



Theology in Stories: C. S. Lewis and the Narrative Quality of Experience

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In one of C. S. Lewis' Stories, *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*,¹ Lucy, Edmund, and Eustace have been whisked magically off into Narnia and are now sailing with King Caspian and his crew on a quest. Caspian is seeking some lost lords of Narnia as well as the end of the world ("the utter East"). They have many adventures—some merely strange, others dangerous. The adventure which concerns us comes when they arrive at the island of the Dufflepuds. These strange creatures (who have one large foot on which they hop about and who are not particularly intelligent) have, for reasons we need not concern ourselves with, been made invisible. In order to become visible again they need a young girl to go into the Magician's house, up to the second floor, and find the spell in the Magician's book which will make them visible again. And they are determined not to permit Caspian's party to leave their island until Lucy consents to undertake this task.

Since it seems they have little choice—battling invisible antagonists is rather hard to do—Lucy agrees to brave the frightening house. She finds the book and begins turning pages looking for the spell. As she does so, however, she becomes engrossed in the various spells she finds there and reads large portions of the book. At one point she finds a spell "for the refreshment of the spirit" (p. 130). It turns out to be "more like a story than a spell." She begins to read, and "before she had read to the bottom of the page she had forgotten that she was reading at all. She was living in the story as if it were real..." (p. 130). When she finishes it, she feels that it is the loveliest story she has ever heard and wishes she could have gone on reading it for ten years.

She decides that she will, at least, read the story again but discovers that the pages will not turn backwards. "'Oh what a shame!' said Lucy. 'I did so want to read it again. Well, at least I must remember it'" (p. 130). But she finds, unfortunately, that she cannot really remember the plot of the story. It all begins to fade in her memory. "And she never could remember; and ever since that day what

¹New York: Macmillan, 1952. Page numbers for citations within these introductory paragraphs will be given within parentheses in the body of the text.

Lucy means by a good story is a story which reminds her of the forgotten story in the Magician's book" (p. 131).

I

We will not, I think, fully understand the wide appeal of Lewis' writings until we think

carefully about the importance of stories for communicating Christian belief. Lewis often depicts the whole of life in terms of what we might call the Christian story of creation, fall, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection.² Beyond that, however, Lewis has, I believe, a strong sense of what Stephen Crites has called “the narrative quality of experience.”³ The very nature of human existence—conceived in Christian terms—is best understood within narrative.

Anyone who has read very far in Lewis will have encountered his characteristic theme of “romantic longing” or *Sehnsucht*. It is, in many ways, Lewis’ restatement of the Augustinian theme of the restless heart. We are, as Lewis says in “The Weight of Glory,” always trying to capture something, trying “to get in.”⁴ We want to ride time, not be ridden by it, “to cure that always aching wound...which mere succession and mutability inflict upon us.”⁵ The human being is, we may say, both finite and free: a bodily creature living in space and time, yet desiring to transcend such finite limitations and rest in God.

The crucial question, of course, is whether such a creature is an absurdity or whether this desired fulfillment is attainable. If fulfillment of the longing which is integral to our being is impossible, then we really are absurd creatures—and we would be better simply to acknowledge the search as futile and endless, to vow with Faust never to say to any moment, “stay a while, you are so lovely.” Lewis is concerned with this question, concerned to know whether finite creatures such as we are can find any spell which offers genuine “refreshment of the spirit”—lasting refreshment of which we cannot be deprived by the corrosive powers of time.

The spell, if there is one, is not available in abstract, theoretical reasoning. Built into our thinking is a kind of frustration: A gap always exists between experiencing a thing and thinking about that thing. In thinking “about” anything we abstract ourselves from it, begin to separate it into its parts, and lose it as an object of contemplation. That is, while thinking about it we are cut off from experiencing it. A man cannot—the example is Lewis’—experience loving a woman if he is busy thinking about his technique.⁶

Lewis searches, therefore, for some other way—some means other than abstract thought to find the “refreshment of the spirit” for which human beings seem to be made. One way to such refreshment, a way which always attracted

²I have developed this theme in more detail in *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

³In an article by that title in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971) 291-311.

