

CSL



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FRESH VIEWS OF HUMANKIND IN LEWIS'S POEMS

by
John Kirkpatrick

The preliminary reading this evening is not from Lewis but from Robert Burns, a poem which gives the motto for this whole paper. This motto was read to you in October '77 by Lois Westerlund in her paper, "It All Depends on the Point of View" (a paper on Lewis's Out of the Silent Planet). But with apologies to Lois, I would rather try to read you the whole of Burns's poem. Being in Lowland Scots, it needs both a glossary and also a born-and-bred Scot to read it. Would that I had that ability of my grandfather.

To a Louse

On Seeing one on a Lady's Bonnet at Church.

(This Bulletin is hardly for the purpose of reprinting 48 lines of Burns, which may easily be read elsewhere; but here is the final stanza with the motto.)

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!

It wad frae monie a blunder free us
And foolish notion:
What airs in dress and gait wad lea'e us,
And ev'n Devotion!

Quote of the Month

We see the thing in a new way; because the poet has found the proper scraps of ordinary seeing which, when put together, will unite into a new and extraordinary seeing.

-The Personal Heresy

Lewis left very little comment on Burns. The most definite is in a letter of 1929 to his brother: "The Scotch have a curious way of rendering wearisome to the outside world whatever they admire; I daresay Burns is quite a good poet -- really."

But Lewis must have felt a deep kinship with that final stanza, simply because so many of his writings radiate helpfulness toward self-knowledge. He constantly reminds us of Screwtape complaining (in Letter #4): "the Enemy ... is cynically indifferent to the dignity of His position, and ours, as pure spirits; -- and to human animals on their knees He pours out self-knowledge in a

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quite shameless fashion."

. Turning to these poems of Lewis which give fresh views of humankind, it seems best not to try to range them chronologically, but to group them by their differences of approach: humankind in relation

- 1) to other kinds,
- 2) to other humans,
- 3) to the divine, within us or outside us.

In each group there will be seven, and those of you who brought copies of the Poems (to follow along) will hear some different readings. These variants are all from the earlier printings, mostly from Punch. Lewis's revisions rarely but occasionally lose some degree of the oral communicability, which is apt here and there to speak more naturally in the earlier versions.

Each title is followed by the page number in the book of Poems (faithfully edited in 1963-64 by our good friend Walter Hooper from Lewis's own revisions, R meaning revised), and by details from the earlier versions used in these readings. Poems from Spirits in Bondage and from Fear No More are given with the kind permission of the trustees of Lewis's estate.

First of all, a poem which views humanity as insensitive or cruel toward nature and natural creatures. This view, now called ecological, is so familiar that it can hardly be fresh except as a fresh statement of it. In The Spectator, September 1945, this poem was entitled Under Sentence; in the book of Poems it is called The Condemned. Its last two stanzas are spoken by a collective voice, as if by the whole cast of characters of Lewis's poem Impenitence.

The Condemned (p. 63R)

Variants: line

- 5, for "that are hedgerow": being woodland
- 7, for "or Borrow, strange": we unused
- 9, for "to you, friendly": friendly to you
- 10, for "have understood": understand

The next poem, The Magician and the Dryad (in Punch, July 1940), shows Lewis's genius for making a purely imaginary non-human character come alive with a roundness and richness that is vividly appealing. The magician insists on seeing the spirit of the tree in quasi-human or mythical form. He is a mixture of different motivations: -- sheer power-complex, to bring about the change -- some sincere interest, to enlarge her experience -- but also a haughty condescension, not bothering to try to calculate the

effect on her. One result is that he is treated to a very fresh view of some of humankind's most valued abilities.

Or, on the other hand, this dryad may not have been so purely imaginary. Walter Hooper says, in his preface to the Poems, "Lewis did not, of course, believe in the factual existence of Dryads (any more than Spenser or Milton); nor did he believe in their non-existence as a nihilist would." But Lewis's extraordinary insights into all kinds of things may have included even some intuition of the spirit in a tree, more than just through poetic imagination. If so, it would probably have been unknown to himself, because his faithfulness to the Christian Church was to a strict orthodoxy.

