

The Soul of C. S. Lewis

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What Is a Soul?

I DON'T SUPPOSE TOO many readers of C. S. Lewis would be tempted to say that "soul" is a simple word. Look it up in OED and you'll find fifteen basic senses, illustrated with quotations from the very earliest stages in the history of the English language. As a theological concept, too, there's not much room for doubting its complexity. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* explains that "No precise teaching about the soul received general acceptance in the Christian Church until the Middle Ages."² But since there are reams of passages in Old English containing the word "soul," this evidently doesn't mean that no one had offered an account of what the word "soul" might mean before the Middle Ages; it means only that there was no official agreement about its meaning before then. There were bound to be difficulties. "Soul" is an English word of Germanic origin. It

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2. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edn., ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1520.

is used, in the Old Testament, to translate a Hebrew word, *nephesh*, which means something like “living being” and precludes the familiar distinction between “soul” and “body.” In English versions of the New Testament, the word “soul” translates the Greek *psyche*: a word that has only to be spoken in order to suggest a pulsating diversity of mythological stories very different in atmosphere from the Gospels (the myth of Cupid and Psyche, of course, being a subject of lifelong interest to C. S. Lewis). In short, the Hebrew and Greek words for which “soul” is often a translation have meanings with which those of the word “soul” are likely to be misaligned. Yet the biblical contexts in which the word occurs leave no doubt as to its importance:

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36)

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.” (Mark 12:30)

“The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” (Ezek 18:20)

“I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child.” (Ps 131:2)

I select these examples pretty much at random. If they were the only surviving evidence of the meaning of the word “soul,” we could infer that the soul was something of supreme value; that it is, with the heart, mind, and strength, an essential constituent of a person; that it is capable of being killed by its own activity when that activity is evil; and that it is capable of being comforted by oneself, implying that it exists in a peculiarly intimate relation to the self, but is not identical with it.

Lewis’s own uses of the word “soul” certainly attest its importance to him:

Human will becomes truly creative and truly our own when it is wholly God’s, and this is one of the many senses in which he that loses his soul shall find it.³

At present we tend to think of the soul as somehow ‘inside’ the body. But the glorified body of the resurrection as I conceive it—the sensuous life raised from death—will be inside the soul. As God is not in space but space is in God.⁴

3. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 90.

4. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, 121.

The mould in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a key: and the key itself a strange thing if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions.

Your place in heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it—made for it stitch by stitch as a glove is made for a hand.⁵

For it is not so much of our time and so much of our attention that God demands; it is not even all our time and all our attention; it is ourselves. For each of us the Baptist's words are true: "He must increase and I decrease." He will be infinitely merciful to our repeated failures; I know no promise that He will accept a deliberate compromise. For He has, in the last resort, nothing to give us but Himself; and He can give that only insofar as our self-affirming will retires and makes room for Him in our souls.⁶

We notice here a strong iconoclastic tendency, at least with regard to conventional ideas about the soul. It is not inside our bodies; our bodies are inside it. We cannot call it our own; it belongs to God and only flourishes when this is freely acknowledged. Each human soul is unique, though none is more valuable than another.

Predictably there is much congruence between Lewis's account and the biblical account of the soul. What they share is a deep indifference to contemporary ideas of the self as somehow all-important. The soul, for Lewis and for the biblical writers I've quoted, is some deep organizing and animating principle in a human being, breathed into it (on a Christian understanding) by God. It gives life, not just in the sense of a mere capacity for experiencing the world, but in the sense of a capacity for experiencing it fruitfully or, as we might say, creatively.

Since the rise of Modernism, though, it might be said we've become intolerant of talk of the word "soul," as indeed of the word "heart": we are all supposed to prefer the Higgs boson. This is apparent from current interpretations of words that begin with the prefix *psyche*, like "psychology" or "psychoanalysis." When I ask students for a definition of either of these they commonly say that they are to do with the mind. The *mind* notice, not the soul. The mind unseats the soul in a despiritualizing age. And, it might

5. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 135.

6. Lewis, "A Slip of the Tongue," 123–24.

further be said, the ego, an individual's sense of themselves, rather than the soul, is likely to become the chief object of our spiritual attentions.

Lewis was wary about psychoanalysis all his life, though less so later. One reason for that was, no doubt, defensive, as we shall see. But another may have been that he feared the displacement of the soul—the means by which the individual is most intimately connected to God—by the narrowly self-interested ego.

However, what I want to talk about today is the presence in Lewis of something deeper than his conscious awareness of himself, deeper than his ego, which seems persistently to have frustrated his attempts to recognize the language of his soul. Since to have one's soul occluded by one's self or ego is a common predicament, the struggle in Lewis to listen to his soul is one of the characteristics of his work that modern readers are likely to find appealing. But what is this thing intermediate between the ego and the soul that I'm talking about? I will call it the grammar of emotion.

