

## C. S. LEWIS: THE ROMANTIC RATIONALIST

DANIELA VASILIU, PhD Student  
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași

### Abstract

The paper “C. S. Lewis: The Romantic Rationalist” presents the way C. S. Lewis gives an account in his first fictional (allegorical) book, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, of how he discovered Christianity on the converging paths of romanticism and rationalism. The outstanding scholar and author whose intellectual and spiritual development has turned him into one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century became an atheist in his teens and after a long journey through different philosophical convictions he converted to Christianity in his early thirties, a change that affected his entire work. His love of literature was essential in discovering both the rational and the imaginative appeal of Christianity, which led him into a vision of the reality of the world and of life that satisfied the longing of his heart and the hunger of his imagination.

**Keywords:** *C. S. Lewis, Allegory, Romanticism, Rationalism, Literature, Philosophy, Imagination, Christianity*

### INTRODUCTION: A MAN OF LETTERS

In 1925, at the age of 26, C. S. Lewis took up his Fellowship in English language and literature at Magdalen College<sup>1</sup>, after a temporary lectureship in philosophy at University College for one academic year. As a result, on the 22th of May, an announcement appeared in the London *Times*:

The President and Fellows of Magdalen College have elected to an official Fellowship in the College as Tutor in English Language and Literature, for five years as from June 15, Mr. Clive Staples Lewis, M.A. (University College). Mr. Lewis was educated first at Malvern College. He won a scholarship in classics at University College in 1915, and (after war service), a first class in Classical Moderations in 1920, the Chancellor's Prize for an English essay in 1921, a first class in *Literae Humaniores* in 1922, and a first class in the Honour School of English Language and Literature in 1923. (qtd. in McGrath 111-112)

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<sup>1</sup> Magdalen College was widely regarded as one of the richest of the Oxford University colleges.

Five years later he was re-elected and he held this position until December 1954, when he was offered the professorship of Medieval and Renaissance studies at Cambridge University, created expressly for him.

During the years at Oxford Lewis was an excellent tutor, amazing his students with his argumentativeness, rhetorical force and formidable memory, and fostering their capacity of analysing and evaluating the important ideas in order to develop their critical thinking.

Lewis saw himself as enabling the student to develop the skills necessary to uncover and evaluate such knowledge for himself. For example, George Sayer (1914-2005)<sup>1</sup> recalls Lewis using a strongly Socratic method in their tutorials of the mid-1930s, perhaps modelled on his experience when studying at Great Bookham under Kirkpatrick. “What exactly do you mean by the word *sentimental*, Mr. Sayer? ... If you are not sure what the word means or what you mean by it, wouldn't it be very much better if you ceased to use it at all?” (McGrath 164)

Lewis became famous not only as a tutor but also as a lecturer, establishing a reputation as one of “Oxford’s finest lecturers, drawing crowds that others could only dream of attracting.” (McGrath 167). He was impressive especially with his highly intellectual capacity of opening the audience’s vision towards new, unexpected worlds and ideas. His lectures on Medieval and Renaissance Studies assured him a wide recognition within the university. Lewis found deep satisfaction in discovering and analysing the old ways of thinking as a way of learning to appreciate the ideas and values of his own age, on the one hand, but also as a search for a *philosophia perennis*—a view of reality, meaning, truth and beauty that transcends history, which actually constituted the core of all his literary, philosophical and spiritual studies.

Engaging himself in serious debates on literary issues with other writers, including T. S. Eliot, Lewis worked hard, between 1926 and 1931, to clarify and develop his own view on literary criticism. The publication of *The Allegory of Love* in 1936, considered a masterpiece in the field of literary criticism and history, established him as a widely recognized and respected scholar among historians of English literature. He proved uncommon depth and skill in mastering language and literature across time, culture and genre and this work “continues to be regarded as one of the seminal works on the tradition of medieval love poetry, the role of allegory in the Middle Ages, and, certainly, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*” (Schultz 75).

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<sup>1</sup> George Sayer (1914-2005) was one of his students, who became one of his close friends, a friendship that lasted almost thirty years, and was one of the first who wrote a biography of Lewis, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (1988).

The leading literary critic William Empson (1906-1984) is said to have described Lewis as “the best read man of his generation, one who read everything and remembered everything he read” (McGrath 166). Indeed, his greatest pleasure during the years remained reading books and discussing them with his colleagues and friends in their weekly meetings.<sup>1</sup> They called themselves *The Inklings* and described themselves as “practicing poets”, because their strongest desire, and C. S. Lewis made no exception, was to write.

