As an English professor, I have had an affinity for C. S. Lewis because in his writings I have always recognized a passion for literature, particularly as viewed through the lens of faith, or perhaps it is more accurate to say theology through the lens of literature. Indeed, while I have heard non-Christian academicians call Lewis a “preacher” on more than one occasion, he would be baffled to be called anything other than a professor, essayist, and novelist. In those roles, however, Lewis is not without controversy in some Christian circles, as I might illustrate with a personal anecdote of my own.

Sometime ago, I was in the middle of a conversation with someone when she stopped to ask about my role as an English professor at a Christian college: “Do you have students read literature written by non-Christians?” I affirmed that I do, and she ventured further: “Do your students read fiction? Isn’t that sort of like making them participate in lies? I don’t see why anyone would read anything other than the Bible. It’s enough for me.” Her thinking reflects quite a strong tradition in Christianity, which views anything not produced within the Church (often a particularly sectarian understanding of the Church) as being unworthy of consideration by believers. Such a view finds a ready target in Lewis. I have heard Lewis called, at best, a liberal Anglican (and thus viewed with
suspicion) and, at worst, a heretic. The bottom line is, as Shake-
speare’s Julius Caesar once put it about the great political instigator
Cassius, he is untrustworthy precisely because “he reads much.”

To be fair, there is a bit of logic to an argument that is suspi-
cious of the value of non-Christian learning, especially when one
views the cultural context of the early Church. The pagan culture
was, well, pagan, and it conflicted at every turn with the moral-
ity and theological presuppositions of the emerging Christian
culture. One need look no further than Ovid’s Metamorphoses (c.
A.D. 8) to see the depravity of first-century literature, where Jove,
for example, rapes his way through a sizeable portion of the coun-
trside’s female population. Early thinkers such as Tertullian (c.
160–c. 225) and Cyprian (c. 200–258) exhorted believers to ignore
the surrounding culture’s products, a view that may be summarized
in Tertullian’s scathing rejoinder, “What has Athens to do with
Jerusalem?” Tertullian meant that our learning should be edified
by the Scriptures and church authority, rather than defiled by the
thought patterns and exempla of pagan thinkers. For the Church
Fathers, it was a matter of theological and moral integrity, an in-
tellectual embodiment of Paul’s instructions to the Philippians, to
think about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable,
excellent, or praiseworthy (Philippians 4:7-9).

This view pretty well killed off the West’s belles-lettres tradition
as Christianity became the dominant cultural force, with theater
and the literary arts quashed beneath the stern criticisms that
held sway until Augustine (354 –430) arrived. Augustine’s conver-
sion came later in life, after he had won a reputation as a master
teacher and scholar, a sort of forerunner to what we would now
call a public intellectual, who used his great erudition to provide
commentary on a variety of issues. Augustine argued forcefully that
pagan thought was not devoid of truth but rather was distinctive in
its incorporation of untruth, or “dross.” He argued that in Exodus,
the Israelites looted the gold of the Egyptians, gold that eventually
became the furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple. In the
same way, Christians can find truth in the intellectual products
of non-Christians and can return that truth to its right use, the
glorification of God. The concept became known as ‘raiding the gold of the Egyptians.’ Three scriptural passages are readily understood in this light: Daniel 1:17-20 (“To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning . . .”), Acts 7:22 (“Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians . . .”), and Acts 17 (at Mars Hill, Paul quotes from Aratus, Epimenides, and Ovid). In them, Augustine and other later thinkers saw license to use pagan thought not as authoritative but rather as instructive and helpful to illumine Christian thought.

By the time of the Renaissance, the Christian humanists (Eras-mus, Wyatt, Donne, Herbert, Shakespeare, Milton, etc.) embraced a very broad understanding of learning and literature, viewing all human pursuits as either positive or negative but always somehow connected to the truths of the faith and therefore worthy of our time and our energies.

Lewis was a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literatures, so it should not surprise us that his view of the relationship between Christianity and broad reading would be one of enthusiastic support. In fact, I would be unjust to Lewis if I did not pause momentarily to consider the joy that he took in literature of all sorts. Any critical consideration of Lewis must be conducted within the context of Lewis’ clear understanding that rational analysis should always entail the caveat that literature is not purely rational: it is emotional and intuitive, both of which are just fine. Lewis believed that literature was uniquely human, an activity that brought joy to the reader. He and his friend J. R. R. Tolkien both scolded those who would squeeze the life out of fiction and poetry by trying to make them about critical analysis rather than pleasurable, human activities. Lewis would likely declare that Christians should read broadly because everyone should read broadly; it makes us human. Stories and poems enrich our lives in ways that nothing else can.