The poem is in iambic heptameters, unrhymed but with an inner rhyme in each line -- not always a word-rhyme, often merely a sound-rhyme, -- as when "sponsor" is echoed by "concentrate", or "dim felicity" by "Nymph", even "drizzle" by "indivisible".

The Magician and the Dryad (p. 8 R)

Variant:

line 15, for "blotted out the ambient":
come between her and the

The whole range of human cruelty toward the world of nature might conceivably justify the destruction of humanity that Lewis imagined in Pan's Purge (in Punch, January 1947). Like The Great Divorce, it is presented as a dream or nightmare. It is mostly in iambic heptameters, in 7-line stanzas, lines 2-4-7 rhyming with Pan, lines 1-3-5 each having two inner sound-rhymes.

Pan's Purge (p. 5)

Later on, Lewis wrote two marches, which he called Narnian Suite. The second march, for giants, appeared in Punch in November 1953, the year of The Silver Chair, so it may refer to the giants whose cookbook included "man pie". It reappeared two years later in The Last Battle, on p. 82 -- "Even Tirian's heart grew lighter as he walked ahead of them humming an old Narnian marching song which had the refrain:

Ho, rumble, rumble, rumble, rumble,
Rumble drum belaboured."

The first march, for dwarfs, was first printed in the book of Poems, but with no date, though the two might be coeval. It too is mentioned in The Last Battle, on p. 71 -- "And the Dwarfs struck up the queer little marching song which goes with the drumbeat, and off they tramped into the darkness."

of the whole book of poems contradicts him, especially this next one. In principle, it is simply quatrains of iambic heptameter, with ballad-rhyme a-b-c-b, the unrhymed lines having his usual variety of inner sound-rhymes. But Lewis has been metrically very free, each liberty vivifying the image or thought with deeply musical spontaneity.

The Day with a White Mark (p. 28 R)

Variants: line

5-8: (7-8 before 5-6)

14: And glimmering roots were visibly
at work below one's feet,
18, for "and ice-sharp": the ice-keen
20, for "kindly": friendly

In passing to the third group of poems, fresh views of humankind in relation to the divine, we have a bridge which Lewis has provided, entitled On a Theme from Nicolas of Cusa. Cusa is the Latin name of Kues, a small German city east of Luxembourg, where Nicolas was born in 1401. Though he rose to be Cardinal, he anticipated Copernicus in his view that the earth goes around the sun. Fortunately for him, the entrenched officialdom seemed not yet fully aware of how its entrenched dogma was thus threatened, and Nicolas died a peaceful death in 1464.

On a Theme from Nicolas of Cusa (p. 70 R)

Variants: line

4, for "tight-skinned": the bloom of
5, for "when": as
7, for "Annihilate": Obliterate

In The Magician and the Dryad we had an almost clinical contrasting of aspects of human and arboreal bodies. The next poem, On Being Human, has an equally clinical air, but contrasting the human with the angelic. It was printed in Punch in May 1946, a year after That Hideous Strength, and it seems based on Lewis's concept of an eldil as having a body made of light.

The 8-line stanzas are rhymed as pairs of quatrains a-b-c-b, the unrhymed lines having inner rhymes, in the last of which "living" is echoed by "privacy" with an English short "i".

On Being Human (p. 34 R)

Variants: line

2, for "Behold": Perceive
9, for "of the": of a
18, for "field new-mown": new-mown field
20, for "Sea-smells": Sea-smell
22, for "smell": scent
31, for "tingling": piercing
34, for "Guards": Shields
34, for "big": bright

In the early book, Spirits in Bondage, is a poem called "Our Daily Bread".

It is not about The Lord's Prayer, but sings of mysteries inherent in our daily routines.

In stanza 2, Lewis refers to people who see "archangels in their daily walks" or "Long files of faerie" in "their beans and cabbage-stalks". This kind of clairvoyance has long been familiar to simpler folk with a selfless love of nature, particularly in Keltic lands, but has usually been closed to, and pooh-poohed by, the sophisticated.

