**C.S. Lewis: Apologetics and the Poetic Imagination**

Earlier this afternoon, Alister McGrath has explored the various ways in which

C.S. Lewis appeals to reason in his apologetics, though he has pointed out that this appeal to reason and to what he calls ‘reasonableness’ is, in fact, constantly interwoven with an appeal to imagination, a series of invitations to look at things in a new way, to imagine how a world might look if Christianity were the case. I agree with Dr. McGrath that in Lewis’s mature work appeals to reason and imagination are complementary, balanced, and mutually enfolded. However, in this essay I want briefly to distinguish from this interwoven thread, the *imaginative* strand and to look specifically at the role imagination played both in Lewis’ own *praeparatio evangelica* and in his subsequent apologetic writing, taking apologetics in its broadest sense to include both his fiction and his poetry.

If we are to understand the special role played by imagination in Lewis’ writing post-conversion, then it is essential to understand the very different way in which he configured the relations between reason and imagination before his conversion. What Lewis in fact experienced with deepening distress throughout the twenties was a profound divorce or bifurcation between what his reason told him, what he felt he could know and affirm philosophically, on the one hand, and the deepest intuitions or apprehensions of his imagination, on the other. As he puts it very starkly in *Surprised by Joy*:

**The two hemispheres of my mind were in the sharpest contrast. On the one side a many-islanded sea of poetry and myth; on the other a glib and shallow "rationalism". Nearly all that I loved I believed to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless[[1]](#endnote-1)**

Of course, this account of his dilemma was written post-conversion and many years after the period in his life that Lewis is describing. However, we have a much more contemporary document, a poem in which Lewis explores these same issues whilst they were still in suspension, still unresolved. The poem was published posthumously in Walter Hooper’s edited collection *The Collected Poems of C.S. Lewis* and titled (by Hooper, not by Lewis) ‘Reason’. But if Alistair McGrath is right, as I think he is, first in dating this poem as early as 1925 and second in revising the date of Lewis’ conversion to Christianity (as opposed to theism) to 1931[[2]](#endnote-2), then what we have in ‘Reason’ is a poem, written five or six years before he became a Christian, in which Lewis lays out the fundamental dilemma, the deep gulf over which any effective Christian apologetics would have to throw a bridge or, to use a metaphor closer to Lewis’ poem, the estranged powers of the soul which Christianity would have to reconcile. It seems to me that in this poem Lewis is identifying not simply a private dilemma, but is feeling deeply within himself a profound disjunction which was general to Western postwar culture and indeed more broadly, post-Enlightenment culture. For this reason it is worth examining the poem in some detail.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The poem offers an extended metaphor of the soul as an inner Athens divided between the two Goddesses, Athene, who represents Reason, and Demeter, who represents the Imagination.:

**Reason**

**Set on the soul's acropolis the reason stands**

**A virgin arm'd, commercing with celestial light,**

**And he who sins against her has defiled his own**

**Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;**

**So clear is reason. But how dark, imagining,**

**Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night:**

**Dark is her brow, the beauty of her eyes with sleep**

**Is loaded, and her pains are long, and her delight.**

**Tempt not Athene. Wound not in her fertile pains**

**Demeter, nor rebel against her mother-right.**

**Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother,**

**Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?**

**Who make imagination's dim exploring touch**

**Ever report the same as intellectual sight?**

**Then could I truly say and not deceive,**

**Then wholly say that I BELIEVE.[[4]](#footnote-1)**

So it opens with a vision of Athene:

Set on the soul's acropolis the reason stands

A virgin arm'd, commercing with celestial light,

And he who sins against her has defiled his own

Virginity: no cleansing makes his garment white;

So clear is reason.

This opening makes it clear that any truth, however inconvenient, must be known and faced for what it is, there must be no flight from Reason, no refusal of fact. But on the other hand imagination must also have a place, and the truths to which it bears witness, however apparently contrary to the truths made available by reason, must also be taken seriously. As Lewis goes on to say:

But how dark, imagining,

Warm, dark, obscure and infinite, daughter of Night…

Tempt not Athene. Wound not in her fertile pains

Demeter…

Then at the turn or ‘volta’ of this extended 16 line sonnet Lewis asks the vital question:

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother,

Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?

Who make imagination's dim exploring touch

Ever report the same as intellectual sight?