⁴In *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 12f.

⁵*Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1958) 138. To fully develop Lewis’ views we would have to note his belief that, apart from sin, our experience of the tension between our freedom and our finitude would not have been painful. Cf., *The Taste for the Other*, pp. 170-172.

⁶Cf. *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1955) 218.

Lewis, lies in myth. On his somewhat stipulative definition, myth is extra-literary.⁷ The fact that it must be communicated in words is almost accidental; for it is not so much a narration as it is a permanent object of contemplation—more like a thing than a story. That is to say, in myth we experience something timeless. Experiencing a myth is more like tasting than thinking, concrete rather than abstract. Yet it is also very different from other tastings; for it seems to bring experience not of some isolated tidbit of life which passes away but of what has timeless, universal significance.

We can, of course, also think “about” the universal and in that way move beyond isolated particulars of life. But this gives no *experience* of what is timeless, no experience of anything which may satisfy the longing of the human spirit to transcend the constraints of our finite condition. Instead, thinking about what is universal and timeless—which simultaneously cuts us off from experiencing it—is merely one more testimony to thought’s built-in frustration. Myth provides, if only for a moment, what we desire: to break through to some great truth in which the heart can rest and which can give coherence to the isolated particulars of life. It offers what no other experience can: an actual tasting of a reality which transcends our finite existence. It brings us briefly into a world more real than our own, so real that any talk “about” it would have to be metaphorical.

However, myth offers no permanent peace for the quarrel between the two sides of our nature—our freedom and finitude. For a brief moment finitude is transcended, we are free of temporal constraints, and the transcendent is comfortingly passive. But the truth we are given in myth is not really a truth to live by in our here and now; for we live as creatures both free *and* finite. Because this is the case, Lewis looks elsewhere—away from myth to story—in order to find that “refreshment of the spirit” we desire. Although story cannot in any single moment of experience overcome the tension between finitude and freedom in the human being as completely as can myth, it points toward a more lasting peace—a peace we can live. Lewis discusses the *genre* of story in his essay “On Stories.”⁸ We can begin at the literary level and move toward the theological.

The story is, Lewis thinks, different from the novel. The novel concerns itself with delineation of character, criticism of social conditions, and so forth. Nor is the story merely, as some think, a vehicle of excitement and danger—anxious tension and, then, relief when the moment of danger passes. Lewis suggests that, at least for some readers, something more is going on when they read a story. He describes this “something more” in a variety of ways: a sense of atmosphere is conveyed; we feel that we have come close to experiencing a certain state or quality.

At the same time, there is frustration or tension in the structure of story—a frustration which story never fully overcomes. For a story is only a net with which we try to catch something else, something timeless, something more like a state or quality—a grand idea like homecoming, or reunion with a loved one, or the simple idea of otherness. But at the same time story is narrative, involving tem-

⁷Cf. chapter V of *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) and the essay “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 63-67.

⁸In *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966) 3-21.

poral succession and plot. Hence the frustration. A story must involve a series of events. It must move on. But the thing itself—the thing we are seeking—is timeless. What we really seek to take hold of can never last in a story. And the storyteller is, therefore, doomed to frustration. The medium of the storyteller cannot grasp what is wanted. The medium, the story, is inherently temporal; yet, the storyteller is trying to catch something which is not really a process at all—what Lewis calls *theme*. The art of the storyteller is to break through beyond the mere succession of particular experiences and to “catch” theme by means of plot.

