C. S. Lewis died on the same day as John F. Kennedy and Aldous Huxley. Overshadowed by others of greater popular fame in the moment of his death, he might likewise have slipped quietly into the ranks of Christian apologists who did good work in their day, but who then pass the torch to the next generation and fade into the world of out-of-print books and minor academic interest. Rather, Lewis’ star has continued to rise; he can be reckoned now as having joined the constellation of the greats. Why? After November 22nd, 2013, one possible answer to that question will have ‘a local habitation and a name.’ On that date, the 50th anniversary of Lewis’ death, a memorial will be unveiled in Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey, placing Lewis in the company of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Austen, and many other great literary men and women. Lewis joins the greats because of his contribution to English letters – and in that phrase is summed up all his varied work as an apologist, a scholar, and a writer. I would venture to suggest that this single memorial, standing for all of Lewis’ work, suggests a certain unity about that work. Lewis was a thoroughly integrated man – and this integration, this sense of wholeness, is a crucial element in his lasting and extensive impact.

LEWIS AS AN IMAGINATIVE APOLOGIST

Lewis’ wholeness was hard-won. “Nearly all that I loved I believed
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to be imaginary; nearly all that I believed to be real I thought grim and meaningless.” Such was Lewis’ condition as a young man, and an atheist: “The two hemispheres of my mind,” he wrote in his autobiography, “were in the sharpest contrast.”

His conversion to Christianity involved a reunion of these divided hemispheres, such that he could see Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion and Resurrection as a ‘true myth.’ When he became a Christian his first instinct was to give an account of his philosophical journey from atheism to faith – in imaginative terms. *The Pilgrim’s Regress* is the firstfruits of the integrated vision that would undergird all of Lewis’ apologetic writing. For the rest of his life, his work would remind us that to look at something and to look along it are both ways of knowing. In our present age, the scientists, the empiricists, have had it all their own way; but Lewis helps us recover the view of “looking along the beam,” as he put it in his great essay “Meditation in a Toolshed.”

Indeed, one of the major achievements of Lewis as an apologist is his recovery of the use of the imagination as a mode of knowing, without thereby rejecting or dismissing the role of reason. Lewis is a rigorous thinker; it is worth remembering that his early training was in philosophy and indeed he originally intended to pursue an academic position as a philosopher.

Yet if we ask whether any of Lewis’ ‘straight’ apologetics works would be as effective as they are if they were stripped of their imagery, the stories boiled down to their propositional bones, I suspect that the answer would be ‘probably not.’ Lewis is effective as an apologist because, in all his works, he is concerned not simply with truth but with meaning. It is not sufficient merely to present an idea, cold and dead on a platter, for the skeptic to sniff at and then walk away; it must be brought to life.

Consider his extended discussion of faith in *Mere Christianity*. He sets out to explain how faith differs from belief, and how faith can be considered a virtue, noting that he once assumed that “the human mind is completely ruled by reason.” If that were the case, then faith and belief would be the same thing – but in fact, this assumption is not true:
For example, my reason is perfectly convinced by good evidence that anaesthetics do not smother me and that properly trained surgeons do not start operating until I am unconscious. But that does not alter the fact that when they have me down on the table and clap their horrible mask over my face, a mere childish panic begins inside me. I start thinking I am going to choke, and I am afraid they will start cutting me up before I am properly under. In other words, I lose my faith in anaesthetics.

Lewis sums up his argument with precise language: “It is not reason that is taking away my faith: on the contrary, my faith is based on reason. It is my imagination and emotions. The battle is between faith and reason on one side and emotion and imagination on the other.” It is a clearly stated, powerful point, but it has its punch precisely because he has illustrated it so vividly beforehand. This technique of using images, miniature stories, and vivid metaphors to convey theological and philosophical ideas is perhaps the most consistent stylistic marker of Lewis as an apologist. Sometimes he starts off with an image and develops his idea from it, as with the passage above; sometimes he uses an image to sum up an extended argument, as in *The Abolition of Man*: “We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.” Here is a hint of Lewis’ depth and staying power, why he continues to be unsurpassed as a popular apologist. As Austin Farrer put it with reference to Lewis’ *The Problem of Pain*, “We think we are listening to an argument, in fact we are presented with a vision; and it is the vision that carries conviction.” Everything Lewis wrote was infused with imaginative insight, and thus with meaning. And he knew what he was doing. “Reason,” he wrote, “is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.”