## 1. THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS

### 1.1. A SIGNIFICANT TURNING POINT IN C. S. LEWIS'S LIFE

In the most recent biography written by Alistair McGrath, *Eccentric Genius. Reluctant Prophet. C. S. Lewis – A Life*, McGrath noticed that in the 1920s a kind of ‘English literary religious renaissance’ took place (McGrath 132). In 1930, the news that the author of best-selling satirical novels, Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), had become a Catholic ‘dropped like a bombshell’ in literary circles and made the front line of the British leading newspaper, the *Daily Express*. On the list of those embracing Catholicism other names were added: G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), who converted in 1922, and Graham Green (1904-1991), who converted in 1926. In 1927, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), the author of the celebrated poem *The Waste Land* (1922), converted to Anglicanism.

Although Eliot’s conversion did not make quite the same newspaper headlines as Waugh’s, Eliot’s huge reputation as a poet and literary critic ensured that his conversion was widely discussed and debated. Eliot found in Christianity a principle of order and stability located outside the human self, which allowed him a secure vantage point from which to engage with the world. (McGrath 132)

Surrounded by friends who were Christians, like J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams, Neville Coghill, Adam Fox and Alan Richard Griffiths, Lewis, a convinced and declared atheist, converted in 1930 to theism, and then to Christianity in 1931, and he chose to become a member of the Church of England. He was not a famous writer at that time. Two books of his poetry had been published under the pseudonym Clive Hamilton, *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics* (1919) – a volume of early poems – and the long narrative poem *Dymer* (1926), and they hadn’t had much success. His Christian convictions would become the basis and the passion that would secure the uniqueness and success of his future writings.

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<sup>1</sup> The Inklings meetings started in 1930s and lasted through the end of 1940s and were held in *The Eagle and The Child Pub*

As many others writers, he came to faith through reflecting on literary and philosophical issues. His readings of the classics forced him to encounter and evaluate the ideas that they embodied and expressed. Also his love of literature was essential in discovering both the rational and the imaginative appeal of Christianity. It was not a persuasion, but rather a way of leading him into a vision of the reality of the world and of life that, while robust and coherent, also fit the longing of his heart and the hunger of his imagination. As he would say in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, “Really, a young Atheist cannot guard his faith too carefully. Dangers lie in wait for him on every side.” (Lewis 124)

The result of his tremendous passion for literature and his radical turning to the Christian worldview was a vast and varied literary work, ranging from fantasy, fiction and children literature to literary criticism and theology, which draws readers especially through the author’s unusual capacity to imagine and envision other worlds. One of his greatest gifts was to use both the rational and the imaginative sides of human thinking and combine them in his writings. He has received much acclaim mainly for the quality of his thinking and the depths of his convictions, combined with his amazing capacity of distilling ideas of great importance into few words without loss of meaning, using powerful visual analogies in illustrating complex issues. His ideology of the imagination and the role it can play in our lives, mainly that reality should be put back in touch with the fullness of imaginative life, was the core of C. S. Lewis’ writings.

## 2.2. AN ALLEGORY

For Lewis, Christianity was an open door for a new understanding of life, imagination and literature, and actually it changed the meaning of everything he did. According to his own confessions, he saw things differently, definitely more clearly, and his first desire was to give a literary account of the journey of his long search through literature and philosophy, and the change that took place when he discovered the answer.

He first began a prose version in this direction, and then, a verse version of it, but he never completed them. In the biography written by C. S. Lewis’ personal secretary, Walter Hooper, and by Roger Lancelyn Green, they included the few lines from the verse autobiography, which were written in a letter to Barfield<sup>1</sup> of May 1932,

*I will write down the portion that I understand  
Of twenty years wherein I went from land to land.*

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<sup>1</sup> Owen Barfield (1898-1997), author and philosopher, had been a lifelong friend of C. S. Lewis since they were undergraduates.

*At many bays and harbours I put in with joy  
 Hoping that there I should have built my second Troy  
 And stayed. But either stealing harpies drove me thence,  
 Or the trees bled, or oracles, whose airy sense  
 I could not understand, yet must obey, once more  
 Sent me to sea to follow the retreating shore  
 Of this land which I call at last my home, where most  
 I feared to come; attempting not to find whose coast  
 I ranged half round the world, which fain design to shun  
 The last fear whence the last security is won. (Green & Hooper 126)*

In their view, as long as Lewis had already read most of the theological books of G. K. Chesterton, it was possible that Lewis's idea of a spiritual voyage came from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy* (1908).