In stanza 3, when Lewis writes "I see a strange god's face", it would be good to know if this was literal truth or poetic imagination. If this be possible (and how natural for the unseen world to gratefully foresee Lewis's reinstating a respect for myth), -- both his then-atheistic rationalism and his later orthodoxy would have kept it strictly private.

The poem ends with an apparent reference to Wordsworth's Ode Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood of 1803-6, particularly to these lines:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

"Our Daily Bread"

We need no barbarous words nor solemn spell
To raise the unknown.

It lies before our feet;
There have been men who sank down into Hell
In some suburban street.

And some there are that in their daily walks
Have met archangels fresh from sight of God,
Or watched how in their beans and cabbage-
Long files of faerie trod. \stalks

Often me too the Living voices call
In many a vulgar and habitual place,
I catch a sight of lands beyond the wall,
I see a strange god's face.

And some day this will work upon me so
I shall arise and leave both friends and home
And over many lands a pilgrim go
Through alien woods and foam,

Seeking the last steep edges of the earth
Whence I may leap into that gulf of light
Wherein, before my narrowing Self had birth,
Part of me lived aright.

In 1941, two years into the Second World War, a book of English poetry was published by the Cambridge University Press called Fear No More. It was entirely anonymous, and was a corporate act of creative buoyance and faith, in times of anxiety, directed toward those who might need the kind of comfort or strengthening it might provide. The only name divulged was the signature of John Masefield, as Poet Laureate, on the very brief Foreword dated 17 May 1940.

The book contains four poems of Lewis. Nowadays it is rare, and Walter Hooper had not yet seen it when editing Lewis's Poems, though he recently told me all about it. Three of the four he knew from other sources (Poems, pages 96, stanzas 5-4-6 entitled Break, Sun, my crusted Earth, 113, entitled The World is Round, and 130, entitled Arise my Body). The fourth seems now to exist only in Fear No More (copied below from the copy at Yale). It is about the mystery of the divine spirit within each soul, and is called --

Essence

Thoughts that go through my mind,
I dare not tell them;
The alphabet of kind
Lacks script to spell them.

Yet I remain. My will
Some things yet can;
Thought is still one, and still
I am called a man.

Oh of what kind, how far
Past fire's degree
Of pureness, past a star
In constancy;

Than light, which can possess
Its own outgoing,
How much more one, much less
Division knowing,

That essence must have been
Which still I call
My self, since - thus unclean -
It dies not all.

The exact opposite to such an indivisible unity is Lewis's confession of his inner conflicts in the Italian sonnet called Legion, after the mad Gadarene who was beset by so many devils. As Saint Mark tells it (Ch. 5, v. 9): "And (Jesus) asked him, What is thy name? And he saith unto him, My name is Legion, for we are many." These were the devils that begged to be sent into the herd of swine, who ran down into the Sea of Galilee and were drowned, to the great annoyance of those who were herding them.

Legion (p. 119) Variants: line

3-6:
When pride or pity of self or craving sense
Blunt the mind's edge, now momentarily keen.
Do not by show of hands decide between
My factions; condescend to the pretence
9, for "asked": ask

The poem called Prayer was first printed in the book of Poems with no date. It seems to be a variation of History's song in Pilgrim's Regress, which starts "My heart is empty". In the Poems this is re-titled The Naked Seed, the key-line being "If thou think for me what I cannot think ..." But the way this Prayer calls on "Master" suggests that it may be some years later than Pilgrim's Regress.

Prayer (p. 122)

The Evensong was also first printed in the book of Poems. It seems quite clearly to be a variation on an immortal quatrain from the New England Primer, 1781:-

Now I lay me down to sleep;
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

Lewis's poem has three stanzas, each of eight short lines, with a rhyme scheme that sounds just as simple as it is subtly complex. Line 1 rhymes with 3, 5 with 7, but 2 with 6, all feminine rhymes, and only 4 and 8 make the one masculine rhyme. Lewis may have meant it as a symbol of the contrast between an outer serenity (the verbal music even suggesting the quiet breathing during sleep) and an inner complexity of hidden significances (all too seldom remembered afterwards).