The Grammar of Emotion

Grammar is one of the most familiar examples of a process that operates unconsciously, but that manifests itself throughout our conscious lives. It organizes our entire experience of speaking, reading, and otherwise interpreting language. No fully adequate grammar has been produced for any living language, since grammar is constantly evolving and showing new capabilities that elude attempts to formulate its "rules." (It seems likely that the very concept of a rule stands to the living actuality of grammar as scientific enquiry stands to faith: there is a basic incompatibility between the thing investigated and the mode of investigation, which ensures that the investigation cannot find what it seeks.⁷ Such failures could be enlightening if they resulted in a new investigative procedure, instead merely of more rigorous applications of the old one.) This phenomenon of a process that is unconscious, all-subsuming within the sphere of its operation, definite enough to invite description, but so elusive that it defies full analysis obviously has

7. Bruce Hood, Professor of Developmental Psychology at Bristol University, has produced research to show that "superstition is hardwired into our brains" ("We Are Born to Believe in God," *Sunday Times*, 6 September 2009, 9). The terms in which this claim is made reveal, I think, a radical misunderstanding of the grounds and motives of religious belief. It may be a form of superstition to find the metaphor of "hardwiring" here reassuring and to ignore the distinction between what is illogical and what is supra-logical. To the extent that the materialistic presuppositions of the article are accepted, the "discovery" serves (and perhaps aims) to exalt science at the expense of religion.

resonances in other dimensions of our experience. Societies might be said to have grammars: they are organized; there are likely to be principles informing the organization; but formulating the principles might be tricky. Even somewhat more restricted phenomena, like institutions (academic, governmental, or religious, say) exhibit certain consistencies in the way they work which implies the existence of some underlying system of organizing principles. Lacan famously said (or is said to have said) that the unconscious is structured like a language.⁸ And, if it is, then it too has a grammar, at once evident and latent, describable and eluding final description. In this essay I want to look at something neither as comprehensive as the unconscious, nor as restricted in the sphere of its operation as a language, but nonetheless very diffuse and wide-ranging, like the pull of moon on tide.

To talk of the grammar of emotion is to imply that beneath emotions themselves (whatever they might be understood to be) is something organizing them, something that is not itself an emotion quite, but that determines the character of what we apprehend as our emotions. Freud's cumbersome but heavily suggestive phrase (as translated by Strachey) is "quotas of energy in some unimaginable substratum."⁹ Understood this way, emotions are the form in which our psychic energies make themselves manifest to us.

Religious belief, or metaphysical outlook, is prominent among the things that make each person both like and unlike any other. Many Buddhists cultivate a habit of expecting to encounter the adversities that in our society we may feel ourselves encouraged to treat as surprising accidents. Christianity has its different way of trying to reconcile us to the experience of pain. Both acknowledge that, when it comes, even if we have done everything possible to eliminate the more obviously neurotic elements in our responses, we may still experience anguish. Christ wept for Lazarus and for Jerusalem and in the Garden of Gethsemane sweated blood.¹⁰ But whether anguish is anticipated or arrives unexpectedly, accepting it remains hard. The gloss I am prompted to put on this is a further revelation of my own ideological perspective: I feel we are creatures who carry into a post-

8. What Lacan actually said was in French; but in English the nearest we get in the *Écrits* to this familiar catchphrase is, "This is precisely why the unconscious, which tells the truth about truth, is structured like a language" (*Écrits*, 737). Lacan was fond of the trope of structuring, probably borrowed in the first place from linguistics. He writes that a "symptom is structured like a language" (*ibid.*, 223) and that a "personality is structured like a symptom." That the phrase, in English, has acquired a life of its own is owing to the suggestiveness of the notion that the unconscious may have within it something analogous to the thing that structures a language. And that something is a grammar.

9. Freud, "Anxiety and Instinctual Life."

10. John 11:35; Luke 19:41; Luke 22:44.

lapsarian world expectations and desires that are immutably pre-lapsarian. This is not to say (as Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett might construe me as saying) that I believe in the historicity of the Fall. Rather, I agree with Coleridge that:

A fall of some sort or other . . . is the fundamental postulate of the moral history of man. Without this hypothesis, man is unintelligible; with it, every phenomenon is explicable. The mystery itself is too profound for human insight. . . .¹¹

I affirm this belief in order to expose candidly how emotions are conditioned by metaphysical beliefs that we hold more or less consciously. What I am more interested in here, however, operates at a lower and less easily accessible level in the infrastructure of our emotions. I have indicated how an emotion might be affected by a belief; but how might a belief be affected by a still deeper emotion?

William Empson once remarked, with a flourish of his coat, but truly nonetheless, that he thought “a profound enough criticism could extract an entire cultural history from a simple lyric”;¹² similarly, a good enough psychotherapist might discern within the expression of an unemphatic, ostensibly trivial emotion, the lineaments of a person’s sensibility: the outline of their whole manner of experiencing the world.