I have often, wrote Chesterton, had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas...His mistake was really a most enviable mistake...What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the human security of coming home again. (Green & Hooper 126)

C. S. Lewis's project of telling the story of his conversion was unexpectedly fulfilled in a two-week holiday spent at Belfast, in the home of his best friend and confidant, Arthur Greeves, in August 1932. Just across the road from *The Little Lea*, the home of his childhood, in which the first awakening of his imagination had occurred in his early peaceful years, was the place where he gave birth to his first fictional prose, *The Pilgrim's Regress*. He sent the manuscript to Barfield for criticism and in a letter he wrote to his friend that the book 'spurred out suddenly' and ended up being in prose. It was published at the beginning of the year 1933 and it is "best understood as an imaginative mapping of the landscape of faith." (McGrath 169).

He decided to turn from a 'voyage' by the sea to a journey by road, which, together with the words chosen to name his book, are clearly the indicators that his main source of inspiration was John Bunyan's Christian quest in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which he highly appreciated. However, it is called a 'regress' because, in contrast to the journey of Bunyan's Christian, who travels from the city of Destruction to Zion, John, in his search for Joy, runs away from Christianity and, after he completes his search, he has to turn back to the brook he left at the outset of the story.

He chose to write his first work of fiction in the form of an allegory, which, as a literary form, had enjoyed a great and long fame from the Greeks through the Renaissance, but in the early twentieth century it was clearly not

popular anymore. In fact, the term was used mostly pejoratively by many of the literary critics of the time. Lewis's friend, J. R. R. Tolkien<sup>1</sup>, was notoriously opposed to allegories and clearly stated his aversion in his introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*. His main complaint was regarding the excessive power with which the allegory can dominate the imagination of the reader.

Lewis obviously did not share Tolkien's view. By the time he wrote *The Pilgrim's Regress*, he had already started his studies on the allegorical love poetry of the Middle Ages, which continued for eight more years before publishing his scholarly book *The Allegory of Love*. Even though he didn't write another allegory, he never stopped reading and trying to explain it. Lewis later found myth to be a more powerful and flexible form to write in.

In the article *C. S. Lewis as Allegorist: The Pilgrim's Regress*, Mona Dunkel (Edwards 29) presents some main considerations regarding C. S. Lewis's views of this genre, as he expressed them in *The Allegory of Love* and even later in an essay on Edmund Spenser, his favourite allegorist, and the posthumously published work *Spenser's Images on Life*.

Lewis considered that in an allegory something immaterial can be represented in pictorial terms: "you can start with an immaterial fact, such as the passion which you actually experience, and can then invert *visibilia* (visible things) to express them. If you are hesitating between an angry retort and a soft answer, you can express your state of mind by inventing a person called *Ira* (Anger) with a torch and letting her contend with another person called *Patientia* (Patience). This is allegory." (Green and Hooper 128) According to this view, allegory begins when the author deliberately creates in his tale a fictional character or object to represent some nonmaterial, invisible reality. So, allegory can be defined as a story consciously and intentionally created by the author with two distinct levels of meaning, one of the story itself, and one existing in the author's underlying representations, and the reality should never be confused with the invented representations.

Lewis believed that, through an allegory with powerful images and word pictures, the author can actually create many other levels of meaning, even without being aware of them. The reader's preconceptions could blind him to the meaning intended by the writer, and of course, another serious hindrance in understanding it would be that the readers do not have the necessary knowledge in order to understand the symbols and representations used by the allegorist. One cannot really understand *The Pilgrim's Progress* or *The Faerie Queen* without knowing some essential notions from the classics and the Bible, for example. However, the intended meaning of an allegory will remain the same over time, and it can deliver on the message to different generations.

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973), member of the Inklings, is word-famous as the author of the fantasy classics *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

The essential condition of genuinely enjoying and understanding an allegory, in Lewis's opinion, is to avoid 'trying too hard to understand it'. The two levels of meaning must be kept distinct while reading so as to awaken the story at both levels, and the ability to understand this genre will come by practicing the reading of it, "for the more time readers spend in the reading of allegory the more skilful they will become at recognizing its nuances and in unpacking the meaning within the stories." (Edwards 32)

He considered that allegory is a valid form only when it is doing what could not be done at all or what could not be done as well in any other way. That is why, in his opinion,

To supply a 'key' to an allegory may encourage that particular misunderstanding of allegory which, as a literary critic, I have elsewhere denounced. It may encourage people to suppose that allegory is a disguise, a way of saying obscurely what could have been said more clearly. But in fact, all good allegory exists not to hide but to reveal; to make the inner world more palpable by giving an (imagined) concrete embodiment. (Lewis, *Pilgrim's* 207)

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis chose an allegory to embody all the complicated ideas and philosophies he had dealt with in his searching for the essence of the meaning of life. The story of how he encountered them and how they affected his thinking and his emotional life, a journey of a very common man named John, who represents Lewis, but also the average person, in a fabulous land, which takes place in a dream of the author, seemed to be the most appropriate vehicle. His choice of an allegory allowed him to place John's story in the intellectual context of his generation but also ensured him a certain objective distance from the details of his own life story, since his purpose was not to write a direct autobiography.

