him to develop his content, as will be seen, almost like a piece of fiction.

Thus, I do not come to a certain conclusion about the influences on Lewis's poetic form. The appearance of the poem, with three lines and then one indented, looks as if it is meant to suggest a larger version of the Sapphic stanza, and the use of a spondee at the end of first three lines of each stanza also hint at a classical source. But the playing with regular spondees in poems, if not at the end of lines, had been started by Barfield. (He had also used some internal rhymes, and he indented the fourth lines—a chorus—of his stanzas.) Perhaps there are other elements in the stanza-planning that I have missed.

IV. AN INTERPRETATION OF LEWIS'S POEM

The first sentence of Lewis's "On a Picture by Chirico" is this: "Two sovereign horses standing on the sand." Perhaps Lewis was moved by one of De Chirico's paintings that was titled "The Divine Horses," "The Horses of Apollo," or some such claim for the horses—moved to claim sovereignty for the horses in his poem. Or, possibly, as was said before, De Chirico has a painting in which he gives crowns to the two horses. The painting in which each horse has a headpiece with two large feathers comes close to this, among those located. At any rate, Lewis calls his horses "sovereign," which prepares for how the poem will end by saying the horses are "new-crown'd" (l. 19).

6 If one counts the syllables (not the stresses) in the lines of Lewis's poem, one is hard pressed even to say that the fourth lines of the quatrains are shorter than the long lines. By my count, the number of syllables in Lewis's lines are these:

1—14, 2—14, 3—14, 4—15;
 5—14, 6—14, 7—16, 8—13;
 9—14, 10—15, 11—14, 12—15;
 13—14, 14—16, 15—15, 16—12;
 17—15, 18—15, 19—14, 20—14.

Despite the classical appearance of Lewis's stanzas, 3 un-indented + 1 indented, Sappho's 11 + 11 + 11 + 5 is more lyrical than Lewis's longer lines.

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The first two quatrains develop into a history of the future, reminding the reader that Lewis was a reader and a writer of science fiction, some of it just barely laid in the future at the time of publication, like *That Hideous Strength*, and some of it still not passed the time of its setting, like “Ministering Angels.” In the poem, the first quatrain indicates that mankind is now dead after a thousand years of war, so this is the far distant future, indeed. The second stanza describes the final men as “stunted men” unable to hunt down, and then eat, these two horses. Lewis’s reading of H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* may have suggested a degenerative development—a downward evolution—of mankind. (The upward evolution of the horses is not from Wells, of course.)

The third quatrain says that the two horses “have reached the end of land”—that is, a bay with salt water is before them. And, for the one time in the poem, the month of the action is mentioned—March. Besides rhyming with “arches” later in the tenth line of the poem, the name of the month derives from Mars, the Roman god of war—and the thousand years of war makes this an appropriate month for the temporal setting. Finally, in England, from A.D. 1155 to 1751, March 25 was the start of the year, not January 1—so the name also may suggest the new beginnings, the really fresh New Year, being described in the poem. (Lewis, as a scholar writing a literary history about Britain in the sixteenth century, would have been quite conscious of March 25 as New Year’s Day.) Admittedly, the poem says it is in “early March,” so the actual new beginning of the year and of the horses’ kingdom must await their crossing the bay.

The fourth stanza contrasts the two horses of the poem with the horses ridden today (i.e., 1949). Lewis’s freedom to include his reader in a first-person reference (“we,” l.13) shows the freedom of the ode form—Keats, for example, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in addressing the urn, says that it “tease[s] *us* out of thought” (l.44, stress added).⁷ Lewis goes on to compare these two horses to the two in the Garden of Eden. This may seem to distance the poem from the science-fiction, being not a Darwinian acceptance of horses developing rather than being created. But one remembers that Lewis retold an Adam and Eve story in a scientific romance format as *Perelandra*. And, of course,

7 Keats also uses “our” (ll. 4) and “ours” (l. 48); the first may be a plural substitution for an authorial “my,” but the second, in context, means “mankind’s.” Auden does not use a first person pronoun, but some of his ode is certainly colloquial: “the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” (ll. 12-13).

the comparison to the unfallen “breeding-pair in Eden” prepares for what is to follow.