Unappeasably, in an early poem, Philip Larkin intones:

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.¹³

Beneath the characteristically sombre intonation, I would like to suggest, is an undertone of expectation. Larkin expects defeat, disappointment and terminal death (unlike Blake, for whom death was a terminus, but not terminal). It is this expectation that organizes the style of his experience and gives to his poetic style its distinctive dour plangency and pathos. More generally, it might be said that such broad metaphysical expectations (“age, and then the only end of age”¹⁴) determine the key into which more conscious emotions are unknowingly transposed.

At the very start of his posthumous fiction, *The Double Tongue*, William Golding tries bearing witness to the possibility of experience before

11. Coleridge, *Table Talk* of 1 May 1830 (*Major Works*, 592–93). Fifteen years earlier, when he was forty-two, Coleridge had insisted on his belief in “a Fall in some sense, as a fact . . . the reality of which is attested by experience and conscience” (letter to Wordsworth, 30 May 1815).

12. Empson, “The Verbal Analysis,” in *Argufying*, ed. Haffenden, 107.

13. Larkin, “Wants,” in *Philip Larkin*, ed. Thwaite, 42.

14. Larkin, “Dockery and Son,” 152–53.

the consciousness (or even formation) of self. He knows he is flouting the assumption that selves are innate—that simply because we cannot quite express memories before we had them, we must have always had them:

Blazing light and warmth, undifferentiated and experiencing themselves. There! I've done it! The best I can, that is. Memory. A memory before memory? But there was no time, not even implied. So how could it be before or after, seeing that it was unlike anything else, separate, distinct, a one-off. No words, no time, not even I, ego, since as I tried to say, the warmth and the blazing light was experiencing itself, if you see what I mean. Of course you do!¹⁵

The tone of that “Of course you do!” is hard to catch. Mocking? Because he knows that of course we don't see. Or companionable? Because he knows that we all have such experience, however much the conditions of evolving a distinct and self-conscious self—which include the use of language—make such experience hard to communicate, even to contemplate. For language, like consciousness, imposes categories of perception, such as time: “A memory before memory? But there was no time, not even implied. So how could it be before or after.” The attempt to express one's own experience implies a consciousness of the distinction between perceiver and perceived. Hence Golding's attempt to avoid saying, “*I remember* blazing light and warmth.” Such statements imply the imposition of a grammar: a system of organizing assumptions which possibly do not exert their full organizing force in the very earliest stages of life—or indeed in some of the states we experience at later stages: sleep, daydreaming, sexual transport, drunkenness, loving absorption in another's joy, or religious contemplation. Many poets are profoundly interested in the imaginative recovery of this state—I am thinking of Keats writing about minnows as if he were one, or Pound evoking the aftermath of the Trojan War in the mind of a waking fallen soldier. Buddhist contemplation, or Christian prayer, constantly aspire to a state in which consciousness is retained, but self-consciousness escaped, as if it were the chrysalis of being, not the final form of it. To me, the Buddhist notion as well as (obviously) the Christian one is fully congruent with the belief that the conditions under which we normally live our lives are post-lapsarian. We treat as normal modes of being that preclude normality. We take our fill of the food that sustains us only enough to dream of health.

Among psychoanalysts, D. W. Winnicott is perhaps especially notable for his attempts to imagine experience before selfhood:

15. Golding, *The Double Tongue*, 3.

For the baby there comes first a unity that includes the mother. If all goes well, the baby comes to perceive the mother and all other objects and to see these as not-me. [The mother] is first a delusion which the baby has to be able to disallow, and there needs to be substituted the uncomfortable I AM unit which involves the loss of the merged-in original unit, which is safe. The baby's ego [its developing sense of itself as a being distinct from the maternal care it depends on] is strong if there is the mother's ego support to make it strong; else it is feeble.¹⁶

It is perhaps customary now to enter objections to Winnicott's claims as unsubstantiated: entrancing fictions about a fantasy.¹⁷ Well . . . a psychoanalytic writer capable of entrancing is perhaps not to be sniffed at; and attempts to practise entrancement do at least show a capacity for recognizing the importance in human experience of being entranced. While scientists pine for forms of proof that babies can't supply, poets (and those, like Winnicott, who value poets) will stand by forms of intuition that they can't ignore. Winnicott here provides a gloss on the experience of observing babies that stimulates what he takes to be the memory of being one. And in this he is at one with a poetic forerunner of all psychoanalysis. In 1798 Wordsworth wrote:

Blest the infant babe—
 For with my best conjectures I would trace
 The progress of our being—blest the babe
 Nursed in his mother's arms, the babe who sleeps
 Upon his mother's breast, who, when his soul
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul
 Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.
 Such feelings pass into his torpid life
 Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind,
 Even in the first trial of its powers,
 Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine
 In one appearance all the elements
 And parts of the same object, else detached
 And loth to coalesce.¹⁸

Perception, as adults understand it, is learned. The aptitude for learning it may be innate, but the capacity for engaging in it is not. According

16. Winnicott, "Sum, I Am" in *Home is Where We Start From*, 62–63.

17. See, e.g., Leopoldo Fulgencio, "Winnicott's Rejection of the Basic Concepts of Freud's Metapsychology," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Volume 88 (2007), 443–61.

18. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 267–94.

to Wordsworth, the (in this example, male) baby's intuitive recognition of "manifest kindred" with his mother is what stimulates the attempt to learn perception. He is "eager to combine / In one appearance all the elements / And parts of the same object, else detached / And loth to coalesce." Before this voluntary effort is made, the Mother does not exist, but, rather a loose congeries of sensory data, which only after it "combine / In one appearance."

By imagining the child in this state of incipient perceptiveness, Wordsworth and Winnicott coax us back into the quiddities of experience prior to the development of the categories that supply its adult grammar. By imagining the formation of a sense of self in this way, they enable us to apprehend more vividly the ease with which the process might be disrupted and the sense of self damaged, or damagingly inflected. Selfhood might be imagined as the bedrock of a person's grammatical organization. The character of the self determines, or powerfully conditions, the character of anything else that is organized on the basis of it.

Lewis and Grief

Lewis thought he could write better than he could speak. For some it is writing that offers the best hope of assuaging the sense—familiar to us all, presumably—of not having adequately expressed ourselves. For some such people, writing becomes, if not a fetish exactly, then an activity that comes to be relied upon for the relief it is expected to afford: "ink is the great cure for all human ills."¹⁹ Andrew Cuneo, formerly a literary critic and now a priest, observes: "How often Lewis notes in his letters that writing is the cure for all ills."²⁰ One such ill, however, is that of compulsive introspection. But there is the possibility too of a compulsion to dismiss all introspection as compulsive: a compulsion that might be the manifestation of a defensive avoidance even of those forms of introspection which might be profitable and wholesome. Cuneo again:

. . . what a shock to read a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature say that, "if I had some rare information about the private life of Shakespeare or Dante I'd throw it in the fire, tell no one, and re-read their works. All this biographical interest is

19. Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves (30 May 1916) in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume 1, ed. Hooper, 187.

20. Cuneo, "Duty With a Stamp: 'Half my life is spent answering letters,'" www.cslewis.com/uk.

only a device for indulging in gossip as an excuse for not reading what the chaps say.”²¹

Again, however, there are complexities here. It is easy to suppose that Lewis’s distaste for biography was defensive; but this would involve the assumption that defences are always bad. But what is commonly called a defence can often with more justice be regarded as a legitimate mechanism for avoiding pain—or what Keats called “disagreeables”—which has somehow gone wrong. A further possibility—strongly hinted at in the suggestion that we should re-read primary texts instead of writers’ biographies—is that the primary texts, if good enough, will communicate the depths of a person’s experience more adequately than their biographers are likely to. And it may be that, in communing creatively with “the best that has been thought and said” (in Arnold’s vulnerable but indispensable phrase) Lewis was doing introspection in a new key: one whose tonalities he could accept and whose disclosures he trusted.

C. S. Lewis began his academic career teaching philosophy (having got firsts as an undergraduate at Oxford in both classics and English). Metaphysically, he knew that there is more to reality than we can get at through our senses; epistemologically, he knew that there is more to the mind than ratiocination. Other modes of mental activity—often subsumed by Romantic writers under the term “imagination”—may help us become aware of the supernatural elements of experience. As a poet, Lewis realized that “thought” is a complex term. Writing of thought in poetry he urges us to “understand that ‘thought’ here carries no specially *intellectual* connotation.”²² He attempts to define how language, in a poem, may momentarily express a state in which the usual rifts between thinking, feeling, and speaking are healed:

The poetic speechthought does not exist permanently and as a whole in the poet, but is temporarily brought into existence in him and his readers by art.²³

Lewis here is not only sharing Coleridge’s recognition that a great poet, such as Shakespeare, directs “self-consciously a power and an implicit wisdom deeper than consciousness,”²⁴ he is sharing Coleridge’s awareness, as a poet, of what the process of composition feels like. Further than that, he is aware of a need to exert the intellect to expose and so transcend its limitations:

21. Ibid.

22. Tillyard and Lewis, *The Personal Heresy*, 147.

23. Ibid.

24. Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Ransom, 1:198.

From all my thoughts, even from my thoughts of Thee
O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free.²⁵

Again, writing of Spenser, a poet whose reputation never stood higher perhaps than in the Romantic period, Lewis declares an interest in the unconscious activities of the mind:

Spenser, with his conscious mind, knew only the least part of what he was doing, and we are never very sure that we have got to the end of his significance. The water is very clear, but we cannot see to the bottom. That is one of the delights of the older kind of poetry: “thoughts beyond their thoughts to those high bards were given.”²⁶

Thoughts of the kind generally operative in critical prose may have often only a tenuous relation to the depths of a person’s psyche. In “Shelley, Dryden and Mr. Eliot,” Lewis asserts that a poet should follow his imagination because our imaginations are “*constrained by deepest necessities*” (my italics).²⁷ Poetry can take us beyond or beneath the ratiocinative thinking Lewis was all too good at, into the depths of such reverie as Shelley commends in his essay “On Life.” Thus, we may enter, in writing poems or in reading them, depths of our being that ratiocination barricades us out of, proffering subtlety as an illusory guarantee of depth.