### 2.3. THE STORY OF JOHN'S JOURNEY: ON THE MAIN ROAD BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

John, the young man who sat up in a journey to find the mysterious, beautiful island in the West, clearly portrays Lewis himself. When he was still a child he had caught glimpses of it through the window of the wall surrounding a garden not far from his house, and he never lost the desire of seeing it again. But, as in John Bunyan's story, he can represent every person who is ready to take the journey of discovering the 'object' of the longing of his own heart.

First, he experienced the disappointment of not finding the fulfilment in the relationship with the brown girl from the garden. Then, tormented by the desire of feeling again the indescribable pleasure generated by the view of the island, John leaves his home at night and wanders along the strange roads of a fabulous country. He was also running away from the cruelty of the Landlord of

his country, who represents God, and the terrible fear of the hole of punishment destined for those who could not obey His rules. In reality, no one could, so he was taught from the very beginning to lie about obeying them.

Unlike Bunyan's hero, Lewis's character doesn't look at all for any kind of redemption and he is not engaged in any kind of fight with the characters he encounters. His desire is to find the island that would satisfy the pleasurable but also painful longing of his heart, and all the wrong turns he takes from the main road gave him the chance of discovering that the answer is not there. This, in the end, forced him to face the decision of encountering Christianity, which otherwise he would have not taken.

From the beginning of the journey he is accompanied most of the time by his new friend Vertue, who represents the human conscience. So, Lewis puts together the longing for the vision of the island with the sense of moral obligation.

After meeting Mr. Enlightenment (nineteenth-century Rationalism), who convinces him that there is no Landlord, freed from the burden of respecting the rules, the young man travels from place to place, first south to the city of Thrill, and then north to the city of Eschropolis. He is captured by the Spirit of the Age, a giant whose eyes make everything transparent, with the purpose of convincing people that the material part of the human being, in all its complexity, is all a man is. He is rescued by Reason, who plays a significant part in all the rest of the journey. He returns to the Main Road but, no matter how hard he tries, he can't cross the Grand Canyon that separates him from the island. He encounters different characters, embodying different currents of thinking and philosophies, eats and lives in their homes, inquires and listens to their teaching and guidance, all of them proving to be wrong.

He endured all the hardships with the hope of finding the island but it wasn't possible without the help of Mother Kirk, representing Christianity. It meant diving into the river and finding his way to the other shore through 'mysterious' paths, to discover that actually the island was on the other side of the Eastern Mountain of the Landlord. He had travelled all around the earth to get to the place he had run away from. The West island of John's desire was all along the Eastern Mountains, the home of the Landlord, and His castle was what he had really been searching for, all the time, without realizing it. He had to turn back East, an easier journey, while seeing the land with completely different eyes, and he crossed the Brook, since the dream was over and then the dreamer woke up.

The alternative world John is travelling through is not only described admirably, but also completed with a map of the land printed on the endpapers. This passion of Lewis for cartography started in his childhood with his first story written, which included an elaborate history and geography of the world of Boxen. We meet this passion again in Narnia, whose topography would include



rich description and a detailed map that is meant to help the reader orient himself. In *The Pilgrim's Regress* he uses the image of a road leading to the mysterious Island, with bad lands on either side. To the north lie objective ways of thinking based on reason; to the south, the subjective, based on emotion. The further John departs from the central road, the more extreme these positions become. The whole story is actually an exploration of these false turns along the road of life.

Even if the story itself reflects the intellectual climate of the 1920s and 1930s, its geography of thought applies much more widely. However, it is important to see *The Pilgrim's Regress* not as a philosophical defence of faith, but a construction of an almost medieval *mappa mundi*<sup>1</sup>—a cosmographical account of the struggle of humanity itself to find its way to its true goal and destiny. The map can also allegorically illustrate the human soul divided into the north, representing the arid intellectualism and the south, the realm of emotional excesses, separated by the straight road between them.