**LEWIS AS A LITERARY CRITIC**

As famous as Lewis became on the basis of his Broadcast Talks and later apologetics works, nonetheless he always, and rightly, noted that he was an *amateur* theologian. It is easy, especially for
Americans, to forget that Lewis was a working academic, an Oxford don and, late in his life, a Cambridge professor. For thirty years, from 1924 to 1954, his day to day work was tutoring students, giving lectures, and producing academic literary criticism. Lewis’ literary critical work is often treated as if it were a ‘day job’ in the style of T.S. Eliot’s bank-manager work; one sometimes catches a hint of regret from certain scholars that perhaps if he hadn’t been an Oxford don, he’d have had more time to produce great works of apologetics. However, the more closely one looks at his academic work, the more significant it becomes, as the foundation and fount of inspiration for his popular work. If Lewis had not been the scholar that he was, in English literature, neither would he have been the apologist or the novelist that he was.

All his life, Lewis was an avid reader, something that certainly stimulated his imagination and involved him in vigorous intellectual debate – and in so doing, helped equip him for both popular apologetics and academic work. As a young man, he seemed sometimes almost drunk with literature, carried away by his imaginative engagement in the story or the ‘atmosphere’ of the work. He never lost that capacity for enjoyment, and indeed it is this that sets him apart from many, perhaps most academic literary critics today: his love of what he read.

Throughout all his books and essays, we can see Lewis’ attention to meaning, and his willingness to surrender to the experience of reading. He enters into the world of the text, whether it is the medieval world of the Roman de la Rose or the science-fictional world of H.G. Wells, and he first meets with what he finds there on its own terms. Unlike what we might expect from a professional academic, he did not draw a sharp divide between what he read for ‘work’ and what he read for ‘pleasure’; nor between ‘high’ and ‘low’ works. But his academic work refined his approach to reading as well – disciplining it, sharpening his sensitivity to genre, mood, word choice. In Studies in Words, he shows a keen attention to language: its nuances, its flavors, its change over time.

And so in his approach to reading, we can catch a glimpse of what made Lewis a gifted teacher – his genuine love of the subject.
and enjoyment of reading as an experience; what made him a gifted creative writer – his exquisite sensitivity for the impact of word choice, perhaps best seen in the deceptively simple yet always precisely chosen language of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. This was the attention to detail and nuance that made him a gifted literary critic.

And just as Lewis’ approach to reading sustained and nourished both his academic and popular work, so too his approach to communication was the same at its core. When Lewis gave his wartime talks on Christianity, he discovered that it was necessary to be able to explain theology in terms that his lay audience would understand – and that this was far more difficult than it seemed. He did the necessary work, learning how to communicate to a broader audience with depth and rigor. I suspect that his ability to make the shift, to discern his audience’s level of understanding and adapt his approach to suit, without abandoning the content, was not something he discovered on the fly, but rather was rooted in his academic writing. For Lewis as an academic is shockingly readable, even in his most technical pieces.

His imaginative vision and his rational thinking allow him to express his insights in ways that are both precise and imaginatively powerful, and so we see his use of image and metaphor in his academic as well as in his popular work. Consider, for instance, the opening image of *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, a brilliant illustration of the necessity of understanding literary genre:

The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is – what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used. After that has been discovered the temperance reformer may decide that the corkscrew was made for a bad purpose, and the communist may think the same about the cathedral. But such questions come later. The first thing is to understand the object before you: as long as you think the corkscrew was meant for opening tins or the cathedral for entertaining tourists you can say nothing to the purpose about them.

Lewis’ point is that “The first thing the reader needs to know about *Paradise Lost* is what Milton meant it to be” – but so clear is the insight, and so vivid is the illustration, that the illustration...
of the corkscrew and the cathedral is equally applicable to an understanding of any text whatsoever.

**LEWIS AS A CREATIVE WRITER**

Lewis’ integration of imagination and reason, his use of image and metaphor to convey meaning, his love of and attention to language, his deep immersion in literature – these all come together in his creative work, as a poet and a novelist. It may seem surprising to first mention Lewis as a poet, but in fact his first sense of literary identity was as a poet, and his first two published works were volumes of poetry: *Spirits in Bondage*, a sequence of lyrics (1919) and a long narrative poem *Dymer* (1926). In his early years, when his friends thought of him as a writer, they thought of him specifically as a poet. He did not get the success he hoped for, and as his letters to Arthur Greeves show, he consciously, and painfully, let go of his poetic ambitions.