But these emphases are rendered uniquely personal—are given the quality that peculiarly attracts or repels us—by their relation to the personality behind them.

Lewis ascribes to himself a vein of Celtic melancholy, a more literary and perhaps more acceptable term than “depression.” Yet George Sayer notes that Lewis at times “suffered intensely from the loneliness and depression to which he was liable all his life.”²⁸ Such testimony will strike many as being at odds with the more widespread image of Lewis as jovial (“It is obvious under which planet *I* was born!”).²⁹ But it may be that this image is the result, in

25. Lewis, “The Apologist’s Evening Prayer,” 143.

26. Lewis, “Edmund Spenser, 1552–99,” published to accompany Lewis’s selections from *The Faerie Queene* and *Epithalamion* in an anthology of *Major British Writers*, vol. 1 (1954); reprinted in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Hooper, 143. The quotation with which my quotation from Lewis ends is from “Third Sunday in Lent,” a poem in John Keble’s *The Christian Year* (1827), a series of poems for every day of the Christian calendar: “As little children lisp, and tell of Heaven, / So thoughts beyond their thought to those high Bards were given.”

27. Lewis, “Shelley, Dryden and Mr. Eliot,” *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Hooper, 207.

28. Sayer, *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times*, 74.

29. Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, 140.

part, of the way that Lewis, “constrained by deepest necessities,” presented himself. Owen Barfield, who knew him well, saw the earlier manifestations of such joviality in Lewis as an act: “*Was* there something, at least in his impressive, indeed splendid, literary personality, which was somehow—and with no taint of insincerity—*voulu* [contrived, forced]?”³⁰ The hesitations of Barfield’s syntax here indicates the difficulty he was having in appearing to suggest the possibility of some discrepancy between the way that Lewis actually was and the way he had fashioned himself. He concludes the next paragraph by declaring his love for Lewis, while recognizing that his doubt “raised issues Lewis himself would have refused to contemplate.”³¹ The significant word there, I think, is “refused.” Lewis had a dread of mental illness accompanied by a defensive resistance to those who professed to treat it. He says to Greeves: “We hold our mental health by a thread, and nothing is worth risking for it. Above all, beware of excessive daydreaming . . .”³² The result of this was an avoidance of introspection, which was sometimes salutary and sometimes desperate. His understanding, as a young man, of how psychological problems form is, by the standards of the singularly accomplished scholar he became, poignantly naïve. Again, to Greeves he says: “whatever you do, never allow yourself to get a neurosis. You and I are both qualified for it, because we were both afraid of our fathers as children.”³³

Significantly, too, Lewis identifies any possible problem as originating with his father, not his mother. Peter Bayley, at first Lewis’s graduate student, then his colleague, recognized that Lewis was “a shy and vulnerable man” whose “assumed persona was too strong. It is probable that he had early assumed it as a defence from victimization or mockery at school.”³⁴ This is very acute, though I’d like to suggest that Lewis may have had need of such defences before he went to school. Soon, though, the act of knock-down dialectical assertiveness became difficult for Lewis to distinguish from a salutary form of intellectual rigour. He may have defended himself so successfully against the fear of annihilation as to believe he’d never had it.

In an age that idealizes spontaneity and naturalness, we are liable to be suspicious of any deliberate cultivation of a form of behaviour. But as a means of improving aesthetic taste, Coleridge endorsed the Earl of Malmesbury’s principle of “feign a relish till we find a relish come.”³⁵ And Lewis’s

30. Barfield, “Introduction,” xi.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Lewis, letter to Arthur Greeves (22 April 1923), 605.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Bayley, “From Master to Colleague,” 80.

35. Harris, *The Works of James Harris, Esq.*, 453.

beloved Jane Austen in *Mansfield Park* endorses Fanny Price's recoil from dangerous kinds of acting within a social context in which politeness was acknowledged as a necessary kind. Wordsworth's concept of "a second Will more wise"³⁶ implies that will may inform behaviour without distorting it.