As John travels north of the road, he encounters ways of thinking which are deeply suspicious of feeling, intuition, and imagination. The coldly and clinically “rational” north region is the realm of “rigid systems,” wooden orthodoxies characterised by “an arrogant and hasty selectiveness on some narrow *a priori* basis”, which leads to the incorrect conclusion that “every feeling ... is suspect”. To the south of the road, however, he encounters “boneless souls whose doors stand open day and night” to anyone, especially to those who offer some kind of emotional and mystical “intoxication”. “Every feeling is justified by the mere fact that it is felt”. The Rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment, romantic art, Freudianism, asceticism, nihilism, hedonism, classical humanism, and religious liberalism are all located on this map, only to be tried and found wanting. (McGrath 172)

### 3. THE ROMANTIC RATIONALIST

#### 3.1. AN ALLEGORICAL APOLOGY FOR CHRISTIANITY, REASON AND ROMANTICISM<sup>2</sup>

Regarding *The Pilgrim's Regress* a review in the May 1936 issue of *The Catholic World* declared: “This brilliantly written volume is a caustic, devastating critique of modern philosophy, religion, politics and art; a clear-cut, logical and effective apologia of reason and Christian faith. We have rarely read a book we so thoroughly enjoyed. We are convinced that the author, too, enjoyed the writing of every line.” (qtd. in Schultz and West Jr. 323)

<sup>1</sup> Latin for “map of the world”

<sup>2</sup> The subtitle of *The Pilgrim's Regress*

One of the stylistic elements used by Lewis in his allegory was satire: “Over the course of the allegory he satirizes Freudian thought, Victorian romantic thinking, numerous philosophical and literary movements, and religious, by satirizing three types of Anglican churchman. Mr. Angular represents the Anglo-Catholic, Mr. Broad represents the Liberal, and the Steward is Lewis’s portrayal of the Low-Churchman.” (Edwards 41). Proving his intellectual honesty, in his allegorical evaluation Lewis included the futility, the hypocrisy and the lack of commitment encountered in the Christian religion.

Using this satirical style and including an extremely wide range of intellectual and philosophical issues, Lewis really thought that his readers would be those belonging to the educated area, an elite. A short examination of titles of the chapters, the quotations (many of them in Greek or Latin), and the use of epigraphs, covering a large number of writers and texts, would provide us a window into the broad classical and cultural knowledge that Lewis possessed. This sense of a too complicated text was suggested by the original title of the book, *The Pseudo-Bunyan’s Periplus: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*, which was eventually reduced to *An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*.

Mona Dunkel (Edwards 29) noted this particular criticism that can be called the “book’s datedness”:

Much of Lewis’s imagery is lost on those of today’s generation who do not read widely and who thus lack experience with the thoughtful reading required by allegory. This is further compounded by his generation’s lack of experience with classical languages, which makes Lewis’s Greek and Latin quotations interrupters rather than well-fitted elements that move his intended image forward. (Edwards 46)

Ten years later he felt that he had to write an explanation for the third edition of the book. Due to the fact that this had been his first writing signed with his name and that it had been perceived as the story of his conversion experience, even though it had been not intended to be a direct autobiography, it ended up being read by some other categories of readers that he hadn’t anticipated. To them he had to apologize for “needless obscurity and an uncharitable temper”. (Lewis, *Pilgrim’s* 200)

As the subtitle of the book suggested, his confessed purpose in writing the book was to defend himself for being a Christian, a Rationalist and a Romantic.

There are two causes, I now realize, for the obscurity. On the intellectual side my own progress had been from ‘popular realism’ to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity. I still think this a very natural road, but I know now that it is a road very rarely trodden. In the early thirties I did not know this. If I had had any notion of my own isolation, I should either have kept silent about my journey or

else endeavoured to describe it with more consideration for the reader's difficulties. (Lewis, *Pilgrim's* 200)

The second reason he mentioned, and explained afterwards, as a reason for the book's obscurity, was the "(unintentionally) private meaning" he gave to the word 'Romanticism'.

In Alistair McGrath's opinion, it is important to understand that, for Lewis, his allegory book wasn't meant to be either a retelling of Bunyan's story in a modern version, or to give a narrative account of his conversion, but to explore and express the key issue of "how reason and imagination may be both affirmed and integrated within a Christian vision of reality." (McGrath 169)

### 3.2. ROMANTICISM

In the preface of the third edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis admitted that the general, extremely wide meaning of the word 'romantic' is not what would describe the central experience of his book. Identifying seven different definitions of Romanticism, he explained that people can be 'romantic' in different ways, to different degrees, depending on which of the aspects they would prefer and for what reason. The most relevant 'sort' of Romanticism to Lewis was often referred to as 'Wordsworthian', dominated by the experience of spiritual transcendence, distinctly different from the aesthetic experience, mediated through nature, poetry, art and music. All his life, he loved romance as a literary genre, especially for its power of evoking otherworldly hopes and fears.