Then could I truly say and not deceive,

Then wholly say that I BELIEVE.[[5]](#endnote-4)

There are a number of remarkable things going on here, from the sense of inner space, of height and depth in the psyche itself, to the bodying forth of the soul’s distinct powers of reason and imagination in the form of the two goddesses, Athene and Demeter. This is no glib classical allusion in the eighteenth-century manner, but a symbolic re-imagination of the inner self in which more than personal, perhaps more than human, powers are at work, and it is highly significant that at this point both these powers are figured as feminine. Lewis is sometimes caricatured as a bluff, masculine, conservative, probably misogynistic, bachelor don, yet here he is expressing his inner life by saying in effect, ‘My problem is that I can’t get my inner goddesses together’!

After exploring many paired contrasts; touch and sight, light and dark, maid and mother, depth and height, the poem ends with a plea, which subtly summons the echoes of its own answer:

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother

Who make a concord of the depth and height?

From the later perspective of Lewis’ conversion we can see that these lines point and give new significance to the paradox of incarnation which is at the heart of the integrative faith which Lewis would later embrace. For it is, of course, the Christian figure of Mary who reconciles ‘both maid and mother.’ In and through her “Yes” to God, the archetypal assent of all faith, Christ the reconciler comes into the world, the one who not only reconciles man to God, and time to eternity, but is also in himself the concord of all depth and height, inner and outer. Furthermore Lewis’s image of the depth and height seems to carry an echo of Paul’s language in *Ephesians*:

**that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18May be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. [[6]](#endnote-5)**

These are of course anticipatory echoes, the poem as it stands witnesses to an impasse and points to a hoped for ‘concord’ which has not yet arrived. Indeed this poem is itself an example of the way in which imagination can embody glimpses of a potential truth which have not yet become actual to our reason, the ‘sacred power of self-intuition’ to which Coleridge, who as we shall see is a very important figure for Lewis, points so presciently in *Biographia Literaria*:

**They and only they can acquire the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition, who within themselves can interpret and understand the symbol, that the wings of the air-sylph are forming within the skin of the caterpillar; those only, who feel in their own spirits the same instinct, which impels the chrysalis of the horned fly to leave room in its involucrum for antennae yet to come. They know and feel, that the *potential* works *in* them, even as the *actual* works on them.[[7]](#endnote-6)**

The way Lewis found out of this personal impasse was at once spiritual, theological and literary, and it brings us to the heart of both his Christian belief and his literary practice. For Lewis, Christ did indeed reconcile the broken parts and the severed dimensions of our divided being; the height and depth, outer and inner, reason and imagination.

This is why I don’t think Hooper’s suggested title of ‘Reason’ does justice to this poem. Indeed I think it skews the way we read it, though equally to title it ‘Imagination’ would do the same. The poem is not about exulting one of these faculties over the other, but rather about *reconciling them*. A better title for this poem might simply be ‘Who?’ The real question posed by the poem is: Who is the reconciler? Reading the poem now it is easy for us to see that the answer is Christ. On the one hand the story of his death and resurrection summons up the deepest imaginative and mythic response, but on the other the story of his incarnation brings imaginative myth and rational history together. For Christianity is, as Lewis came to believe, ‘myth made history.’ As we have seen, the language of the poem, with its echo of *Ephesians* points to a profound and integrative theology of incarnation and yet it was not until another six years had passed that Lewis was able fully to answer the question posed and whose answer is anticipated in this poem.

This is a clear example of the process of imaginative anticipation of truths to which reason has not yet attained, which Lewis describes more generally in *Surprised by Joy* by saying: ‘my imagination was in a certain sense baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer.’[[8]](#endnote-7) And it is not surprising, therefore, that appeals to imagination are not simply a decorative extra, a sweetening of the doctrinal pill in Lewis’ apologetic writing, but are woven essentially into the fabric of what he says. ‘The truth of imagination,’ as Keats called it, is part of the message.

At this point it is worth asking what Lewis himself meant by imagination, in what tradition is he standing when he speaks of it? Fortunately, we have a poem addressed to fellow-poet Roy Campbell and almost totally overlooked by Lewis scholars in which he sets out exactly what tradition he stands in and it is the tradition of philosophical romanticism in which Coleridge plays a central role.