Lewis eventually seems to have believed that introspection may have a certain value as a means merely of cleansing the mirror of our souls so that God (and the creation) might be reflected more clearly there. Our Christian destiny lies "in being as little as possible ourselves."³⁷ But how intensive might such cleansing need to be? Lewis often seems hostile to psychoanalysis: he is apt to travesty all critics with an interest in "psychology" as "amateur psychologists" whose motive is to debunk dead authors and who are grievously lacking in "the plastic impulse, the impulse to make a thing, to shape, to give unity, relief, contrast, pattern."³⁸ Yet Coleridge (whom Lewis admired) was a pioneer of psychoanalysis with an epicurean sensitivity to the verbal nuance and "vocalic melody."³⁹ Lewis indeed, in a poem, praises Coleridge for having "re-discovered the soul's depth and height."⁴⁰ (The "re-" is characteristic and apposite: Coleridge saw himself as restoring to constrictively post-Enlightenment conceptions of the mind a complexity which Shakespeare had already achieved.) Yet Lewis retained a fascination with the psychological speculation that belied his peremptory dismissals of it. He never had psychotherapy as such. But he went for weekly confessions with a monk whose "wisdom" he acclaimed.⁴¹ And, as if recognizing its deep relevance to himself, he was curious about the Freudian principle of repression: "as the psychologist have taught us, it is not the remembered but the forgotten past that enslaves us."⁴²

It seems likely that, early in his life, Lewis's conscious cultivation of a Christian outlook had something of the quality of "woodenness" that we impute to actors who haven't yet found a way to achieve the properly paradoxical state of "acting naturally." I want to suggest that pessimism was a feature of Lewis's temperament which was established before he entered his teens and which was permanently confirmed by his mother's death. His faith required him to counteract his pessimism, which through much, if not all, of his life, continued to reassert itself. Lewis's battle with despair is

36. Wordsworth, "Ode to Duty," line 48, *The Poems*, Vol. 1, Hayden, 606.

37. Lewis, "Christianity and Literature," 22.

38. Lewis, "On Criticism," 544–45.

39. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 29.

40. Lewis, "To Roy Campbell," 80.

41. See Vaus, *Mere Theology*, 192–93.

42. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," 12.

evident even in such things as his casual manner of quoting Dunbar: “Man, please thy maker and be merry / And give not for this world a cherry.”⁴³ Here, perhaps, we see the outlines of a self-protective mechanism: serve God: be cheerful, though the world encourages despair.

Ontological Insecurity

We don't yet know much about Lewis's mother. Her letter to Albert Lewis of 14 November 1886 suggests confusion about her own impulses, rather than simple warmth and spontaneity of affection: “I may not be demonstrative, indeed I know I am not, but when I think of how many nights I have cried myself to sleep . . . I do not feel that I deserve to be thought of as heartless.”⁴⁴ However, George Sayer (who also loved Lewis) remarks that “This is the most emotional sentence to be found in what we have of her correspondence.”⁴⁵ In relation to such an impression (again rather at odds with the view of his mother promoted, in filial love and loyalty, by Lewis), Lewis's self-declared “hostility to the emotions” becomes a little less enigmatic.⁴⁶ Those unacquainted with, or unsympathetic to, the psychoanalytic concept of a defence (an unconscious mechanism for deflecting traumatically painful emotions) will perhaps find it invidious of me to suggest that Lewis's relationship with his mother may have been in any important way disappointing to him. Yet perhaps we should investigate more cautiously Lewis's account in *Surprised by Joy* of what the experience of his mother's death meant to him:

With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent has sunk like Atlantis.⁴⁷

I wonder how fully do we register the implications of this passage: “all settled happiness”; “all sea and islands now.” The shock-waves of Lewis's

43. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 84. The text of Dunbar's poem “The Reign of Covetice” (covetousness) actually runs: “Man, please thy Maker an' be merry, / And set not by this world a cherry.” It is characteristic of Lewis to have replaced the archaic “set not by” with the more contemporary and, for non-specialists, intelligible “give not for.”

44. Quoted in Sayer, *Jack*, 7.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 160. Lewis states that he early learned “to fear and hate emotion,” 32.

47. *Ibid.*, 23.

grief, at ten years old, extend not only to the man in his fifties remembering them, but to *all* regions of his life in between. He describes a radical and comprehensive sense of loss. And what he has lost is not his mother's presence, only, but all faith in the goodness of the world. I state this baldly in order to solicit full recognition for the calamitous nature of what Lewis is asserting. His language represents his mother as the fulcrum on which the stability of the world rests, or as the presence in whose embrace the world finds peace. She is, as mothers may often be for children, the *primum mobile* within which all known reality is held; or else a region of fixed stars in relation to which all terrors of the child's experience become bearable. When she dies, the world, which had previously partaken of the reassuring and loving qualities of his mother's presence, is deprived of them and becomes suddenly bleak (Lewis's word), frightening, untrustworthy, and insecure.