What Lewis describes in his essay “On Stories” is essentially Lucy’s experience on the island of the Dufflepuds. The story is a spell which brings “refreshment of the spirit.” It brings one close to, if not directly into contact with, something entirely beyond time. But this all fades and is soon gone; for story is narrative. The spirit is both refreshed and frustrated because it has temporarily been drawn out of the constraints which time places upon us and, yet, has been so drawn by a literary form which is itself inherently temporal. Thus story—more than myth—unites the temporal and eternal as intimately as plot and theme.

II

This is Lewis’ literary theory. Near the end of his essay “On Stories,” however, Lewis makes a comment which carries us beyond literary considerations alone. “Shall I be thought whimsical,” he writes, “if, in conclusion, I suggest that this internal tension in the heart of every story between the theme and the plot constitutes, after all, its chief resemblance to life?” Life, Lewis suggests, is frustrating in the same way a story is. “We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never embodied.”

The author of a story uses temporal plot to try to catch a timeless theme, a temporal net to catch what is eternal. Life is the same sort of net, amenable to being understood within the narrative *genre*: a net of successive experiences seeking to catch something which is not temporal at all. Lewis’ literary theory and his belief that the human heart is restless until it rests in God meet here.

What I have described might *almost* be said to be Lewis’ metaphysic. Certain human experiences take us beyond—or almost beyond—the finite boundaries of life. But they never last. They pass us by and are gone. Still, they are clues, if we will follow them. How do we do so? Not by constructing a completely explanatory theory which will itself attempt to be a timeless product; for our theories do not participate in the timelessness which we momentarily experience. The theorist is also a pilgrim; the theorist’s own life has a narrative quality. As Stephen Crites has put it, every moment of experience is itself in tension; for memory (of the past) and anticipation (of the future) are the tension of every moment of experience.⁹ Past and future, memory and anticipation, are themselves present. Hence, the present moment is “tensed.” Tensed—and therefore filled with tension. As long as we remain within history we cannot escape that. We are limited to the present; yet in that very present both memory and anticipation serve as signals of transcendence.

⁹Crites, *op. cit.*, pp. 301ff.

Crites suggests that only narrative can contain the full temporality of our experience within a unity of form. And Lewis, I believe, is suggesting something similar. The human creature, made for fellowship with God, can touch the Eternal but cannot (within history) rest in it. For our experience is inherently narrative, relentlessly temporal. We are given no rest. The story moves on. And hence, the creature who is made to rest in God is in this life best understood as a pilgrim whose world is depicted in terms of the Christian story. This may explain why stories are sometimes the most adequate form for conveying the “feel” of human existence.

Most particularly, it is in stories that the quality—the feel—of creatureliness may be most adequately conveyed. Lewis himself suggests on one occasion that “if God does exist, He is

related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another.”¹⁰ By way of illustration he suggests that we think of looking for Shakespeare in his plays. In one sense, Shakespeare is present at every moment in every play—but not in the same way that Hamlet or King Lear is present. Yet, we would not fully understand the plays if we did not understand them in relation to Shakespeare, as the product of his creative genius.

Even more important, narrative is the form which does justice to the experience of creatures who are embodied spirits. Crites has stressed the point that story does not isolate body and mind. Lewis, likewise, seems to suggest that the narrative *genre* is most appropriate for creatures who are finite, yet free. By trying to catch in its net what is not temporal at all story recognizes that we are made to transcend our present condition. At the same time, story is not just this grasping after a transcendent theme. Its bodily structure, plot, always moves on. It is relentlessly temporal, just as historical life is.

Because story gives no lasting rest, we may try to escape its limitations. Lewis thinks we ought not. He suggests that being a pilgrim involves a willingness to accept the temporality of human experience, a willingness to understand ourselves in terms of narrative structure and to accept the tension of the “tensed present.”