The final stanza heightens the religious theme. It begins “They are called.” Lewis does not say that God calls them, leaving it implicit. “Change overhangs them.” Evolution, or God, is developing their ability to speak. Lewis just says, “Now their neighing is half speech.” That is, they are becoming rational beings. And all of this is in the first line of the stanza. The predicted leaving of “the places where Man[kind] died” suggests a new beginning for the horses, and Lewis ends with an allusion to the Fourth Voyage of *Gulliver’s Travels*. Lewis knew, of course, that those voyages to undiscovered areas of the Earth’s globe were the forerunners of modern science fiction, which substitutes far planets for far Earthen lands.

This pair of changed horses, then, are equivalent to Adam and Eve. Readers of Lewis may remember the “Socratic myth” that Lewis offers in the fifth chapter of *The Problem of Pain* about mankind’s evolution; it begins:

For long centuries God perfected the animal form which was to become the vehicle of humanity and the image of Himself. He gave it . . . jaws and teeth and throat capable of articulation, and a brain sufficiently complex to execute all the material motions whereby rational thought is incarnated. The creature may have existed for ages in this state before it became [the equivalent of] man. . . . Then, in the fullness of time, God caused to descend upon this organism, both on its psychology and physiology, a new kind of consciousness which could say “I” and “me,” which could look upon itself as an object, which knew God, which could make judgements of truth, beauty, and goodness, and which was so far above time that it could perceive time flowing past. (65)⁸

Likewise, readers of Lewis will remember Aslan’s gazing on and breathing on pairs of animals in *The Magician’s Nephew*, with a flash of something like fire, making them Talking Animals (113-14). And some of the readers of Lewis may remember his letter of 10 January 1952 to Sister Penelope, a nun in the Community of St. Mary the Virgin, Wantage, Oxfordshire, to whom Lewis wrote that he also “had pictured Adam as being, physically, the son of two anthropoids, on whom, after birth, God worked the miracle which made him Man . . .” (3: 156). The passage in *The Problem of Pain* suggests the ages of

8 My thanks to Charlie W. Starr who reminded me of Lewis’s Socratic myth in *The Problem of Pain*.

development, that in *The Magician's Nephew*, although it speeds up the process, shows that a variety of animals may become the equivalent of Adam and Eve, and the third, again in a speeded-up process, reinforces the prior animality of Adam. None are a new creation from the dust; all are influenced in a general way by Darwinian imagery (not, of course, in a non-religious way). It is in this context that the development of the poem's horses may be understood. The "new kind of consciousness" seems to have not descended on them since "their neighing is [only] half speech," but that development clearly is close.

If Lewis were thoroughly developing his poem as science fiction, he would have had to answer some questions that he does not raise. The major one: how were the two horses to get across the bay, or to another land mass perhaps, when there is no suggestion of their having a boat or the equivalent of hands to build one? Perhaps Lewis simply remembered how Gulliver first saw a Houyhnhnm hold a root "between his hoof and pastern" (Swift, ch. 2; cf. a fuller discussion in ch.9). Obviously, although Lewis is using science-fictional material, his major concern is with it as a parable, not as an end, in and of itself.

Let me return to the form of the poem. Although this discussion so far may have sounded like a typical summary of content, such as is done sometimes by people having problems doing anything but echoing back what a writer has already said, I hope that, beyond such details as the implications of March, this survey has also suggested how carefully Lewis has developed steps in his use of the quatrains. In the first, he introduced the two horses and gave the basic fictional background of the long-lasting war and the dying off of mankind. In the second he discusses the survival of the two horses to this point. In the third he establishes their presence by the bay. In the fourth he contrasts these two horses with horses at present and, in a comparison, refers to horses in Eden. In the fifth, he suggests these horses are to be the replacement of mankind. (Incidentally, this is not the only science-fictional work that has discussed mankind's replacement in this world. One example, if one ignores its final twist, is Alfred Bester's story "Adam and No Eve.") But the point is, Lewis is organizing by quatrains, not doing a simple narrative, for which some type of verse without breaks would be appropriate—blank verse, heroic couplets, or the type of iambic hexameter couplets which Lewis used in his (partial) translation of Vergil's *Aeneid*. This organizational emphasis may not be the most important part of a poem's artistry, but it nevertheless adds to the effectiveness of the poem.

