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C.S. Lewis Midterm

Meeting Professor Lewis

Yesterday in a graduate seminar called "Lyric and Ecstasy," which deals with the lyric poetry of John Donne, Richard Crashaw, and John Milton, my Professor remarked that critic Susan Stewart was probably ignorant of a certain line in the "Preface to the Reader" to Crashaw's 1646 *Steps to the Temple*. The line, which says of Crashaw's poems, "They shall lift thee reader some yards above the ground," would have perfectly tied together an argument Stewart makes about levitation, ecstasy, and Crashaw's verse (Rambuss 5). Later in the anonymous Preface is another striking line: Crashaw "penned these poems, *Steps* for happy souls to climb heaven by" (Rambuss 6). Upon reading this second line I was struck by the notion that, despite its obscurity, C.S. Lewis would have known what Steward didn't, that he had most likely read Crashaw as well as the small front matter that accompanied his first published work, since the image of floating upwards and of climbing, step by step, to heaven, is echoed beautifully in Lewis' allegory *The Great Divorce*: "Every one of us lives only to journey further and further into the mountains" (Lewis 74). This is an apt analogy for my experience reading Lewis's own preface, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. My appreciation for his brilliance has only grown, and my respect for him as a scholar has enhanced my respect for him as a fiction writer. In the following pages I will outline what it is like to read Lewis the critic, how his critical thinking can elucidate moments in his fiction, and, briefly, describe the way his work on Milton differs from my own.

Lewis the Scholar

My first impression of Lewis' work on Milton was awe. Though the brief author biographies on the back of his fiction works list him as a professor of medieval and Renaissance literature at Oxford, it is too easy to focus on his writing for children and be fooled by the humble assertion that he is lay given in *The Problem of Pain*. Lewis may not be a theologian by profession, but he is a world-class scholar. Evident from every page of *A Preface to Paradise Lost* is the impressive depth of his reading. Each chapter begins with one or two epigraphs from all over the cannon, be it from Dante, the Bible, Middle English, Kipling or Coleridge. He works easily with ancient Greek, Latin, Italian, and spends pages setting up his critical endeavor with a discussion of Middle English translation: "This quality will be understood by any one who really understands the meaning of the Middle English word *solempne*" (Lewis 17).

When reading Lewis' literary criticism one gets the feeling that he was firmly in the comfort zone of his profession. He seems to have read everything, and he writes with such careful force that his criticism at first reading appears correct and unimpeachable. He begins, not with Milton himself, but with a study of the Epic genre, tracing its paradigm from Homer and *Beowulf* to Virgil and finally to Milton. With a methodical clarity he separates Epic from Lyric and Tragedy (4), then breaking Epic into primary and secondary categories (13). In these first few chapters he offers readings of the Epic tradition, claiming that without an understanding of the mode of Epic attempting to understand or enjoy *Paradise Lost* is futile. While I disagree that one needs to be well versed in the epic tradition to work on or enjoy *Paradise Lost*, I found Lewis' work here to be impressive, informative, and useful.

Playful Still

I do not wish to impart the notion that Lewis' voice is altogether different in criticism than in fiction, or that the playfulness with which he writes fiction is absent from his professorial endeavors. Rather, moments of play abound in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, and Lewis' descriptive, figurative powers are put to good use describing poetic devices and literature itself. Take, for example, Lewis' description of reading epic poetry: "You cannot ponder over single lines and let them dissolve on the mind like lozenges" (21). Few other critics can conjure a sentence that simultaneously connotes the experience of reading lyric, of the very different experience of sweeping through a great epic, and somehow also causes me to salivate, to tongue the roof of my mouth, and to taste the faintest hint of lemon. At every turn, the clever liveliness of Lewis' fiction is poised to break up through his criticism.

Lewis writes, "It is common to speak of Milton's style as organ music. It might be more helpful to regard the reader as the organ and Milton as the organist" (41). Such vibrant imagery not only makes his work colorful, but it also works towards his critical position, establishing Milton as a master who works or "plays" on readers with great skill. Describing the hypothetical elision of a key simile in the poem, he writes "if it were omitted the wound would spread over about a hundred lines.

