



C. S. Lewis and the Language of Apologetics

Pavel Hosek

My country, the Czech Republic, is among the most atheistic countries in the world. Most Czechs are not interested in any religion. Those that are prefer all possible alternatives to Christianity. Very few nonbelievers in my country read Christian literature. There is one exception. His name is C. S. Lewis. Czech nonbelievers enjoy his books greatly and he is by far the top-selling religious author in the secular market in the Czech Republic. Many people wonder why. C. S. Lewis is certainly one of the greatest Christian writers of all time. Judging from the number of copies sold, he is the most successful author in church history.[1] Yet the content of most of his books is certainly not bestseller material these days, as he offers his readers old doctrines of Christian orthodoxy. Generally speaking, this is not very popular stuff in contemporary Western culture.

Why is Lewis (unlike many other apologists) able to attract millions of nonbelievers? Why is it that even the atheistic Czechs enjoy his books? If the content of Lewis' message is the same (and it is), what is so special about Lewis that he became the bestselling Christian writer and an apostle of the postmodern era?[2] Why is it that he can speak to a stubborn Czech atheist?

A quick look at the titles of Lewis' works gives us a hint: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Cosmic Trilogy*, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, *The Screwtape Letters*. These titles do not really sound like traditional apologetics. Lewis' style of thinking and literary technique have little to do with abstract speculations like "Metaphysical Evidence for God" or "A Treatise on Moral Absolutes". He used literary means and genres, rarely found in the field

of Christian apologetics: poetic language, symbolism, myth, science fiction, novels, fictional correspondence. Probably the most characteristic feature of Lewis' literary style is his usage of metaphor, symbol and mythopoetic language. In his particular use of language, Lewis was able to employ his expertise in literary theory and history of literature, the field of scholarship which was his secular occupation.

I believe that Lewis' specific understanding of poetic language is what distinguishes him from most apologists, and likely also one of the most important arguments for his effectiveness in communicating the Gospel to contemporary secular people. This is precisely the case in the Czech Republic. When I was working as an editor in the Christian publishing house Navrat domu, which published most of Lewis' books in the Czech language, the sales figures communicated a clear message: Lewis won the heart of the average Czech secular reader. In most cases, the reader would start with the *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Great Divorce* or *The Cosmic Trilogy*. Only later, if at all, would the reader turn to Lewis' essays or to his more explicit apologetics.

This begs an important question: How did C. S. Lewis understand the poetic language that he employed in his most popular writings?

In poetic language, we extend the ordinary meaning of words. Words which speak about empirical reality (a tree, a river, a stone) are used to look beyond the material objects, to signify what is not visible to the natural eye, whether it is inner feelings, moods or spiritual experience. One of Lewis' basic convictions was that we are not speaking here about arbitrary artistic originality or creativity – there is actually not much space for arbitrariness and chance in using language metaphorically.

Lewis believed in deep and complex interconnectedness of the spiritual and material worlds.[3] He held that nature is not just a passive material for human creative (or destructive) activity. Natural phenomena point beyond themselves to extrasensual reality, to which they bear witness. Lewis saw the theological justification of this idea in the biblical doctrine of

creation, which portrays nature as the herald of God's glory and mystery (see especially the book of Psalms).

Lewis argued it was God who created nature with all its beauties, colours and shapes, and who also created man with his aesthetic sensitivity and imagination.[4] There is therefore a preordained harmony between nature, perceived by our senses and spiritual meaning, which we ascribe to natural beauty because we are equipped with God-given intuition and imagination. God did not leave it to mere chance how exactly His glory is mirrored in created nature. There is an interconnectedness between our God-given imagination, natural phenomena and spiritual reality which they reflect (as the psalmist says, God's majesty is symbolised by high mountains, His awesomeness is proclaimed by the sky, fire symbolises for us His holiness, wind is a symbol of His Spirit, His peace is like a river...).[5]

In connection with poetic language, as it is used in religion and elsewhere, Lewis spoke about metaphors of two types.[6]

On the one hand, there are metaphors which serve for clearer understanding (or easier memorisation) of some idea. But this idea is in principle (at least for the author of the metaphor) accessible in its literal sense. Such metaphor is used then as an educational tool. It serves as an illustration, aesthetic enrichment or aid for our memory. Lewis called these metaphors *teacher's metaphors*.

For example, when I teach my students at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Prague, I tell them that the church is like a hospital for the convert, a school for the disciple and an army for the mature Christian. I could use more precise abstract theological language, but I employ these metaphors to illustrate the doctrine and help the students to remember it.