One can also notice Lewis's use of imagery to make his points as

a legitimate part of his skill. The thousand years of war concludes, he says, “in charnel, graves, and bones, and waves on a bare shore” (l.3). The bay, with “falling arches”—presumably the bridges of the earlier time—is “vast / And empty in bitter sunset light, where once the ships passed”(10-11).⁹ The horses ridden in the present time have an “old look / Of half-indignant melancholy and delicate alarm” (ll.13-14). I leave it to others who have ridden more horses than I to pass judgment on Lewis’s summary of equine attitudes, but as a suggestion of a suppressed race it does well. The pair of horses in Eden had “tossing manes and glossy flanks at play” (l.16). (Since the poem refers to the horses as a “breeding pair,” this use of “play” may be, but need not be, sexual.) Even if Lewis is often considered didactic, he knew that good poetry is built on images, not on generalizations, perhaps especially not on moral generalizations. Longfellow’s “The Psalm of Life” belongs to the Victorian Age, not the second half of the twentieth century with its Imagistic tradition.

However if “On a Picture by Chirico” is only a versified, and nicely written, scientific romance, then it has a certain type of aesthetic appeal and, perhaps, historical interest within the science-fictional community. But I want to approach the question of the importance of the poem through some comparisons and classifications and then a clearer statement of the poem’s meaning.

I have said that “On a Picture by Chirico” is an example of an ekphrastic poem. That, by itself, does not guarantee its value, for not all ekphrastic verses are major works. Alastair Fowler names over twenty-five modern poems which contain descriptions of paintings or photographs (115-118). I will not name the poets, but it is unlikely, the more writers one has in a genre, or subgenre, that all of them will be important. Also, I have compared Lewis’s poem to “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and Lewis’s poem may be considered an ode—in the general sense of an important lyric, in the tradition of Pindar and Horace, if its readers can agree it is important enough. At least, the typical structure of Pindar’s surviving odes has a mythic narrative in the middle, so there is nothing unlike an ode in Lewis’s poem being narrative; and the scientific-romance content may be considered as a modern “myth”—a narrative presentation of a modern world view. This is the *Weltanschauung* presented in Wells’ evolutionary degeneration of mankind into the Eloi and the Morlocks and eventual disappearance of all humans. Species develop and species die off.

9 “Falling arches” unfortunately echoes the podiatric “fallen arches.”

Further, the writing of “On a Picture by Chirico” in a series of stanzas does not outlaw it from being an ode, any more than Keats’s poem is ruled out. Seven of Pindar’s odes are monostrophic. So, to some degree by content, by form, by tradition, Lewis’s poem is within the possible classification of an ode. I realize that this discussion of whether Lewis’s poem can be called an ode is a trivial argument over terminology outside of two points, still to be argued. The second, to be developed starting in the next paragraph, is whether the poem is significant enough in what it says. But the first point is that Lewis was concerned with Pindar at the same time as he wrote his ekphrasis. That is, in the same year, 1949, as Lewis wrote “On a Picture by Chirico,” he wrote his long poem titled “Arrangement of Pindar” in eighty-three unrhymed lines. I do not attempt to analyze its meter, but the lines are long—the first line runs sixteen syllables. The poem opens describing the young men dancing Pindar’s ode (the word “ode” is not used, and no attempt to shape a strophe, antistrophe, epode pattern is made); the closing lines speak of the audience for the ode; the long middle sections recreate an example of Pindar’s content. Lewis is able to present a moral statement in terms of Greek mythology; perhaps the most important passage is when Herakles is seized with “sweet desire” upon looking upon the trees of Hyperborea (ll. 49-55)—although Pindar says madness is the result of longing for that place (l. 58). Lewis’s understanding of *Sehnsucht* and Pindar’s, as Lewis presents him, are opposed. Nevertheless, “Arrangement of Pindar” shows that Lewis thought in terms of the significance of the classical ode during his time of writing the ekphrasis.¹⁰

But is “On a Picture by Chirico” important enough? I think there is a way to consider the meaningfulness of the poem. One of the striking things about Don W. King’s recent collection of Lewis’s poems is that one can now, fairly easily, compare Lewis’s poems written and published about the same time. I am interested in the poems published soon after World War II, since “On a Picture by Chirico” appeared in *The Spectator* in 1949. Here are the ones I find most meaningful for my purpose. “On the Atomic Bomb (Metrical

10 Lewis thought of Williams’s *Taliessin through Logres* as being Pindaric. He mentions the comparison briefly at the end of a 1945 obituary (“Charles Walter Stansby Williams,” 148) and in a 1946 review of *Taliessin through Logres* (“Charles Williams,” 137); but his clearest statement of the comparison comes in a review of *Taliessin through Logres* before World War II, in 1938 (“A Sacred Poem,” 125, 135). These page citations are from the collection of Lewis’s reviews, *Image and Imagination*.

