

INTRODUCTION

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In late 2013, I was much involved with the commemorative events surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of C.S. Lewis's death. It fell to me to organise a symposium and thanksgiving service at Westminster Abbey, London, and, in one of the greatest honours of my life, I had the privilege of unveiling the memorial to Lewis in Poets' Corner, the place where Chaucer, Shakespeare, and all the finest figures in English letters lie buried or celebrated. An unforgettable experience.¹

But an equally unforgettable experience, and in some ways a more important one for me, was my discovery of a Romanian perspective on his work, a perspective that this edition of *Linguaculture* in large part serves to exemplify. It was therefore with great pleasure that I received Professor Rodica Albu's request to introduce the current volume, and I do so with the following personal reflection. What I have to say is perhaps a little more autobiographical than is normal for an introductory essay at the front of an academic journal, but I hope it is none the worse for that.

A year before those fiftieth anniversary commemorations, I had received an email from a complete stranger, Daniela Vasiliu. She had been given my name by a man whose identity need not be mentioned at this point, but to whom I will return at the end of this introduction. Daniela wrote to say that she was planning a visit to Oxford and would I meet with her to discuss her PhD thesis on 'C.S. Lewis at the border between Christian spirituality and fiction'?

We met at my suggestion in the Eagle & Child pub (the venue of many Inklings' meetings) to discuss her work and it was there that she invited me to speak in Iași. She was planning a conference for autumn 2013 at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University and could I come as a guest lecturer? A visit, I surmised, might enable me to catch up with my old friend, Oti Bunaciu, President of the Romanian Baptist Union, whom I had known when he and I were students together in Oxford in the late 1980s. Though I had never been to Romania myself, I had a couple of close friends (John Anderson and Andy Brockbank)

¹ A collection of the anniversary talks, lectures, discussions, and sermons given at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge in November 2013, is forthcoming as *C.S. Lewis at Poets' Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter S. Williams (Wipf & Stock, 2016).

who had lived there for several years, working for the Baptist Church, and so I was interested in becoming acquainted with the country. I was also familiar with two works by Richard Wurmbrand (his famous *Tortured for Christ*, and his less well-known but, to me, much more challenging and intriguing book *The Sweetest Song*), which further piqued my interest in travelling to Romania. For all these reasons, I said yes to Daniela's invitation.

Academics—or, at least, the academics I know—are notorious for foolishly over-committing themselves. I am no exception, and soon after I accepted Daniela's invitation I regretted having done so. The positive reasons for coming to Romania had not gone away, but I was quickly becoming aware that I would be stretching my schedule to breaking-point by trying to fit in a visit to Iași during the last quarter of 2013. In that period, I would be starting a new post as Professor of Apologetics at Houston Baptist University (an online, non-residential position) while still heavily involved with tutoring and speaking duties in Oxford where I am based. Moreover, I knew I would be pulled every which way in connection with the fiftieth anniversary of Lewis's death, writing articles, giving interviews, preaching at Magdalen College, lecturing in Plymouth, Cheltenham, St Andrews, Copenhagen . . . ! Above it all loomed the heaviest responsibility that I have ever taken on: being the lead organiser of the project to memorialise Lewis in Westminster Abbey, England's coronation church. This involved raising £20,000 for a permanent memorial, as well as planning a one-day conference, chairing a panel of Lewis experts, and devising an order of service. A thousand people from all round the world were expected, including former students, friends, and colleagues of Lewis, his stepson Douglas Gresham, his editor and biographer Walter Hooper, and the recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who was due to give the address.

Given this welter of activity, something had to give, I felt. The obvious way of lightening my load, I thought, would be to extricate myself from my trip to Romania. However, when I tried to excuse myself, Daniela was quite unexpectedly insistent that I honour my commitment. Her insistence revealed to me that the Iași conference meant a great deal more than I had realised. It was not just another academic conference, but an important step in a long and sometimes painful process whereby Lewis's works have become disseminated in Communist, and now post-Communist, Romania.