Lewis himself believed that his mother's death had been instrumental in giving him an outlook in which disappointment is avoided by expecting the worst:

I think that though I am emotionally a fairly cheerful person my actual judgement of the world has always been what yours now is and so I have not been disappointed. The early loss of my mother, great unhappiness at school, and the shadow of the last war and presently the experience of it, had given me a very pessimistic view of existence. . . . I still think the argument from design the weakest possible ground for Theism, and what may be called the argument from un-design the strongest for Atheism.⁴⁸

But I want to go beyond the mere fact of death and suggest how the reverberations of this loss shook Lewis ontologically: radically unsettled his sense of his own safety in the world. And it may be, moreover, that there are factors involved of which Lewis remained unconscious, or of which he never gave any inkling of being aware. Did he feel securely and lovingly held by his mother? Was he welcomed into the world? Was there an apprehensiveness before his mother's death which turned into fear and misgiving afterwards? We would need to know a lot more about Flora Hamilton, and her feelings towards her son, in order to be able even to speculate with any confidence. All we have for certain is Lewis's repeated insistence on a profound ontological trauma which he attributed to his mother's death.⁴⁹

48. Lewis, letter to Dom Bede Griffiths (20 December 1946), *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Vol. 2, ed. Hooper, 747.

49. See also his letter to Phyllis Sandeman (31 December 1953), *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Vol. 3, ed. Hooper, 398.

Lewis had an especially acute need to find stability in the world. This gave to his moral and metaphysical thinking an unusual depth and urgency that his poet's gifts as a prose writer made it possible for him to express with special felicity and force. He located the security he yearned for beyond the world. The difficulty he encountered in making his sense of reality seem plausible to sceptics is comparable, perhaps, to the difficulty of gaining respectful attention for a psychoanalytic imagining of the realities of early childhood. The Hungarian psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi, for example, speculated that children who had observed, in overburdened, depressed, ill, or otherwise preoccupied mothers "the conscious and unconscious signs of aversion" (which need not be obvious, except to the child) suffer a weakening of "their desire to live," even if, in later life, "this was resisted by a strong effort of will."⁵⁰ Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst who, as we have seen, follows Wordsworth's practice of minutely imagining the experience of infants, considers that the way a mother holds an infant is "the only way in which [she] can show the infant her love of it. There are those who can hold an infant and those who cannot; the latter quickly produce in the infant a sense of insecurity."⁵¹ Freud had already argued that the cleverness of clever infants might be unconsciously exploited by a mother in postponing the satisfaction of the desire, for instance, to be fed. Clearly all such notions are speculative as is their relevance to Lewis. The assumption that Lewis's pessimism is entirely explained by the *fact* of his mother's early death is equally debatable.

What we see more certainly than causes are effects. Lewis had a predilection for periods in which the modern idea of interstellar space did not exist and the disturbing idea of an abyss as limitless as deep space was therefore similarly impossible. In medieval cosmology "There was no abyss."⁵² Lewis believed that the feeling of being at home in the world is illusory; and that, if you were to visit a longed-for place it would only point beyond itself to some more distant object of longing.⁵³ Our natural state is to feel that "in this universe we are treated as strangers" because "our real goal is elsewhere."⁵⁴ His poem "In Praise of Solid People" testifies to a "homeless longing";⁵⁵ and in "Poem for Psychoanalysts and/or Theologians" Lewis presents himself,

50. Ferenczi, "The Unwelcome Child and His Death Instinct," 125–29.

51. Winnicott, "The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship," 592.

52. Lewis, "De Audiendis Poetis," 7.

53. See, e.g., "The Landing" and "Leaving For Ever the Home of One's Youth," in *Poems*, ed. Hooper, 41, 245.

54. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," 103, 99.

55. Lewis, "In Praise of Solid People," *Poems*, 199.

impishly perhaps, but credibly nonetheless (in an idiom that recalls the Old English poem, “The Wanderer”) as wandering over a world whose roundness endlessly postpones arrival.⁵⁶ Lewis has an awareness of the phenomenology of perception that makes the idea of perception as inherently illusory not only intelligible but more probable than the idea of it as refracting a solid world. All such instances point to a sense of himself as the alienated inhabitant of a world that, for all its beauty, is dangerous and disappointing. At the same time, Lewis feels a deep recoil from philosophies that intensify the sense of the world’s moral and metaphysical arbitrariness.

The doctrine of the natural law provides a partial antidote to the horrors of subjectivism, relativism, or nihilism. The horrors are resisted in proportion as Lewis feels them more acutely. He sees that judgments take place within an ideological system. He understands, fears, and resists the impulse to conclude that there is nothing outside the system. Instead he maintains, according to the testimony of innumerable witnesses in many times and cultures, that beyond the perceptible universe is a changeless system of moral norms, not contingent, but built into the structure of reality. Miracles and reason in its most exalted mood he conceives of as entering the system from outside and testifying to this ultimate order of reality, which provides each culture with a source of sanctions and stability. God holds the world as a mother holds a child. A hostile critic might say that his psychological need to find an ultimate sanction for the moral beliefs within a cultural system discredits the theory of an ultimate sanction. But Lewis would point out that the need to believe is “on all fours” with the need not to.