But what I meant by 'Romanticism' when I wrote the *Pilgrim's Regress* - and what I would still be taken to mean on the title page of this book - was not exactly one of the seven things. What I meant was a particular recurrent experience which dominated my childhood and adolescence and which I hastily called 'Romantic' because inanimate nature and marvellous literature were among the things that evoked it. I still believe that the experience is common, commonly misunderstood, and of immense importance: but I know now that in other minds it arises under other *stimuli* and it entangled with other irrelevancies and that to bring it into the forefront of consciousness is not so easy as I once supposed. (Lewis, *Pilgrim*, 202)

Twenty years later, Lewis told the story of this 'dominating experience' of his childhood in a more detailed way in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy, The Shape of My Early Life*. The title is from the first line of a sonnet by William Wordsworth, in which the celebrated emotions are joy and grief; the poet would like to share the experienced joy with his daughter, but remembers that she is dead. In the same way, Lewis describes the moment of longing which for a moment is intense joy and before realizing, it is gone, leaving behind the

pain of missing and longing. As in Wordsworth's sonnet, the desire is in any earthly sense unattainable, but it is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Lewis became aware of the beauty of nature for the first time when he was still very little, seeing the toy garden that his brother Warnie created on the lid of a tin cookie box. During the years of his childhood he developed a great love for the "cool, dewy, fresh, exuberant" beauty of the physical landscape of Ulster in Northern Ireland, where he grew up. Besides enjoying them, the wonders of nature triggered that distant calling from what was beyond his reach.

The first real stab of desire, though, the universal experience of longing, or *Sehnsucht*, which he would later call Joy, came while he was standing beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day, and the memory of that toy garden came into his mind, flooding his heart with an unusual, overwhelming pleasure that disappeared as quickly as it came, leaving his heart empty and longing. He had the same experience later through Beatrix Potter's book *Squirrel Nutkin*, which causes him to fall in love with the idea of autumn, and then again, from a few lines of poetry about the Norse god Balder ("Balder the beautiful/Is dead, is dead" – from Longfellow's translation of *Tegner's Drapa*), which created in him a desire of almost sickening intensity. (Lewis *Surprised by Joy* 11)

Through his adolescent years, experience proved to him that sex, magic and the occult had nothing to do with Joy. When he almost forgot about it, he encountered it unexpectedly through Arthur Rackham's illustrations in *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. He had a continuous story of encountering Joy, through the study of Norse mythology, the music of Wagner and the romances and fantasies of Malory, William Morris and especially George MacDonald. Lewis warns the readers of this biography that "in a sense, the central story of his life is about nothing else." (Lewis *Surprised by Joy*<sup>1</sup> 11)

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, his childhood experience is illustrated by the vision of the island that John sees through the window of the stone wall, a vision that leaves in his heart an immense desire for experiencing again that indescribable pleasure generated by just looking at it, which drove him to leave his home and to go in search for it.

The experience is one of intense longing. It is distinguished from other longings by two things. In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight ... This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than any other wealth. And thus it comes about, that if the desire is long absent, it may itself be desired, and that new desiring becomes a new instance of the original desire, though the subject may not recognize the fact and thus cries out his lost youth of soul at the very moment in which he is being rejuvenated. This sounds complicated, but is simple when we live it. "Oh, to feel it as I did then!" We cry; not noticing that

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Beloved Works of C. S. Lewis*.

even while we say the words the very feeling whose loss we lament is rising again in all its old bitter-sweetness. For this sweet Desire cuts across our ordinary distinction between wanting and having. To have it is by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it. (Lewis, *Pilgrim's* 202-203)

In a similar way, he defines Joy in his biography as the experience of “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction.” (Lewis *Surprised by Joy* 11)

I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) had indeed one characteristic, and only one, in common with them; the fact that anyone who experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is the kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tested it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power as pleasure often is. (Lewis *Surprised by Joy* 11)

That second explanation that Lewis gave in the preface of *The Pilgrim's Regress* regarding the ‘private’ meaning of the word Romanticism was related to: “the peculiar mystery about the *object* of this Desire”.