In his essay on the narrative quality of experience Crites describes two ways in which we may try to escape the temporality of our existence and find a rest in some false infinite of our own making. A reader of Lewis’ *Pilgrim’s Regress*¹¹ will recognize a striking similarity to the Northern and Southern ways which the pilgrim John must avoid as he travels the road. On the other hand, Crites believes, we may try to escape from narrative by abstraction. We may seek refuge in some theory which pretends to be timeless. Abstraction has an intellectual character, isolating mind from body. This is Lewis’ “North” where all is arid, austere, bodiless, and finally sterile. The other attempted escape which Crites depicts is that of constriction: narrowing our attention to dissociated immediacies and disconnected particulars. In this case one assumes that feeling and sensation are irreducible in our experience. We accept our finite condition as the whole meaning of life and purchase timelessness by giving up the quest for the universal. We focus on the present, ignoring memory and anticipation, and do not see that particular

¹⁰“The Seeing Eye,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 168.

¹¹Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958.

experience calls us out beyond itself. This way is all body. It is Lewis’ “South” where the pilgrim can find himself present at an orgy.

The first way is content to talk “about” the universal but gives up the quest to experience it. The second refuses to notice how particular experience calls us away from itself toward something which transcends all particularity. Lewis’ pilgrim—an embodied spirit—is to eschew both ways of escape. His is to be a “feeling intellect.”¹² Lewis says in his preface to *Pilgrim’s Regress* that we were “made to be neither cerebral men nor visceral men, but Men”—things both rational and animal, creatures who are embodied and ensouled. We can neither abstract from the temporal flow of our experience nor reduce it to immediate experience without ignoring something important in our nature.

III

If up to this point I have managed to convey my message at all successfully, its irony must certainly be clear; for, in rather abstract fashion I have been suggesting that such abstract argument cannot convey a quality like creatureliness successfully. This raises, quite naturally, a problem for the theorist, in particular the theologian. If the quality of our experience through time is narrative, no theory—itsself an abstraction from experience—can fully capture the truth of reality. There may be occasions when abstraction is important and necessary; nevertheless, it is no accident that Lewis writes stories instead of a *Summa*. The story is, on his account, the form most true to our experience. Its form makes clear that we grasp after what is not fully given.

There are certain features of our experience, essential to serious discussion of the Christian life, which cannot be adequately conveyed by theological treatment, however careful and precise. Thus, for example, Christians have commonly wanted to say that our commitment to God must be ours, freely and willingly given. Yet at the same time they have wanted to say that we are of ourselves incapable of making this commitment, that it must be “worked in us” by God’s grace. Begin to abstract, isolate, and emphasize the divine activity and you end with irresistible grace, election of some to condemnation, and the suspicion that it is something of a sham to speak about our free and willing commitment. Begin to abstract, isolate, and emphasize our own free commitment and you end with Pelagianism, having made grace superfluous. Construct instead, however, a narrative of your own commitment—as Lewis does, for example, in *Surprised by Joy*—and it may make good sense to say *both* “I might not have made this commitment which I now freely and willingly make” *and* “I could not have so committed myself had I not been drawn by God, and it is really his doing.” That is what believers are likely to say in telling the story of how grace has abounded in their own commitment.

And within the narrative it seems to make sense to speak this way. Similarly, Lewis writes of the Oedipus story, in which despite his efforts to avoid it, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother: “We have just had set before our

¹²The phrase is from the subtitle of Corbin Carnell’s *Bright Shadow of Reality: C. S. Lewis and the Feeling Intellect* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

imagination something that has always baffled the intellect: we have *seen* how destiny and free will can be combined, even how free will is the *modus operandi* of destiny. The story does what no theorem can quite do....It sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region.”¹³ Or, to take an example from the history of Christian thought, there are, I think, few who would deny that St. Augustine’s *Confessions* offers a more compelling picture of the relation of creature and Creator—and conveys better the paradox of a freely given commitment, elicited solely by God’s grace—than even the best of his more abstract treatises on the grace of Christ and on the predestination of the saints. However important and necessary those treatises are in certain contexts, they cannot convey the quality, the feel, of creatureliness in the way the *Confessions* do.