In the 1989 play “Shadowlands,” playwright William Nicholson places these words in Lewis’ mouth: “We read to know we’re not alone.” While Lewis himself didn’t say the words, they capture a sentiment that is thoroughly appropriate to Lewis. For him, stories are what connect us to one another, articulating the
inarticulatable, and reconciling the detached. When we consider Lewis and literature, we are in error if we do not presuppose the incredible pleasures, both emotional and intellectual, that lie in our shared literary traditions.

However, we would be unjust as well to claim that Lewis viewed text as little more than important pastime. For him, literature was foundational to rational thought and analysis, a vantage point from which we might see what had previously been hidden to us. For example, Lewis saw literature as being an incredibly rich moral banquet. Despite the various corruptions of human good depicted in many of the world’s great masterpieces, from the sexual marauding of Jove in Ovid to the scandalous bigotry of Shakespeare’s villains, Lewis notes that an exhaustive comparison of those masterpieces begins to generate an outline of the kind of morality that is common to all cultures.

Rather than exploring how the literary arts enrich our lives aesthetically or culturally, however, I will take up a slightly different charge, seeking to respond at least in part to those who see broad reading as spiritually dangerous. For Lewis, the reading of great literature is a thoroughly moral undertaking. Literature forms character by allowing us to examine ideals and failures from a front row, intellectually speaking. In heroes, we see the possibilities of human will, just as in anti-heroes, we see its weaknesses. We may become what we read; we may emulate what we have beheld. This is, in part, was the impulse that drove Lewis to become a novelist himself. He was concerned that modern approaches to literary study, and literary production, were becoming weak and ignoring the transformative power of narrative. In the process, he warned, we were creating “men without chests,” who have no moral understanding of the world.

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis describes this morality as the Tao, an ethical code that seems to define human good as a revelation of God’s design for goodness. The idea is that when we compare the shared elements, casting away the dross of cultural variations and idiosyncrasies and embracing the overlapping virtues, we find the ‘really real’ of moral universals. Thus we note the general revelation
of God’s law to all of humankind, through all of human literature is a part of how we should understand Rom 1:20, which notes that because God’s “power” and “nature” have been revealed throughout creation, all people “are without excuse.”

Critics of the Tao note that Lewis seems to embrace the particularly Christian virtues that are extant in other cultures but ignores the shared (im)moralities that do not find parallels in Christianity. Indeed, one of the distinctives of Christianity is not that it is the greatest common moral denominator but rather is something beyond that, a revelation of God’s particular grace in the midst of a world dripping in common grace. Such a point hits the mark, of course, but Lewis’ basic point still stands: we can discern a great deal about what lies at the root of our shared humanity specifically by examining our shared literary stories and traditions. Some might object, though, that a moral focus is a thin substitute for theological content. Lewis is not embracing morality as a substitute for faith; he is following Paul’s argument in Romans that morality and the law lead inexorably to the need for grace. The law constantly reminds us of how much we need that which is greater: grace.

Lewis saw great value in the relationship between one thing and another, a relationship that could yield powerful insights. In literary terms, one means of accomplishing this is through the use of allegory. Allegory is a symbolic system where one term (or person, event, etc.) is not only literally true but is also true in a larger sense that provides fresh insight. The Bible uses this as a basic means of interpretation: John 3:14 is explicit in our need to read Moses lifting up the serpent in Num 21:8-9 as a prophetic foreshadowing of Christ’s crucifixion.

Lewis’ most important book of literary criticism, *The Allegory of Love*, works to recover the waning understanding of allegory in poetry and narrative. He proposes that allegory is what brought lasting value to Classical works in the Christian era: we are able to read the texts symbolically, so that the characters, events, and even ideals point ultimately to Christian understandings of reality. This method of reading revealed larger truths that might lie behind the woodenly literal parts of the narrative. An invented narrative might
even not be literally true but could be figuratively true, an irony that forms a significant part of Lewis’ view of the world. A poem about love, then, might not actually be merely about the love of a man and a woman; it might be about a larger kind of love or even something else such as politics. The symbolic would thus shed light on the larger, more ideal truth.

