

# The poetic C. S. Lewis

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Poetry ... is a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible. (C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>)

A poetic sensibility is fundamental to C. S. Lewis's writings, but there is a history and development to it, as he once revealed in a letter:

The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. It was he who made me first attempt (with little success) to be a poet. It was he who, in response to the poetry of others, made me a critic, and, in defence of that response, sometimes a critical controversialist. It was he who after my conversion led me to embody my religious belief in symbolical or mythopoeic forms, ranging from *Screwtape* to a kind of theological science-fiction. And it was, of course, he who has brought me, in the last few years to write a series of Narnian stories for children; not asking what children want and then endeavouring to adapt myself (this was not needed) but because the fairy-tale was the genre best fitted for what I wanted to say<sup>2</sup>.

A key point in this history is Lewis's dual conversion, first to theism (in 1929) and then to Christian belief (in 1931), in the second of which his close friend J. R. R. Tolkien, a devout Roman Catholic, played an important part. Tolkien placed his basic arguments in a poem addressed to the pre-Christian, sceptical Lewis, entitled *Mythopoeia* (the making of myth). In this he praises history's storytellers and mythmakers, as vehicles of truth and hope about the Universe and its creator.

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme  
of things not found within recorded time ...  
They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,  
and yet they would not in despair retreat,  
but oft to victory have turned the lyre  
and kindled hearts with legendary fire,  
illuminating Now and dark Hath-been  
with light of suns as yet by no man seen<sup>3</sup>.

Tolkien also spoke to Lewis of the New Testament Gospel narratives<sup>4</sup>. His argument persuaded Lewis that he needed to respond to them imaginatively — as he had done readily to Old Norse, Celtic and Classical mythology — as well as intellectually. The Gospels, Tolkien suggested, had all the qualities found in myth and great story, with the astounding unique factor that they record events which, in fact, happened in history. They are rooted in time and place. Tolkien essentially drew Lewis into an old book at a time when what he called his 'chronological snobbery' — his imbibing of the modernist myth of progress — had been deconstructed by another and mutual friend, Owen Barfield. Lewis had already realized that reading old books was necessary to

counteract imbalances and distortions created by the modern view. Soon Tolkien and he would embark on projects to rehabilitate an older view.

A striking and characteristic feature of the writings of that older and increasingly lost world, particularly prior to what Lewis came to see as the post-Christian West, was its embodiment of at least traces of an original unitary consciousness in the human being (an idea from Owen Barfield that captivated both Lewis and Tolkien). As someone who had a very strong ambition to be a major poet before his conversions at the age of 31 and 33, Lewis recognized that with changes in consciousness, leading to a characteristically modern mentality, the very nature of poetry had changed. In an essay on Edmund Spenser in 1954, Lewis wrote:

The general quality of *The Faerie Queene* is so highly poetic that it has earned Spenser the name of 'the poet's poet'. But if we examine the texture of the language line by line we may think that it is sometimes flat and very little distinguished from that of prose. ... The truth is that Spenser belongs to an older school. In the earliest times theology, science, history, fiction, singing, instrumental music, and dancing were all a single activity. Traces of this can still be found in Greek poetry. Then the different arts which had once all been elements of *poesis* developed and became more different from one another, and drew apart (the enormous gains and losses of this process perhaps equal one another). Poetry became more and more unlike prose. It is now so unlike it that the number of those who can read it is hardly greater than the number of those who write it<sup>5</sup>.

It could be argued that C. S. Lewis also, as much as it is possible for a twentieth-century person, belonged to an older school, an older world, where his heart lay. His concerns with, as he put it, "symbolical or mythopoeic forms" in his writing was directly related to his conversion, and his increasing preoccupation with an older consciousness, which was highlighted for him by the increasing separation of poetry and prose, and dramatically spotlighted by modernism in poetry. Ruefully he claimed, in his inaugural lecture upon taking up the new Cambridge Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature in 1954:

I do not see how anyone can doubt that modern poetry is not only a greater novelty than any other 'new poetry' but new in a new way, almost in a new dimension<sup>6</sup>.