**In England the romantic stream flows …**

**…from Scott; from Coleridge too.**

**… Newman in that ruinous master saw**

**One who restored our faculty for awe,**

**Who re-discovered the soul’s depth and height**

**Who pricked with needles of the eternal light**

**An England at that time half numbed to death**

**With Paley’s, Bentham’s Malthus’ wintry breath.[[9]](#endnote-8)**

Indeed, in this poem we can see the key images of depth and height and even anticipate, if we wish, the glorious power of an imaginative Christ figure who frees Narnia, ‘half-numbed to death’ from a White Witch’s ‘wintry breath.’ Though Lewis would have read Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* as a matter of course, he was fortunate in having as a close friend and ‘wisest and best of my unofficial teachers,’[[10]](#endnote-9) Owen Barfield for whom Coleridge’s understanding of imagination was essential for a complete renewal of the way we see the world. In this poem *To Roy Campbell* Lewis has already set out the kind of thing imaginative apologetics might be called on to do: to ‘restore our faculty of awe,’ to ‘help the soul re-discover its depth and height and in Lewis’ telling and beautiful phrase to ‘prick with needles of eternal light’ a benumbed contemporary culture. But, perhaps the most helpful mapping of the terrain Lewis was to body forth and explore in books like *The Ransom Trilogy* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Till We Have Faces* is to be found in the programme Wordsworth and Coleridge set themselves at the beginning of the Romantic movement, as it was later recalled by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*:

**In this idea originated the plan of the lyrical ballads in which it was agreed that my endeavours should be directed to persons and character supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object, to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us; an inexhaustible treasure, but for which in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand.[[11]](#endnote-10)**

We can see both these ‘endeavours’ as Coleridge calls them at work in Lewis’ best writing. Certainly he procures for his ‘characters supernatural or at least romantic,’ just that transference and bodying forth of our ‘inward nature’ that Coleridge was aiming for. Whether the icy White Witch or the golden goodness of Aslan, whether the numinous Eldills of The Ransom Trilogy or the beautifully embodied figures of Psyche and Oruel in *Till We Have Faces*. But in some ways it is the Wordsworthian, more than the Coleridgian side of his achievement which makes Lewis such an effective imaginative apologist. The power to ‘excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural’ by ‘awakening the mind’s attention’… and ‘directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.’ It has often been remarked that it is easier to portray evil than to portray goodness, but many people have noted that Lewis is an exception. The sheer goodness of his ‘good’ characters, the sense of ‘solid joys and lasting treasure’ which he evokes in *The Weight of Glory[[12]](#endnote-11)* and sustains so beautifully throughout *The Great Divorce*. Michael Ward has drawn attention[[13]](#endnote-12) to the extraordinary imaginative skill and intertextual layering with which Lewis built up what he (Lewis) called the ‘kappa element’ in his evocation of the ‘Donegality’ or unique quiddity, of rich particularity and, ‘inexhaustible wonder’ of each of the seven Chronicles. This power of re-enchantment, of removing the ‘film of familiarity’ and ‘awakening the mind’s attention’ is something Lewis was striving for in his writing. He makes this clear in his important essay *On Three Ways of Writing for Children*. In this essay Lewis makes a distinction between the kind of ‘fantasy’ writing that is mere ego pleasing and this-worldly wish fulfillment of which he says:

**‘Its fulfillment on the level of imagination is in very truth compensatory: we run to it from the disappointments and humiliations of the real world: it sends us back to the real world undivinely discontented. For it is all flattery to the ego. [[14]](#endnote-13)**

And, by contrast, the kind of imaginative writing, ‘imaginative’ in the Coleridgean sense, which he is aiming for. Of this he says:

**It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for he know not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he had read of enchanted woods: this reading makes all read woods a little enchanted.[[15]](#endnote-14)**

At its best, this is what Lewis’ writing continually achieves, this re-enchantment upon return. We return from the Narnian woods to find all our real woods ‘a little enchanted.’ Indeed he makes this aim explicit, some would say a little too explicit, at the end of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when Edmund and Lucy are told by Aslan that they cannot return to Narnia:

**“You are too old, children,” said Aslan, “and you must begin to come close to your own world now.”**

**“It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s *you*. We shan’t meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?”**

**“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.**

**“Are – are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund?**

**“I am,” said Aslan. “But there I have another name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.” [[16]](#endnote-15)**

Lewis may be in danger here of making things too explicit here and breaking his own spell. A better emblem of the real imaginative enchantment he achieves, particularly through the art of story-telling itself, is the little episode in the same book where Lucy finds in the magician’s Big Book a spell “for the refreshment of the spirit:”

**The pictures were fewer here but very beautiful. And what Lucy found herself reading was more like a story than a spell. It went on for three pages and before she had read to the bottom of the page she had forgotten that she was reading at all. She was living in the story as if it were real, and all the pictures were real too. When she had got to the third page and come to the end, she said, “That is the loveliest story I’ve ever read or ever shall read in my whole life.”[[17]](#endnote-16)**

It is part of the magic that Lucy cannot turn the pages of the book backwards and repeat the experience or even remember the story but when she meets Aslan at the end of this episode she asks:

**“Shall I ever be able to read that story again; the one I couldn’t remember? Will you tell it to me, Aslan? Oh do, do, do.”**

**“Indeed, yes, I will tell it to you for years and years”[[18]](#endnote-17)**

Here Lewis offers the enchantment of imaginative story as both a bridge between reason and imagination and also an emblem of heaven itself.