When we read broadly, then, we can find connections, archetypes, and foreshadowings of theological and moral truth that would not otherwise be obvious. These Classical works (and their Medieval heirs) could point us in the right direction, particularly if we hold the appropriate keys to understanding the allegorical correlations. These shared literary traditions allow us to see beyond our own limitations, tapping into larger truths that may not be readily evident. Lewis’ view of literature was that it should always convey the magic of narrative, the possibility of non-empirical knowledge or even delight, where love is magical, where beauty is possible, and where meaning itself may be intuited rather than analyzed. The text might just surprise us with a vision that we had never before known was possible, revealing to us truth that we had not yet been able to comprehend.

This leads us directly to what is perhaps the most amazing view of literature, that just as the law leads us to understand the need for grace, and allegory leads to spiritual wisdom, literature can lead to conviction by the Holy Spirit. Lewis’ friendship with J. R. R. Tolkien was one of peers who loved myth and poetry, but who did not at first share faith. Tolkien was a dedicated and outspoken Christ-follower, who all but pled with his friend to abandon his atheism and embrace the true faith. The thread of their many conversations constantly visited this issue, one man’s faith and the other man’s doubt.

Prior to his conversion, Lewis believed that the biblical text was just another text among all of the world’s other texts. This was a kind of inversion of the complaint that is offered by Christians who see no great value in the world’s literature. Lewis was dismissive of Christian claims of truthfulness in a realm where he saw equivalence rather than truth claims. On one occasion, as he and Tolkien
were conversing about faith, he said that he saw Christianity as just another invented myth, like the others he had read so intensely. He saw all of them as ways to communicate truths and ideals but not an exclusive truth claim. He reviewed other myths that seemed to parallel the accounts of the biblical tradition. Tolkien affirmed that there were echoes that ran between the stories, but asked a particularly pointed question: What if the other myths foreshadowed Christ, so that Christ was the culmination of all that came before him? What if God had hard-wired humankind to resonate with his redemptive plan?

Lewis, with all of his great erudition and compendious knowledge of the great traditions of the world, suddenly saw that what made Christianity different was that it was true, and that Christ was ultimate Truth. As he wrote, “The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. . . . By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. . . . God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder [a Norse god who parallels Christ’s sacrifice], not less.” In a moment that echoed Augustine’s conversion 1500 years previously, he submitted to the Gospel, due to the preparation of his mind and the illumination of the Spirit, meeting in that moment to change his life, and our own understandings of the world around us. The Spirit worked through the words of humans who had not known unadulterated Truth; his was an intellect empowered by the Spirit Who was calling to him, leading him, to help him see the outlines of Truth in the midst of untruth, finally allowing him to piece the shape of this Truth in such a way as to have him declare, I see it! Literature, then, was an agent of the Holy Spirit’s conviction of Lewis.

Lewis scholar Louis Markos, in his helpful book From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics, says,

If Christianity is true, then the God who created both us and the universe chose to reveal himself through a sacred story that resembles more the imaginative works of epic poets and tragedians than the rational meditations of philosophers and theologians. . . . [T]he gospel story spreads
its light both forward and backward to uplift and ennoble all stories that speak of sacrifice and reconciliation, of messianic promise and eschatological hope. It was through the Psalms and the Prophets, which were written in poetry, as well as the ‘epic’ tales of the Old Testament—Abraham’s long, circuitous journey, Joseph and his brothers, the Passover and Exodus—that Yahweh prepared the hearts and minds of his people for the incarnation of the Christ. Is it so unbelievable that he should have used the greatest poets, storytellers, and ‘prophets’ of antiquity to prepare the hearts of the pagans?

When I hear arguments that Christians should not read broadly, I know that what underlies these views is a belief that secular literature is so wicked and so seductive that it cannot be redeemed. My response echoes that which Lewis would likely utter: Romans reminds us that Christ died for us while we were helpless sinners (5:6) and enemies (5:10). How can Christ redeem sinful literature? In the same way that He has redeemed sinful men and women: through the redemptive power of the Creator God, Whose Gospel is the greatest story ever told, precisely because it is true.

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