He pointed out elsewhere the unprecedented difficulty of conceiving of evening, as T. S. Eliot wished his readers to, as a patient on an operating table<sup>7</sup>. Modern poetry sought originality, rejecting what he called 'stock responses' to experience — rejecting, that is, a kind of decorum of the imagination. In the old view, goodness and truth are full of light; evil and

falsehood are a shadow world. Deity and worship are associated with height. Virtue is linked with loveliness. Love is constant and sweet, death bitter and endurance praiseworthy. “In my opinion,” Lewis writes, “such deliberate organisation is one of the first necessities of human life, and one of the main functions of art is to assist it. All that we describe as constancy in love or friendship, as loyalty in political life, or, in general, as perseverance — all sold virtue and stable pleasure — depends on organising chosen attitudes and maintaining them against the eternal flux”<sup>8</sup>. Lewis uses such stock and archetypal symbolism in the Narnian Chronicles — for instance, the lush valley world of Narnia is an indicator of its spiritual health. It faces dangers from the north of cold (the White Witch) and, from the south, of heat, in the form of the warlike Calormenes (*calor* of course is Latin for ‘heat’). This Mappa Mundi echoes that of Lewis’s first fiction, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, where its Everyman, John, must stick to the straight central path to avoid the demonic dangers from north and south. The hazards embodied allegorically in that story pertain to Lewis’s intellectual climate at the end of the 1920s, and still have a great deal of relevance today.

When Lewis’s poetry is read, it often seems excessively modelled on older poetry, both in form and content, at times veering towards pastiche. To describe it one needs the vocabulary of traditional rhymes and metres, such as rhyme royal, the Spencerian stanza, the alliterative metre, tetrameters, pentameters, iambs and trochees. Don W. King spells out Lewis’s ‘lifelong fascination with prosody’ in his stud, *C. S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of his Poetic Impulse*.

The distinguished poet Ruth Pitter<sup>9</sup> became a friend of C. S. Lewis, and, although admiring some of his verse, recognized that his true poetry resided in his poetic prose, and struggled to articulate why this was so. She mused in her journal on their correspondence about each other’s poetry<sup>10</sup>:

Did his great learning, a really staggering skill in verse inhibit the poetry? ... He had a great stock of the makings of a poet: strong visual memory, strong recollections of childhood: desperately strong yearnings for lost Paradise & hoped heaven (‘sweet desire’): not least a strong primitive intuition of the diabolical (not merely the horrific). In fact his whole life was oriented & motivated by an almost uniquely-persisting *child’s* sense of glory and of nightmare. The adult events were received into a medium still as pliable as wax, wide open to the glory, and equally vulnerable, with a man’s strength to feel it all, and a great scholar’s & writer’s skills to express and to interpret. It is almost as though the adult disciplines, notably the techniques of his verse, had largely inhibited his poetry, which is perhaps, after all, most evident in his prose. I think he wanted to be a poet more than anything. Time will show. But if it was *magic* he was after, he achieved this sufficiently elsewhere.

There is no doubt that Lewis is a significant minor poet. His first volume of poetry was published in March 1919, when he was 20, some of it reflecting his experience of the First World War (he arrived at the trenches around his nineteenth birthday and was severely wounded a few months

later by the shards of a shell that killed a friend standing beside him). In 1926, a long narrative poem, *Dymer*, was published that, like the earlier book, was shaped by unbelief in Christianity. Indeed that rejected faith was lumped together with all forms of supernaturalism, including spiritism, whereas the poem favoured a form of this-worldly philosophical idealism.

Old Theomagia, Demonology,  
Cabbala, Chemic Magic, Book of the Dead,  
Damning Hermetic rolls that none may see  
Save the already damned—such grubs are bred  
From minds that lose the Spirit and seek instead  
For spirits in the dust of dead men’s error,  
Buying the joys of dream with dreamland terror<sup>11</sup>.

Soon after his conversion to Christian faith in 1931, Lewis turned to fiction that was fantasy, allegory or parable — the symbolical or mythopoeic focus he mentioned in my earlier quotation. Less than two years later, in 1933, he published his contemporary take on Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* — *The Pilgrim’s Regress* — a philosophical allegory of the modern zeitgeist endued with themes that would prove to be characteristic of his writings — such as the quest for joy and a recognition of spiritual cosmic warfare between good and evil. His science-fiction trilogy, the first volume of which was published in 1938, started as a wager with Tolkien to write fantasy for adults, rescuing it from being relegated simply to children’s literature. A tossed coin between the two of them resulted in Lewis writing a tale of space travel and Tolkien of time — in the latter case, an effort which, though abandoned, did lead to *The Lord of the Rings*. During the war years — a prolific period of publication for Lewis — he produced the bestselling *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Great Divorce*, as well as the second and third in his science-fiction series, *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* appeared in 1950, with the other Narnian Chronicles coming out annually until 1956. Also in 1956, *Till We Have Faces* appeared, a novel of great maturity which retells the myth of Cupid and Psyche as a precursor of the Christian Gospel story when, for Lewis, myth became historical fact.