Evensong (p. 128)

(In retrospect, I wonder how interesting any reader could find this printed outline of a primarily musical attempt, addressed to ears, not to eyes. Perhaps its value to the silent reader might be as a witness that musical rhythms, colors, inflections, and balances are natural to all language, -- and as an invitation to have fun imagining how the right verbal music can enliven the sense of any statement.)

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Report of the 119th Meeting
September 14, 1979

After the Chairman for the evening, John Kirkpatrick, had read the essay printed above, the discussion period began with a few preliminary questions and then became almost entirely concerned with Lewis's standing as a poet and with the question of whether his poetry will ever come into its own.

On the question of "rating" Lewis as a 20th century poet, Mr. Kirkpatrick responded that it is really not his concern, and suggested that we are still too close in time to have a proper perspective. Continuing, Mr. Kirkpatrick said Lewis "is certainly one of the most interesting poets I have ever read, though I am an ignoramus in 20th century poetry"; "Every time I go back to Lewis he presents me with something new"; "I have long considered the Great Dance his greatest poem, and I think it qualifies as a 'great poem'."

Present were Linda Bridges, Gene McGovern, Jane Whitlock, Jim Como, Lottie Lindberg, Marilyn Driscoll, Hope Kirkpatrick, Eileen Merchant, Robert Merchant, Mary Gehringer, Don Ryan, William Eddy, Allene Roberts, Russell Roberts, John Carman, Gail Ramshaw Schmidt, Thomas Schmidt, Walter Ramshaw, Bruce Hacker, William Linden, Richard Hodgens, Michael Christensen, W. Winchell, Carol Ann Brown, Loretta K. Brooks, John Martin, Ruth Ramshaw, Joan Duncanson, Peter Stine, Nona Aguilar, Ruth Kahrs, Dorothy Fitzgerald, Gordon Weston, Beverly Arlton, Jack Haynes.

-Report by Robert Merchant

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Financial Report for the year ending
August 31, 1979

Income	
Subscriptions	\$3,305.00
Gifts	116.85
Back Issues	538.33
	<u>\$3,960.18</u>
Expenses	
Printing	\$1,635.30
Postage	1,532.82
Photocopying	322.19
Supplies	199.88
Copyright	130.00
Rent	135.00
Miscellaneous	65.42
Bank	11.51
	<u>\$4,032.12</u>
Balance, August 31, 1978	432.24
Balance, August 31, 1979	360.30
Savings account	171.59
Total Assets	\$ 531.89

Early in That Hideous Strength, the fellows of Bracton College meet to con-

sider, among other items, the state of the college's finances. Commenting upon the Bursar's rather distressing report, the author remarks that "It is very seldom that the affairs of a large corporation, indefinitely committed to the advancement of learning, can be described as being, in a quite unambiguous sense, satisfactory."

In reviewing our own finances, the Eldila find that this appears to be equally true of small organizations. The Eldila are quite unwilling to suggest an increase in our never-yet-changed annual fee of \$7, but we must recognize that our expenses will continue to increase.

In an attempt to resolve this dilemma, the Eldila have decided to establish a new class of membership, to be denoted "Sustaining Member". Payment of a \$25 annual fee admits one to this distinction. The Eldila also appeal to those who feel they can afford some increase over the basic \$7 fee, but not as much as \$25, to increase their contributions accordingly.

The Eldila emphasize that this appeal for increased financial support is entirely voluntary. They would be extremely distressed if any member who does not care to make an increased contribution should therefore discontinue membership.

This invitation for increased support from those members who can afford it will provide those members with an opportunity to demonstrate commitment to the continuation of this unique relationship, in the memory of C.S. Lewis, which is so meaningful and rewarding to us all.

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Forthcoming Meetings

121st Meeting: November 9, 1979
A Celebration of
the Society's
Tenth Anniversary

122nd Meeting: December 14, 1979
Topic: They Stand Together
Chairman: Eugene McGovern

123rd Meeting: January 11, 1980
Topic: "The Eldila in the Space
Trilogy"
Chairman: John Willis, S.J.

Meetings of the Society are held
at 7:30 PM on the second Friday
of the month at
The Salisbury Hotel
123 West 57th Street
Manhattan