Intellectualism

I have tried to establish that the loss that Lewis suffered on the death of his mother was not only the loss of her presence, love, and attention, but the loss also of the fundamental feeling of security in the world that his mother’s existence symbolized. The pain of such loss was obviously very extreme. It has always struck me as significant that Lewis was no good at mathematics, a subject in which his mother had obtained a first class degree. He emphasizes in *Surprised by Joy* that he twice failed the mathematical part of Responsions. He would not have secured his undergraduate place at Oxford had not the university, after the war, waived the requirement that he pass this elementary part of the old Oxford entrance examination. Lewis was hopelessly incompetent, therefore, at a subject in which his mother excelled. There are many possible explanations of this, of course; and any

56. Lewis, “Poem for Psychoanalysts and/or Theologians,” 127.

responsible psychotherapist would caution against the dangers of interpreting Lewis in his absence. It seems, however, not entirely reckless to suggest that he could not bear to involve himself imaginatively with a discipline so strongly associated with his mother. Unconsciously, he averts his attention. Consciously, he's just no good at mathematics. In some such way, we might be unconsciously defended against a whole range of painful recognitions. And one very powerful means of defence, for an intellectual, is the intellect.

In writing about writers, it is customary either to ignore the part of the writer's life before she or he could talk, or else to discuss it in terms of genealogy. Thus in the extant biographies of Lewis, the narrative becomes fully attentive to his imaginative life once he has got enough language to begin expressing it in words. Before that, we are told about the adults around him. But, to his parents of course, Lewis had had a lot of life by the time he wrote his first words and very much more again by the time he wrote the first of the books for which he is renowned. I want to suggest we should pay attention to this period of latency and try to imagine something of what may have been going on during it.

Few members of the intellectual professions, perhaps, have a highly developed sense of the dangers of intellectualism or over-reliance on the discursive intellect as a means of discovering truth. In academic writings on literature, it seems, explicit acknowledgement of this danger is rare; and *a fortiori* it is rarer still in those academic writings that aspire to theoretical sophistication. Yet intellectualism can be addictive and can preclude the genuine thoughtfulness that is a precondition for the appreciative reading of literature. For this reason it is important to remember that, like Eliot, Lewis was a poet before he was an academic⁵⁷ and that, accordingly, he retained all his life a sense of the limitations of the intellect, which his expertise in exerting it was unable to occlude.

Certainly Lewis recognized that intellectual activity can be addictive and a defence. He refers to “the incurable intellectualism of my own approach”;⁵⁸ acknowledges that “the limitations of my own gifts has [*sic*] compelled me to use a purely intellectual approach.”⁵⁹ He asserts the necessity of thinking not just with the intellect but in a way that involves “the whole man.”⁶⁰ Great literature, and especially poetry, was for Lewis powerfully conducive to thinking of this kind. Reading it well was therefore, for

57. It is no less important to remember that Lewis was a child before he was a poet.

58. Lewis, “God in the Dock,” 37.

59. Lewis, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thought,” 620.

60. See, e.g., “The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy,” in “The Weight of Glory,” 105; “It is by this middle element [the Chest] that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal,” *The Abolition of Man*, 19.

him, an experience both therapeutic (it “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality”⁶¹) and quasi devotional: “Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”⁶²

The wound in Lewis, occasioned by the particular circumstances of his childhood, supplies both a motive for intellectual exertion and a wariness about the presumptions of the intellect. Lewis achieves here, towards the end of his life, a deep psychic reconciliation in which pain and insight, self-transcendence and self-fulfilment, are delicately harmonized. His strength as a theorist is that his prose reverberates with the susceptibility to despair that he found his strength in trying to assuage. It is bracingly all-encompassing, yet intimately personal. He has found a way of using the grammar of his emotional life in which pain is regulated as it is registered. A radical, all-pervading despair which he does not define he nonetheless communicates with a fullness that tempers its force. He has learned what those who seek therapy are still learning: how to speak his own language. And to do this, emotionally no less than linguistically, we must learn enough about our own grammar to be able to stop thinking about it and attune our speech to our souls.

* * * * *

Westminster Abbey Unvisited

Perhaps one day of lonely light among
The plane trees that for all their loftiness
Were still content to shelter me before
Lovers shuddered, blanched and shifted tense,

The path across the open lawn of judgement
Will swerve into the backwoods of desire
And I will stand before this empty place
Where you do not repose, but where

I watched a father, widowed, harrowed, weightless
As a face upon the winds of love forlorn
Tumble headlong into an abyss,
While tourists behind cameras trailed and yawned

61. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 140–41.

62. *Ibid.*

And I will think of how I turned to you,
Knowing no more about you than your name,
Discovered on the gravestone of a book
You'd climb from into gazebos of fame.

In a silence rinsed of acclamation
Maybe we will meet. You'll wear no gown.
I'll be singing silently of mountains,
You of Oxford in the midst of County Down.

You'll say few words and I will listen
As inner doors of reticence spring open
All the losses that affinities alight on
Now healed and rivers free to run and shine.

And all your lovers gathered here invisibly
Not reading the letters you slip away beneath,
Will watch for the child among the huddled students
Building a city out of guilt and dreams.

8th November 2013