It is into these books that Lewis most found expression for his ‘poetic impulse’, as Don W. King calls it. There is also, however, poetic prose embedded in more discursive works, such as essays and popular philosophical theology such as *The Problem of Pain*, *Miracles*, *A Grief Observed* and *Letters to Malcolm*. King, in a major study of Lewis, the poet, believes:

In *A Grief Observed*, Lewis works through his grief [at losing his wife, Joy Davidman] to a new understanding and a renewed faith; it is his free verse lament for Joy, himself, and his understanding of God.

*Perelandra* and *A Grief Observed* suggest Lewis’s propensity toward poetic prose. Other of Lewis’s prose works, including



*Mere Christianity, The Problem of Pain, The Screwtape Letters, The Great Divorce, The Chronicles of Narnia*, as well as others, demonstrate similar poetic elements, though not as extended nor marked as these<sup>12</sup>.

The thinking behind Lewis's symbolic and mythopoeic fiction was often shaped in the context of his friendship with Tolkien, and is greatly concerned with the art of narrative, the nature of story, the function of myth and the foundational place metaphor has in our thinking and language, including in scientific theory and philosophical abstraction. As a writer, not merely a theorist and critic, Lewis had at the heart of his concern a desire to create meaning, to capture qualities or states in fiction. Such a desire resulted from and was accomplished by his poetic sensibility — what he called the fundamental 'imaginative man' in his make-up. Lewis champions the imagination as the organ of meaning, involved in all human knowledge of reality; for him the imagination provides a sensing, perceiving, feeling knowledge that is objective but personal. A human facility with metaphor is a condition of winning truth. Typically, Lewis states: "a man who says heaven and thinks of the visible sky is pretty sure to mean more than the man who tells us that heaven is a state of mind" ('Bluspels and Flalansferes' in his book *Rehabilitations*, 1939).

Lewis held that elements of fantasy, fiction and poetry are embedded, by necessity, in all human language and thinking. He distinguished reason and imagination, and truth and meaning. A concern he shared with Tolkien and other friends was to embody the qualitative, or what in thought

is general and abstract, in literary form while retaining the integrity and reality of these extra-literary qualities. Tolkien for instance embodied the perilous journey and the heroic quest in his *The Lord of the Rings*. Lewis made the quality of joy or *sehnsucht* incarnate in his fiction, particularly in *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *Till We Have Faces* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but also in his non-fiction, such as his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*. Such universal, archetypal or symbolic elements in a successful narrative are rooted in the concrete and particular nature of the story or account. At times, a principle that seems contradictory or paradoxical as an abstraction (such as the relation of divine providence to free human agency) can work satisfactorily, organically and integrally in a fictional narrative. In this, there was for Lewis and Tolkien a fascinating parallel with history (the most successful marriage of the general and the particular, they believed, being the incarnation of Christ — when myth become fact, as Lewis expressed it).

In his book *Planet Narnia*, Michael Ward<sup>13</sup> reveals how the medieval world model that Lewis loved so much is incarnate in the seven Narnian Chronicles. Ward argues that a particular astrological planet exists in each of the seven as a quality or atmosphere. The Sun, for instance is particularly represented in *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*. The voyagers head east towards the sunrise, gold (the metal of the sun) tempts Eustace and provides the curse on Deathwater Island, and light takes on a numinous quality as the adventurers approach World's End and Aslan's Country. In achieving this correspondence, Lewis goes further than in

his science-fiction trilogy, which only fully represents two of the planets — Mars and Venus — in its splendid re-envisioning of the medieval cosmos. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, as Ransom lay contemplating the stars, planets and galaxies through the spacecraft's window, "he found it night by night more difficult to disbelieve in old astrology: almost he felt, wholly he imagined, 'sweet influence' pouring or even stabbing into his surrendered body"<sup>4</sup>.

Don W. King observes that *Perelandra*, the second of the space trilogy, is the most poetic of all Lewis's prose writings. He demonstrates how the poet Ruth Pitter, with Lewis's approval, turned part of the concluding section of the book into Spenserian stanzas. This concerns the gods, whom Lewis has revealed as ruling angelic beings, using such a familiar category without losing their splendour and imaginative power over readers. Although the gods are difficult for human eyes to see, Ransom on the planet Perelandra, or Venus as it is known to us, hears their voices and those of the new humans of that planet speaking of the Great Dance of the Universe. Ruth Pitter found the prose of this section of the book particularly conducive to poetry, as William Wordsworth before found with his sister Dorothy's journals, or, recently Ruth Padel found with Charles Darwin's letters and other prose in her verse biography<sup>15</sup>. Here is an example of Pitter's adaptation that Lewis especially praised. In this example a voice speaks of a tree planted on Thulcandra (Earth, the silent planet) bearing fruit in the world of Perelandra, with its new Adam and new Eve.