And the realisation of this more-than-merely-academic importance was confirmed several times over when I arrived in Iași and saw for myself something of what Lewis means, and has meant, to a Romania that only relatively recently became extricated from Communist oppression. I recall a conversation with Professor Albu in which she related a perspective on *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* that I had never considered before. Narnia's hundred-year winter and the tyranny of the White Witch ("even some of the

trees are on her side”) carried a special meaning for Romanians of a certain generation. I suddenly saw not only a whole new political dimension to the meaningfulness of that first Narnia tale; I also saw how fortunate I had been, all my life, to live in a free society, having been born and raised and educated in democratic, stable, tolerant England. Of course, I had always known this in theory, but here, for the first time, I was coming face to face with something of the reality of what it was like to have to live *without* those freedoms, or with fragile and youthful versions of those freedoms. I saw why Professor Albu should have had a poignantly urgent interest in translating *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (and, indeed, *The Abolition of Man*) into Romanian. These works, which I had known all my life, and treated as friendly companions, with whom I could imaginatively relax, and from whom I could learn so many valuable lessons, had another life, so to speak, when they penetrated behind the Iron Curtain. There they took on a new identity, one that was precarious, subversive, and desperately significant. The Chronicles, which I was apt almost to patronise as merely literary or spiritual or moral works of art, were also, in the Romanian context, vital and daring *samizdat*.

And not just the Chronicles, either. As Danut Manastireanu writes, below, it was a small victory for the forces of liberty when a Romanian translation of *Mere Christianity* was published in the United States by Iosif Țon:

The book (thousands of copies of it) had to be smuggled into [Romania], since at that time religious literature was regarded by the secret police as fully as dangerous as drugs, arms or pornography. As Christianity was still under siege from the atheist propaganda of the Communist state, this work became for us, young Christian intellectuals who were constantly being pressed to defend the rationality of our existential option, an invaluable apologetic resource.

It was humbling for me to realise that the writings of C.S. Lewis could mean so much to people that they would court punishment, imprisonment, perhaps even risk their lives, in order to gain access to them.

In this introductory note, therefore, I want to bring the reader’s attention not so much to all the individual contributions that follow, as is normal in a preface of this kind, but rather to the sheer fact of this edition of the journal itself. The fact that it exists is a cause for satisfaction, even celebration. And the fact that, finally, my thick head has had punched into it (through the sweet pugnacity of Daniela Vasiliu) an understanding of something of the reality of Eastern Europe’s painful recent history, is also—if only for me—a cause for celebration. Lewis, I now perceive, matters, not just imaginatively and theologically, but politically and socially. This is all the more interesting, given that he was, in general, as resolutely un-political a writer as can be conceived!

And so I wish to highlight the names of those who, over recent decades, have done so much, often against considerable odds, to forge the channels by means of which Lewis's writings could begin to be accessed, understood, and enjoyed in Romania, including figures such as Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Mirela Radoi Delong, Marcel Chirnoagă, Sorin Mărculescu, Vlad Russo, Dan Rădulescu, Anca Manolescu, and many others besides. They are detailed in Emanuel Conțac's fine survey of Lewis's Romanian reception history, and constitute a roll of honour that deserves its own place in Westminster Abbey.

Finally, let me return to the person whom I mentioned above, but did not name the man who first put Daniela in touch with me. Dr Christopher Mitchell directed the Wade Center at Wheaton College, Illinois, for eighteen years, working tirelessly to build up its collection of Lewis works and establish it as the premier focus for Inklings scholarship globally. He also understood, much better than I, the role Lewis's works play in non-English speaking and non-democratic societies, and in fact he had done much to encourage Daniela to organise the 2013 conference, the first ever conference on Lewis in Romania, so I believe, but certainly not the last.¹

Dr Mitchell was a gracious and wise man, a truly humble servant of his vocation, whose tragically sudden and unexpected death in July 2014, was a blow to all who knew him. Personally, I owe him a huge debt, and so, I think, does the wider world of Lewis scholarship, including those who never had the privilege to meet him. His role in encouraging the serious study of C.S. Lewis, like the role of those involved in publishing and translating Romanian editions, has too often gone unnoticed and unpraised, but it has been indispensable and its value is incalculable.

¹Following the success of the 2013 conference, whose keynote speaker was Michael Ward, a second symposium was held in 2014, featuring speakers including Professor Helen Cooper, the sixth scholar to hold the chair of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge initially created for C. S. Lewis, and Professor Stephen Prickett, former President of the European Society for the Study of Literature and Theology, President of the George MacDonald Society. The papers presented by the participants in the two events are partly gathered in this *Linguaculture* issue and partly included in a forthcoming volume devoted to the life and work of C. S. Lewis. (Editor's note)