On the other hand, there is another kind of metaphor, one which Lewis estimated to be much more important. This second kind of metaphor functions as an irreplaceable name for a reality, which is not accessible to the speaker in any other (i.e. more literal) way. Such metaphors, called by Lewis *pupil's metaphors*, cannot be "translated" into literal propositions. This is the

only possible way of relating to an otherwise unknown reality, the only bridge between the speaker and what he is trying to capture in words. Such metaphors arise from our intuition and imagination; they are never simply a product of abstract reasoning.

For example, there seems to be a deep symbolic connection between darkness and evil, light and good, dirt and sin, cleanliness and holiness, earth and mother, sky and father, stone and man, wood and woman, lamb and humility, lion and majesty, snake and wickedness, water and chaos, breath and spirit etc. We use these symbols in our prayers. We hear them in advertisements and popular slogans. We find them on every page of our Bibles. The place that these and many other correspondences have in poetry and devotional language can never be completely explained by rational analysis. These connections are understood intuitively and by means of imaginative perception.

Usually the pupil's metaphors are a result of deep inner experience. They are born or emerge from unknown depth of the soul. True poetry is characterised by such metaphors, said Lewis, as well as myth and religious language in general. The poet is basically giving testimony about an encounter with reality. He spontaneously testifies about his experience and shares with the reader what he saw in moments of creative inspiration. His speech is never abstract or descriptive. He is never just passing information. He doesn't just give moral lessons, dressed in beautiful words. Rather, he shares a mythopoetic testimony, only partially controlled by his conscious mind.[7]

If, as Lewis said, we must count on deep interconnectedness of spiritual and material worlds, if it is true that they mirror each other and correspond to each other because God designed them for exactly this purpose, then the poet, when he is truly inspired, can capture in his creative work deep spiritual truths. These truths are inaccessible to abstract analysis or empirical science. Even speculative theology can hardly comprehend them due to its necessarily abstract language. The poet's testimony is therefore irreplaceable and it cannot, without harm, be translated into abstract propositions.

We must keep in mind that in Lewis' view the

ultimate reason of correspondence and interconnectedness of spiritual and material reality is the common origin of both spiritual and natural worlds in God's creation and design.[8] This is what makes it possible for poets to speak about the invisible in terms of the visible. Moreover, by God's providence human intuition and imagination is so made and tuned as to discern spiritual meaning behind symbols and metaphors taken from visible nature. In other words, Lewis said that all the beauty of nature reflects and points to absolute Beauty, or to the transcendent source of all beauty and good. For Lewis, this is God Himself.[9]

Aesthetic fascination, which we experience when we are overwhelmed by the beauty of creation, may be a bridge to a genuinely religious experience. Material beauty points beyond itself to uncreated Beauty. God Himself speaks to men through the splendor of His creation, which reflects His glory. Moreover, Lewis believed that truly inspired poetry, if intuition and imagination are used in harmony with God's design, also mirrors God's reality.[10]

Lewis himself experienced this call from God on his way to conversion. He was fascinated with the beauty of nature, as well as with the beauty of poetry. But he was searching in vain for its deepest source, the ultimate cause of his immense existential Desire, evoked by aesthetic fascination.[11] On his own spiritual journey, Lewis followed many false tracks. He mistakenly identified the source of Desire with the impulse, which gave it birth. Sometimes Lewis was charmed by the mystery of distant mountains, numinous atmosphere of ancient myths or imaginative visions of romantic poets. Lewis says about this journey:

"If a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given... The only fatal error was to pretend that you had passed from desire to fruition, when in reality, you had found either nothing, or desire itself, or the satisfaction of some different desire." [12]

In his famous essay *The Weight of Glory*, Lewis

describes this experience in the following way:

"We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty... The books or music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited." [13]

With the help of his Christian friends, especially as a result of a long conversation with the famous writer J. R. R. Tolkien, Lewis eventually recognised the ultimate source and origin of Desire in God. He quotes in this context the famous words of St. Augustine: "*You have made us for Yourself and our hearts will not find peace until they rest in You*". [14]

The aesthetic experience, evoking ecstatic desire, is finally understood as God calling the alienated, sinful man back to Himself.

From what has been said so far, it follows naturally why Lewis valued poetry and mythopoetic language so highly. It becomes clear why Lewis, even though he didn't deny the value and necessity of abstract rational argument as a way of talking about God, found it seriously insufficient. If God is not only the ultimate source of all Good, but also the fountainhead of all beauty, it matters greatly whether literary representation of Christianity (i.e. apologetics) reflects this fact or not. It matters whether apologetics mediates the shining glory of its Subject, or whether it is just another abstract discourse about metaphysics.