Experiment” (pp. 335-36) says that mortals have known they had to die, sooner or later; the Bomb has not brought death in the world for the first time. “On Receiving Bad News” (p. 336) does not define the news but offers a comparison of the receiver to a tired horse not yet close to its stable. “Consolation” (pp. 336-37) ironically celebrates England’s appeasement of Communist Russia after the war. “Pan’s Purge” (pp. 342-43) tells of the wiping out of the current civilization in which men had taken full control of nature; in it, unlike “On a Picture by Chirico,” some small numbers of humans were allowed to survive Pan’s destruction of the warped culture—also, the poem is parallel to some elements of *That Hideous Strength* of about the same time (the cleansing carried out by Pan instead of the Oyéresu). “Dangerous Oversight” (pp. 344-45) tells of a “merry-hearted” king who was defeated by his enemies, driven back to “a small river-isle” (l.14), and finally killed by his enemies’ cannons (“the grey batteries spoke,” l.22). (This example will be returned to.) The first two of these four were written and published in 1945; the third was perhaps written in 1945 and certainly published in 1946; the fourth was perhaps written in 1946 or 1947 and certainly published in 1947; the fifth was written and published in 1947. “On a Picture by Chirico” was written and published slightly later—in 1949.

In short, I believe “On a Picture by Chirico” is a post-World War II poem which reflects, in its thousand-year war, the century of two World Wars and England’s losses—both of men in the First and of much of the city of London and other bombed areas in the Second. Rationing and scarcity continued after the Second, which had ended with two atomic explosions. Those Bombs suggested any future war would involve the complete destruction of all large cities and massive numbers of people. Lewis’s poem on the Atomic Bomb involves a sort of Stoic acceptance of the weapon—he says it is not up to destroying the whole world—but only predicts a future of more wars. The other poems suggest various disasters or failures. “On a Picture by Chirico,” in particular, suggests the sequence of wars will end by wiping out mankind. In short, the years after World War II were not happy times in England, and a number of Lewis’s poems of the period reflect this. A somber facing of death, a passing of expectations, a failing of hope that the future will be better—are not these the materials for a great ode?

“Dangerous Oversight” is like “On a Picture by Chirico” in a special way: both of them avoid, in different ways, a complete downbeat ending. “Dangerous Oversight” sets up its merry monarch

who is defeated in a series of battles and finally is killed (with his queen, his fool, and his chaplain) on his river island—the island may be meant to suggest Britain, also an island and also bombarded, in one way or another, during World War II. But Lewis has a “tree fair-fruited” growing from their dead, “unpolluted flesh” (ll. 25-26). The last three quatrains (of the nine in the poem) describe this tree growing taller than the “Alps and Andes” (l. 32); its shadow is “poison to the evil-eyed” (l.34). Thus, belatedly, the enemies of the king are killed. Perhaps there is some specific myth or poem that Lewis has in mind, but I do not recognize it. Of course, in some endings of the ballad “Barbara Allen,” briars and roses grow from separate graves and eventually intertwine; but that is a relatively small celebration of a human love. That Lewis compares the tree’s “smell and taste” to those of Eden (ll. 27-28) suggests this is meant to be a gaining of immortality (through the Tree of Life) despite death in this world—but that tied to the death of the enemies seems unusual. If this is meant to be the Day of Judgment, the tree is a non-Biblical image. The resolution with mankind’s complete defeat in this world in “On a Picture by Chirico” likewise has a reference to Eden—for the origin of horses. But it is not so much a Last Judgment poem as a Start Over poem. At any rate, both of these works go beyond the death of a joyous, almost Chestertonian king and the death of the remnants of humankind to a celebration—of a tree, of two horses.

I do not know if an anthology of post-World War II poems has ever been published as a book of residual-war poems. If it were, of course, the publishers would want to collect poems that actually referred to the war, as looking back at it, and “On the Atomic Bomb (Metrical Experiment)” certainly would be appropriate. But if a metaphoric or symbolic way of dealing with the war and post-war were allowed, then Lewis’s “On a Picture by Chirico” would be just as appropriate. His ode suggests a complete despair over mankind’s tendency to fight one war after another—that is, the despair is complete—unless, like Gulliver, one admires the Houyhnhnms.

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