C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*:

The Tree was planted in that world but the fruit has ripened in this. The fountain that sprang with mingled blood and life in the Dark World, flows here with life only. We have passed the first cataracts, and from here onward the stream flows deep and turns in the direction of the sea. This is the Morning Star which He promised to those who conquer; this is the centre of worlds. Till now all has waited. But now the trumpet has sounded and the army is on the move. Blessed be He!<sup>16</sup>

Ruth Pitter, stanza IX:

The Tree was planted in that world, but here  
The ripened fruit hangs in the heaven high:  
Both blood and life run from the Fountain there,  
Here it runs Life alone. We have passed by  
The first strong rapids: the deep waters ply  
On a new course toward the distant sea.  
Till now, all has but waited. In the sky  
There hangs the promised star, and piercingly  
The trumpet sounds: the army marches. Blest be He!<sup>17</sup>

In essence, Lewis's quest to embody poetic, symbolic and, at its height, mythopoeic meaning in his prose took precedence over poetry in his post-conversion writing. Although he continued to write and to publish poems (in periodicals such as *The Cambridge Review*, *The Spectator*, *Punch*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *Time and Tide* and *The Magazine*

*of Fantasy and Science Fiction*), he no longer integrated his work around an attempt to become established as a poet, even a major one. Instead, the quest to capture the real and the tangible as qualities or states attainable in imaginative writing — so much so that the reader's very experience could be enlarged — possessed him. He wished to enact a necessarily limited kind of 'little incarnation' following the model of the period when, he believed, myth became fact at a real historical moment in the first century, and just before<sup>18</sup>.

In *Perelandra*, Lewis's fictional self in the story recalls a remark to Ransom after the return of the latter from Venus, concerning the difficulty of telling his story:

I [...] had incautiously said, 'Of course I realise it's all rather too vague for you to put into words,' when he took me up rather sharply, for such a patient man, by saying, 'On the contrary, it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can't be expressed is that it's too definite for language'<sup>19</sup>.

In his prose writings, particularly his 'symbolical and mythopoeic' fiction, Lewis put his whole self into the quest for the 'thing,' for the real — into its capture in words. This was his wider vision of what poetry as *poiema* is, as he attempted to rehabilitate an old and lost view. As his friend Tolkien put it to him, in words in the poem, Mythopoeia that helped in his conversion in 1931: "We make still by the law in which we're made"<sup>3</sup>.

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1. Lewis, C. S. *Reflections of the Psalms* Ch. 1 (Geoffrey Bles, 1956).
2. Lewis, W. H. (ed) *Letters of C. S. Lewis* 260 (Geoffrey Bles, 1966).
3. Tolkien, J. R. R. 'Mythopoeia' in *Tree and Leaf* 2nd edn (Unwin Hymen, 1988).
4. We learn this from Lewis's letters, his essay 'Myth Became Fact' and Tolkien's essay 'On Fairy Stories', which contain many of the ideas apparently discussed. See my *J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis: The Story of their Friendship* 53–59 (Sutton Publishing, 2003).
5. 'Edmund Spenser, 1552–99' in C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* 142–143 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966).
6. 'De Descriptione Temporum' in C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (ed. Hooper, W.) 9 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969).
7. Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost* 56 (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960).
8. Lewis, C. S. *A Preface to Paradise Lost* 55 (Oxford Univ. Press, 1960).
9. Ruth Pitter (1897–1992) received the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1955, and was named a Companion in Literature in 1974 by the Royal Society of Literature.
10. Letter 29 September, 1948, quoted in King, D. W. C. *S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* 228–229 (Kent State Univ. Press, 2001).
11. Dymer, Canto VII, 8 in C. S. Lewis, *Narrative Poems* (ed. Hooper, W.) 67 (Geoffrey Bles, 1969).
12. King, D. W. C. *S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* 244 (Kent State Univ. Press, 2001).
13. Ward, M. *Planet Narnia* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2008).
14. Lewis, C. S. *Out of the Silent Planet* Ch. 5 (John Lane, 1938).
15. Padel, R. *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (Chatto & Windus, 2009).
16. Lewis, C. S. *Perelandra* Ch. 17 (John Lane, 1943).
17. Ruth Pitter's stanzas are quoted in King, D. W. C. *S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse* 278 (Kent State Univ. Press, 2001).
18. I explore Lewis's quest to capture the real in 'Myth, fact and incarnation,' in Honegger, T. & Segura, E. (eds) *Myth and Magic: Art according to the Inklings* (Walking Tree Publishers, 2007).
19. Lewis, C. S. *Perelandra* Ch. 3 (John Lane, 1943).