Finally, let us return to the dilemma set out in the poem *Reason* and to the way it finally came to be resolved so fruitfully both in Lewis’ actual conversion and in his subsequent writing. Lewis famously **said “For me reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning.”[[19]](#endnote-18)** We cannot have one without the other and in order to make them work together we must respect their differences. Lewis never published the poem *Reason* in his lifetime, but had he been consulted towards the end of his life he might have wanted, from the perspective of those later works that appeal both to reason and imagination, to have challenged his own phrase ‘ever report the same.’ in that poem:

**Who make imagination's dim exploring touch**

***Ever report the same* as intellectual sight?**

In one sense this phrase sets a false goal and betrays a failure of imagination, if it implies that the ‘reports’ given to us by reason on the one hand and imagination on the other should be so exactly ‘the same’ that each could be translated without loss into the other’s terms. But if we mean by ‘report the same’ not ‘bring back word for word the same report’ but rather ‘report, in different ways and from different terrains, ‘the same’ single reality, bring back news in different languages from the same far country’, then indeed we will be asking for something which Lewis’s mature writing delivers to us in great and generative abundance.

And it is that generative abundance, that generosity of spirit, that lavish provision of infinitely suggestive image and metaphor, of stories which are mythopoeic, not allegories themselves, but as Lewis said of Tolkien, ‘constantly suggestive of incipient allegory, which is his great legacy to us. Stories and poetry shich not only kindle the imagination for Christ but constitute in themselves and open door an invitation to new and yet more generative works of imagination. I would like to conclude these remarks on Lewis and imagination, not in literary critical, nor even in theological mode, but with imagination and poetry, so I shall try to give scholarship the kiss of life with a verse, and sum up what I have to say in a sonnet:

**CS Lewis**

**From 'beer and Beowulf' to the seven heavens,**

**Whose music you conduct from sphere to sphere,**

**You are our portal to those hidden havens**

**Whence we return to bless our being here.**

**Scribe of the Kingdom, keeper of the door**

**Which opens on to all we might have lost,**

**Ward of a word-hoard in the deep hearts core,**

**Telling the tale of Love from first to last.**

**Generous, capacious, open, free,**

**Your wardrobe-mind has furnished us with worlds**

**Through which to travel, whence we learn to see**

**Along the beam, and hear at last the heralds**

**Sounding their summons, through the stars that sing,**

**Whose call at sunrise brings us to our King**.

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2. For McGrath’s datings, and his own account of Lewis’ integration of reason and imagination, see McGrath, A. *C.S. Lewis. A Life. Eccentric Genius. Reluctant Prophet.,* Hodder & Stoughton, Carol Stream, IL, 2013 pp. 135-159. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For a fuller examination of this poem in the wider context of Lewis’ poetry, see Guite, M., ‘Poet,’ in MacsSwain and Ward (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to CS Lewis, Cambridge University Press 2010, pp* 294-308 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *The Collected Poems of CS Lewis* edited by Walter Hooper (Fount 1994) p.65 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
5. Hooper, W. (ed.), *The Collected Poems of C.S. Lewis,* Fount Paperbacks, 1994. p. 95 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Ephesians 3:17-19 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Engell, J. and Jackson Bate, W. (eds), *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Princeton/Bollingen 1984.vol. 1, p. 241 to 242 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
8. *Surprised by Joy* p171 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
9. *Poems*, p. 80 by citing Scott, and then Coleridge as read by Newman, Lewis is appealing to a particular understanding of imagination within a religious frame. For a fuller account of this tradition see John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination*, Oxford 1981 and Paul Avis, God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology , London 1999. For my own discussion of the importance of this tradition see Faith, Hope and Poetry, pp. 4-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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13. In Ward, M *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of CS Lewis* Oxford 2008 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
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15. ibid p. 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
16. Lewis, C.S., *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* first published Geoffrey Bles 1952, 1974 edn. p. 222] [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
17. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* p.144 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
18. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* p.147 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
19. in ‘Bluspels and Flalansferes’ in Lewis, C.S., *Rehabilitations and other Essays*, Oxford, 1939 p.157 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)