Inexperienced people (and inattention leaves some inexperienced all their lives) suppose, when they feel it, that they know what they are desiring. (...some nature, some past events, some literature, some erotic suggestion, some distant planet, the magic or occultism, the intellectual craving for knowledge, etc.) But every one of these impressions is wrong. The sole merit I claim for this book is that it is written by one who has proved them all to be wrong. There is no room for vanity in the claim: I know them to be wrong not by intelligence but by experience, such experience as would not have come my way if my youth had been wiser, more virtuous, and less self-centred than it was. For I have myself been deluded by every one of these false answers in turn, and have contemplated each of them earnestly enough to discover the cheat. (Lewis, *Pilgrim's* 203)

After all the disappointment experienced on his journey, in trying and trusting in vain in different forms of Romanticism, John discovered the meaning for these early passions while spending a night in the cave with the Hermit History. This one explained to him that the desire for something that cannot be found in this world is actually one of the messages from the Landlord, sent to the ‘gentile’ people. Romanticism, with the longing of the hearts for what is about to be, but is not yet, was one of the latest of these messages. In the end John discovered that the island, which he had thought was what he had desired, was not even possible to reach. He had to turn back all the way and to cross the brook to the

Eastern Mountains, to get to the Landlord, where the true island had always been.

### 3.3. REASON

As he grew up, after a few hard and negative experiences in different boarding schools, Lewis studied for three years with a private tutor, Mr. William T. Kirkpatrick, his father's and also his brother's teacher, whom they called "the Great Knock". He enjoyed greatly the years of studying classics and languages from the original texts (Latin and Classical Greek, German, French and Italian), spent in the professor's small cottage, in a large rural village, Bookham, in Surrey. Kirkpatrick was the one who introduced Lewis to the Oxford tutorial model, the whole experience being greatly formative, both educationally and spiritually. Lewis described Kirkpatrick as a person who came closer to being "a purely logical entity" than anyone he had ever known. Certainly, the serious and severe method of Mr. Kirkpatrick's tutoring had a lot to do with the rigorous thinking and logic that Lewis used in his entire work.

When he started his study with him, Lewis had already lost any faith in God. Even though Mr. Kirkpatrick never discussed religion with him, the rationalism and atheism of the professor helped to establish Lewis in his atheistic convictions. However, materialism, with its claim to ultimate self-existent matter, motion and empty space, which by chance managed to produce self-conscious creatures who are able to feel, think and reason, was hard to defend in the thinking system of the young man with such a hunger for what is beyond 'reality' and who had such a longing heart.

In a letter to his lifelong best friend Arthur Greeves, Lewis wrote:

You know, I think, that I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical stand point Christianity is not even the best. All religions, that is, all mythology to give them proper name are merely man's own invention - Christ as much as Loki. Primitive man found himself surrounded by all sorts of terrible things he didn't understand ... Thus religion that is to say mythology grew up. Often, too, great men were regarded as gods after their death...

Of course, mind you, I am not laying down as a certainty that there is nothing outside the material world: considering the *discoveries* that are always being made, this would be foolish. Anything MAY exist. (Lindsay p. xvii)

Shortly after going to war, in the trenches in France at the age of 19, he wrote to Greeves that he had now discovered philosophy and especially metaphysics, which make other questions seem irrelevant. The Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley's form of idealism regarding the human perception of natural things made his materialism more complex than it had been. It was a natural course,

since for him it was so important to retain a place for beauty and the spirit, which was contradictory to the view of the self-sufficient existence of material things.

In the light of the hard experience of the war his entire view regarding the nature of the universe gradually changed, adopting the growing conviction that nature is evil unless touched by beauty and spirit. While recovering in the mobile hospital among all the other suffering soldiers after he had been wounded, Lewis was trying to understand his horrific experience in the light of his atheistic beliefs. As on the battlefield, he saw spirit constantly evading matter. Beauty, the only spiritual thing that he could find, would escape the prison house of nature, a materialism mysticism coming mainly from Schopenhauer. He confessed to Arthur Greeves his beliefs that through our inner sensations, beauty calls our spiritual nature away from time and space to 'Something' superior to the material world.

The thing in your last letter with which I most want to disagree is the remark about Beauty and nature: apparently I did not make myself very clear. You say that nature is beautiful, and that is the view we all start with. But let us see what we mean. If you take a tree, for instance, you call it beautiful because of its shape, colour and motions, and perhaps a little because of association. Now these colours etc. are sensations in my eye, produced by vibrations on the air between me and the tree: the real tree is something quite different—a combination of colourless, shapeless, invisible atoms. It follows then that neither the tree, nor any other material object can be beautiful in itself: I can never see them as they are, and if I could it would give me no delight. The beauty therefore is not in matter at all, but is something purely spiritual, arising mysteriously out of the relation between me & the tree: or perhaps as I suggest in my Song, out of some indwelling spirit behind the matter of the tree—the Dryad in fact.