But the treatises still *are* necessary in certain contexts. The theologian’s task is not superfluous. In one of his brief essays Lewis distinguishes nicely between ordinary language, scientific language, and poetic language. He gives these illustrations of each.¹⁴ (1) It was very cold. (2) There were 13 degrees of frost. (3) “Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers

was a-cold; The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass, And silent was the flock in wooly fold: Numb'd were the Beadsman's fingers." Theological language tries to bring to religion the technical precision of scientific language. It is an attempt to provide what scientific language offers in different contexts—a precise test which can end dispute. It is language, as Lewis says, on which we can take action.¹⁵ We can, for example, use it to guard against mistaken understandings of our beliefs. But this is not the language the believer naturally speaks; for such language cannot convey the quality of religious belief and experience. Believers, when questioned, are usually more likely to tell their story.

My theme is by now becoming familiar: Abstraction, however important, means a loss of immediacy, a loss of the sense of what it feels like to be (for example) a creature. And to see this theme in Lewis' writings is to begin to understand the wide appeal those writings continue to demonstrate. He appeals far less to theoretical argument than many of his readers (and critics) have imagined. Rather, he tells stories which expand the imagination and give one a world within which to live for a time. Like Lucy, the reader can almost forget he is reading a story at all and can be "living in the story as if it were real." Lewis offers not abstract propositions for belief but the quality, the feel, of living in the world narrated by the biblical story. In stories we do not have to divide our treatment into separate *loci*—to talk first about the creature, then God (or first God, then the creature—on which distinction a good many theological arguments can be constructed). Instead, we are permitted to see God and the creature as they really are—in a narrative in which it makes little sense to think of human beings abstracted from either time and history or from the God-relation.

We may grant that there will still be something dissatisfying about this. The relentlessly temporal character of human life will tempt us to try to make our

¹³"On Stories," p. 15.

¹⁴"The Language of Religion," in *Christian Reflections*, p. 129.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 130.

peace by separating theme and plot, dividing the feeling intellect into its parts. We may seek to view ourselves as all body, finding significance only in isolated present experiences (and regard the longing for something more as an absurdity). Or we may seek to view ourselves as all intellect, all free self-transcending person—as, in effect, one like God. But when we take either of these ways we will ultimately find ourselves talking about something other than human beings—creatures known properly only when known in relation to God, made for a destiny they cannot at present fully experience. The point is not, in the first instance, a religious one for Lewis. It is simply a claim about what rings true to our experience of what it means to be human. But, of course, it leads on to a religious claim. If we understand ourselves as creatures, we will recognize the narrative quality of our experience and may perhaps find a way to make peace with it.

IV

How make that peace between the two sides of our nature? One might be drawn as Lewis, always something of a Platonist, was to turn to myth—to that permanent object of contemplation which, he believed, brings us into contact with a "more real" world. In myth one might transcend

the limits of thought and “taste” the universal. However, this is a solution which temporarily eclipses but does not bridge the gap between time and eternity. We fall back from the mythic universal into our finitude—and have no truth to live by *there*. We want and need more, or so Lewis thinks.

In life and art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive. Whether in real life there is any doctor who can teach us how to do it, so that at last either the meshes will become fine enough to hold the bird, or we be so changed that we can throw our nets away and follow the bird to its own country, is not a question for this essay.

Thus Lewis writes in “On Stories.” Elsewhere, however, he takes up that question and suggests that incarnation—for him the central turning point in the Christian story—surpasses even myth.¹⁶ The Christian story affirms that in one human being that other and more real world has entered our history, that we need not transcend our finitude in order to find that more real world. The universal is particularized, located in time and space. The author has written himself into the play. As Augustine found the Word made flesh in the gospel but not in the Platonists, so here too Lewis has turned from myth to story and found the story which promises to satisfy the longing of the restless heart while yet acknowledging, even affirming, the relentless temporality of a pilgrim existence.

¹⁶“Myth Became Fact,” p. 66.