While preparing my Th.D. dissertation on C. S. Lewis at the Charles University of Prague, the focus of my research had been the distinctiveness of Lewis' literary style in communicating the

Gospel. While I was reading and rereading his works over and over again, one thing struck me repeatedly. As I was comparing Lewis' scholarly writings on the history of literature and literary theory with his popular apologetic books, it became clear that Lewis always consistently applied his theoretical assumptions about the nature of language, poetry, myth and metaphor. Only after I read all of Lewis' scholarly books did I actually appreciate what he was trying to achieve in his popular works.

What Lewis tries to accomplish in his popular apologetics is to let the readers taste the symbolic universe of Christianity from the inside. He invites them to immerse into the grand story and to soak in the atmosphere of the Gospel. He avoids watering it down with abstractions and moralistic platitudes. The modern reader is not discouraged by religious language, which today prevents meaningful communication and sometimes even immunises against the Gospel.[15]

By resymbolising and even remythologising the story of salvation, Lewis penetrated through the protective layers of contemporary readers and allowed the Gospel be heard in a fresh, unexpected way. Lewis the apologist is at the same time a poet. He employed intuition, imagination and emotion just as much as reason and logic.

He worked this way because he believed that a work of art can mediate experience.[16] By means of what he called *phantom emotions*, the literary text can communicate an experience, which the reader did not have or perhaps even could not have himself or herself. The goal was not to reproduce in the reader the same feeling which the author had while writing. The goal was to direct the reader by means of intuitive and imaginative reference to the Reality encountered by the poet in moments of aesthetic inspiration.

It seems that Lewis himself was extremely successful in applying this theory. Millions of Christians express their thanks to Lewis, for he taught them to enjoy and taste the beauty of the Truth which they had always believed. He rescued them from dry dogmatism and helped them to experience wonder and fascination. Many nonbelievers found their way to Christ through

Lewis' books, which contained something they had not found in more traditional presentations of the Gospel.

It seems that in today's postmodern world, as the whole Western culture is rethinking the Enlightenment overemphasis on abstract reason, Lewis' literary style is extremely appealing. The situation in the Czech Republic confirms this general observation. Since the fall of the Communist regime, 25 of Lewis' books have been published in the Czech Republic. All of them have sold well, as have three books written about him. No other religious author has earned a comparable track record.

I think the situation in my own country is in harmony with a worldwide trend. People today, in the midst of scientific technological culture, which robbed the world of all wonder and mystery, start to search anxiously for the vanishing traces of the Sacred. Lewis' writings, offering a vision of humble fascination and reflecting the unimaginable glory of the Creator, find many open ears and hearts among the postmodern readers, even in the post-Communist, atheistic Czech Republic.

Needless to say, Lewis always voted for a balance of reason and imagination, not for an irrational escape or a pseudomystical approach to reality, which would do more harm than good. It is exactly this balance of heart and head, feeling and thinking, imagination and reason, which makes Lewis' writings so effective and so suitable for the postmodern situation.

Notes

[1] See Dorsett L., in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 645.

[2] See the article of Veith, *A Vision Within a Dream, Within the Truth: C. S. Lewis as Evangelist to the Postmodernist*, 367ff.

[3] Lewis draws in this respect on the theory of E. Bevan, expressed in his famous book *Symbolism of Belief*, and also on Owen Barfield's notion of "Semantic unity", expressed in Barfield's book *Poetic Diction*. See *Miracles*, 79.

[4] *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, 108.

[5] More about Lewis' view of interconnectedness of material and spiritual world, which he calls "psycho-physical parallelism", see in the essay Bluspels and Flansferes, in

Selected Literary Essays, 265.

[6] Bluspels and Flalansferes, in *Selected Literary Essays*, 254-255.

[7] On Lewis' view of metaphor see Mackay P., *The Role of Metaphor in Christian Thought and Experience as Understood by G. C. Clark and C. S. Lewis*.

[8] See in this context *Pilgrim's Regress*, 169.

[9] *Surprised by Joy*, 176-177.

[10] Christianity and Literature, in *Christian Reflections*, 1-11.

[11] On Lewis' journey to conversion and the role of Desire in it, see his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*.

[12] *Pilgrim's Regress*, 204-205.

[13] *Screwtape Proposes a Toast*, 97-98.

[14] *The Four Loves*, 126.

[15] On this aspect of Lewis's apologetics see the book *Past Watchful Dragons* by Walter Hooper.

[16] *Christian Reflections*, 133.

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