Yet there are two things to note here. One is that, although Lewis’ fame is rightly founded on his prose works, he is a better poet than most people realize. His poems, many of them unpublished at his death or published under the pseudonym Nat Whilk (“I know not whom”) were gathered by Walter Hooper into two collections, *Poems* and *Narrative Poems*, and, not surprisingly given contemporary lack of enthusiasm for poetry in general, have been largely overlooked by readers. It is to be hoped that Don King’s forthcoming single-volume collection of the complete poetry will help to draw more sustained attention to Lewis as a poet. Hitherto, those who venture to read these volumes have often done so mainly out of curiosity for a seemingly un-Lewisian production; but if one does not have an existing taste for poetry, or familiarity with the kinds of forms Lewis used, or appreciation for the use of sound and meter in poetry, the merits of these poems are likely to be overlooked.

And they do have merit. In the poems we find phrases full of imaginative richness, compact and vivid: “This year the summer will come true”; “devils are unmaking language”; “heaven’s hermitage, high and lonely.” More significant than his imagery
is the sound of his poetry. This is one of the reasons Lewis as poet is difficult to quote, for his effect is (unfashionably) tightly bound up with the form and metrical structure of the whole poem; but it seems likely to me that his attention to sound and rhythm in his poetry disciplined him to do the same in his prose, but with a freer hand and larger canvas. Here we encounter a man who knew language intimately; who tasted it, who worked with the rhythm of a line, shaping it until it sang.

I would submit that it is from his lifelong attention to writing poetry that Lewis was able to write prose that resonates as it does – with lines like the brilliant close of “Is Theology Poetry?”: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

NARNIA: A FULLY INTEGRATED WORK
If anything of Lewis’ work survives when all the rest has passed away, it will almost certainly be the Chronicles of Narnia; here we see Lewis at his most integrated – as apologist, scholar, writer. The Narnia books are not a retreat from engagement with apologetics, but a new way to approach it, using imaginative strategies to present a view of the same objective truth that Lewis so powerfully defends in his ‘straight’ apologetics works. Yet there is something special about the Chronicles of Narnia, something that has proved impossible for later Christian authors to replicate; only Lewis’ friend and fellow Inkling JRR Tolkien has managed, in The Lord of the Rings, to create a work of equal power and appeal that also conveys the Christian vision. No one since Lewis and Tolkien has achieved this, though the shelves crammed full of imitations attest to the fact that many have tried. The deftness of his word choice, the elegance and clarity of his prose, the consistent yet subtle patterning of his images throughout the novels, show the hand of Lewis the poet, attentive to the play of language. These are extremely well-written books, apart from any other consideration. Though there are plenty of good novels in the world, there is something distinctive about the Chronicles of Narnia that has made them particularly compelling for so many different readers.
What gives Narnia its resonance and power? Michael Ward has made a convincing case that the Chronicles are constructed out of, and deeply imbued with, the spiritual symbolism of the medieval seven heavens. Lewis the literary critic laid the foundations for Narnia. He didn’t just stumble across an interesting bit of information about medieval cosmology and decide to include it in his writing; rather, he had been writing and teaching and thinking about medieval literature for his entire professional career as an academic. He fully understood, and had imaginatively engaged with, the imagery of the medieval cosmos; he knew from his reading, and from his poetry, and from his academic analysis, that these were genuinely “spiritual symbols of permanent value.”

And Lewis the imaginative apologist built on those foundations. The Narnia Chronicles are “all about Christ” – presented not didactically, nor allegorically, but through a technique that Ward has called “donegality,” with its invented etymology connecting to ‘the spirit of Donegal,’ the Irish coast with its glorious, Jovial waves that Lewis so loved. Donegality involves the deliberate creation of a distinctive atmosphere or flavor for each book that subtly crystallizes in a Christological character. The Christ of the Narnia books is the “cosmic Christ” implicit in every aspect of reality; Aslan is the Christ-figure in which the atmosphere of each book is focused. We breathe in the kingly spirit of Christ in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe; we are braced by his martial spirit in Prince Caspian; and so on through the Chronicles, as each book’s distinctive atmosphere shows forth a different aspect of the One by whom all things were made.

Such an atmosphere could only have been created by a man who thoroughly understood the experience of reading, someone who could taste the ‘flavor’ of a novel like The Last of the Mohicans or the unspoken holiness of Phantastes, someone who understood from inside, as a lifelong reader of great sensitivity, how a work of fiction operates in the imagination. And the Christological focus of the Chronicles, which is also the source of their power and meaning – for Christ is not an add-on moral to the Chronicles, but the very center and heart, the love that moves the Narnian
sun and other stars – could only have been created by a man whose faith was part of every aspect of his life. For above all, and in all, and through all, is Christ: in the end, this is what gives Lewis an integrated vision; for indeed, as Walter Hooper put it, Lewis was a thoroughly converted man.

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