You see the conviction is gaining ground on me that after all my Spirit does exist: and that we come in contact with the spiritual element by means of these 'thrills'. I fancy that there is Something right outside time & place, which did not create matter, as the Christians say, but is matter's great enemy: and that Beauty is the call of the spirit in that something to the spirit in us. You see how frankly I admit that my views have changed: I hope I don't bore you. (Green & Hooper 217)

A couple of years later, when he began to teach philosophy at University, he had already moved into a belief called Absolute Idealism. The Absolute was an impersonal spirit, almost like God, but there was nothing to fear and nothing to obey about it. It was more like a book, always available but making no demands.

However, Lewis was never a philosopher in the technical sense of this term. His thoughts, though, always had a philosophical insight, characterized by a systematic way of carrying out the inquiry, based on logic. He had an acute

desire for reality and, in an extremely honest way, he wanted to know the ‘truth’. He saw logic as a real reflection of the nature of ultimate objective reality; without it reason is not possible. He concluded that the theory of the self-existence of the natural universe and the denial of a supernatural origin is contradictory. If the universe is the product of a series of accidents, then the very thought that the universe is an accident is itself an accident and not reliable. Following this line of thought, in his assertion, reason cannot be evolved and self-aware, so it must be supernatural.

Lewis defended himself in the preface of *The Pilgrim’s Regress* as being a Rationalist. In his story, the allegorical feminine character Reason, a knightly figure, plays one of the main roles. She is the one who saves him from the prison of modern intellectualism, kills the giant, and teaches him to think through the circular arguments of Freud and the Enlightenment that had confused him. In the end, Reason protects him from escaping the decision of accepting the reality and truth of Christianity. “He realized that if he could cast Reason down, he too would be destroyed.” (Lindskoog 94)

#### 3.4. REASON AND IMAGINATION RECONCILED

In an address delivered at Manchester University, called *Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare*, Lewis defined reason as “the organ of truth” and imagination—a key concept in Wordsworthian transcendence—as the “organ of meaning”. In other words, he considered that imagination and what it produces—figures of speech, metaphors, allegories, myths and stories, etc.—can light up truth in a unique way, so that it acquires understanding. It is clear that the relationship between reason and imagination was of critical importance to him. The inherent difficulties in the use of human language in talking about non-material and abstract things—conscience, feelings, philosophical concepts, etc.—can be met through the use of rhetorical devices produced through imagination, which are “flashes of lightning in the metaphysical darkness, enabling readers to see a glimpse of truth and move toward it” (Schultz and West 273).

The concept that multiple meaning can be grasped and expressed beyond reason through imagination became the key literary element in both his fiction and nonfiction work. By attributing to reason the role of discerning truth and falsehood of what imagination produces, he put reason and imagination in complete interdependence and proved their inherent limitations and errors in answering the essential questions of life.

He presented these in *The Pilgrim’s Regress* by using the dialectic between “northerners” and “southerners”, which was actually the framework for explaining the proper relationship of reason and imagination in the context of searching for the answer to his heart’s longing. He defended rational thought



against arguments based purely on feeling, yet refused to accept an exclusively rational approach to faith.

The “argument from desire” that is stated by Lewis, in his explanations regarding what he meant to prove in his allegorical book, is central for the Christian apologetic he developed later in his writings. Lewis opened up a line of thought originally employed by the French philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), namely, that there is an “abyss” within the human soul, which is so great that only God can fill it. He only substituted the image with that of the chair that must be occupied.

It appeared to me therefore that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given - nay, cannot even be imagined as given - in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal existence. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle - the chair in which only one can sit. And if the nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist. I knew only too well how easily the longing accepts false objects and the Desire itself contains the corrective of all these errors. The only fatal error was to pretend that you had passed from the desire to fruition, when, in reality, you had found either nothing, or desire itself, or the satisfaction of some different desire. The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof. This lived dialectic, and the merely argued dialectic of my philosophical progress, seemed to have converged on one goal; accordingly I tried to put them both into my allegory which thus became a defence of Romanticism (in my peculiar sense) as well as of Reason and Christianity. (Lewis, *Pilgrim's* 205)

We cannot treat *The Pilgrim's Regress* as embodying Lewis's definitive understanding of the relationship of faith, reason, and imagination. This fusion of Rationalism and Romanticism, related to his own personal experience, forced him to reject the atheistic components of both, and embrace Christianity's God as the reality beyond the world, who generates and satisfies both the longing of the soul and the necessity for truth and reason of the mind. This is the theme that continued to develop and mature in his subsequent writings, in all genres, and makes his writings so appealing for each of us, as, deep inside of our hearts, we are all, to different degrees, romantic rationalists.

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