Pages later, he reworks the Milton metaphor from musical to nautical: "A boat will not answer to the rudder unless it is in motion; the poet can work upon us only as long as we are kept on the move" (45). This point illustrates the constant flow of Milton's style, which Lewis accomplishes by "an avoidance of what grammarians call the simple sentence" (45). But even in describing syntax and formal literary devices Lewis cannot omit his own humor and style. After quoting a nine-line sentence from *Paradise Lost*, Lewis writes, masterfully, "This is a pretty complicated sentence" (46). The genius is in the irony, for if read alone, Lewis' line is ridiculous.

The line is exactly what would be called a simple sentence. If "this" is self-referential, Lewis' sentence becomes a humorous farce given its pure simplicity.

Milton and Perelandra Revisited

Lewis' distaste for the end of *Paradise Lost* is only one of the many critical positions he takes up in his *Preface*, though he does point to many of the poem's failings. In a chapter titled "Milton and St. Augustine" Lewis provides a gloss of the key Christian doctrines which he believes are the basis for "Milton's version of the Fall story" (66). One of his points will help us exemplify how his position as a critic (and a Christian) can manifest in his fiction. In an earlier response to *Perelandra*, I argued that the temptation of Tinidril is an analogue or doubling of the temptation of Eve, that Lewis reenacts and prevents the Fall of humanity on earth by allowing Ransom to intervene on Venus. I would add here that Lewis' assertion, writing about unfallen sexuality (i.e., the fact that in *Paradise Lost* Adam and Eve have sex before the fall), "the poet should not have touched the theme at all" is manifested in the explicit lack of sexual attraction between Ransom and Tinidril (124).

Lewis's Milton vs. My Own

In this final section, I hope to, very briefly, point to some of the places in which I disagree with Lewis' assessment of *Paradise Lost*. The first notion is one that we have already seen: Lewis believes unfallen sexuality to be an error. While Lewis, who is a Christian (note that I am not), is entitled to this view, I believe his judgment to be the wrong one. First of all, the descriptions are innocent (Satan even averts his eyes because of the splendor and his own jealousy) and beautiful. Shameless sex, in a way that we, living after the fall, cannot fathom,

seems an essential part of paradise. Adam and Eve were man and wife, and their physical and emotional union is the premise on which Adam chooses to Fall with Eve. Also, if Adam and Eve were meant to fill the world with unfallen humans, it seems essential that they should procreate before the Fall.

In general, I believe that some of the mistakes that Lewis cites are brilliant non-mistakes, and some of the benefits which Lewis would grant the poem, which he sees as mostly orthodox, I would with hold in favor of an unorthodox reading. My primary concern is with Satan, who Lewis deems ultimately absurd. I will grant to Lewis that "Milton cannot exclude all absurdity from Satan, and does not even wish to do so" (95), but I argue that just because he is absurd in some moments does not mean that he is absurd in all of them. In my thesis, I argue that Satan is a character of deep self-awareness, and that, in trusting himself, he follows orders from God. Satan's main flaw is a vast misunderstanding of God, but in striving to understand at all he takes part in the holy project. I also believe that he is granted mercy from God in the end of the world of *Paradise Lost*.

My own opinions of *Paradise Lost* are very much still in development as I work to finish my thesis, and Lewis is a much more accomplished scholar than I am. I know only for certain that I take Lewis' criticism very seriously, and so do the other critics who I have read. While I might not entirely agree with him, I found his *Preface* formidable, informative, and captivating. Lewis as a critic is respected. His writing, on strength of scholarship and prose alone, deserves to be engaged, and his ideas have influenced and challenged the way I view the poem that has taken over my life for the last several months. Lewis' readings are adept and exciting, and his prose is descriptive, imaginative, and playful. Having finally met Lewis the critic, I plan to turn back to

Lewis the author with a more careful, admiring eye, eager to find the ways the depths of his scholarship manifest in his delightful fiction.

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