Abstract

Is C. S. Lewis's literary criticism a throwback, largely irrelevant to contemporary debate? Convinced that "most, if not all, our thought is won by metaphor," Lewis places literary language on the same footing as other forms of knowledge acquisition. It is that tool by which the imagination comes to know the unknown. Working from within the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, Lewis provides some fascinating examples of metaphor as speaking pictures creating new characters and shaping fictional worlds. How he, first, figures for us unknown regions and then, second, conducts us into them so we vicariously *experience them* is entirely based on this strong view of language as world-making. In two narrative set-pieces, he dramatizes the powers of language for us as we grasp the unknown: in the speaking picture that becomes a portal to another world (at the beginning of *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*); and in the magic book that actually comes to life as Lucy reads it (midway through *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*). By creating an enchanting world in his fiction, Lewis re-enchants the real world for us. By creating a history of a world hitherto unknown to us, he opens the possibility of goings-on outside our familiar experience. By speaking a language that conducts us to another world, he vindicates the powers of language to talk about this world and any other. In his view of metaphor, as well as in his fictional treatments of linguistic creation, Lewis rescues the revelatory force of words for a skeptical age.

Is C. S. Lewis Still Relevant to Literary Studies Today?

By Thomas L. Martin

THE "NEXT BIG THING"

An article in the *New York Times* recently asked what the next big idea in the humanities will be. The author claims that the humanities are in a dying state and that impoverished scholars are eagerly scanning the horizon for some new theory to rescue them: "by the end of the 1990s, the sweeping approaches of the previous decades had been exhausted. Yet no powerful new idea emerged to take their place. A deep pessimism crept over the humanities. Today, scholars complain, their fields are fragmented and rudderless." Because all the deconstructive readings of literary texts had been done, all Foucauldian readings done, all Lacanian readings, this author concludes, there's little left to do, hence, the abjection humanities scholars feel—and what the author described as "the need in fields like English, history, and philosophy for a major new theory."[1]

What are these scholars looking for, and indeed are the humanities dying? Or some of you outside the academy who are attending this Shakespearean festival may say, "I didn't even know they were sick." What has given rise to such a state of affairs, and what relevance has C. S. Lewis to such a critical climate? Indeed, why should we look backwards when perhaps we should look ahead? The author of the *New*

York Times piece makes clear she is looking for "the next master theory" (emphasis supplied). But is this what literary criticism needs to resuscitate it from its moribund state? How did Lewis himself think about literature?

ALLEGORIES OF READING

First, it's worthwhile to pause over all this death imagery. Barthes and Foucault spoke of the death of the author, while many critics today are talking about the post-humanist subject, the death of history, literature, and the humanities in general. If death so attends our own cultural and critical situation, then it should be no surprise that the literary past is dead, too. One thinks of Greenblatt's famous "I began with the desire to speak with the dead"—incidentally, he was speaking about Shakespeare—and Bloom's statement that readers are "nearly necromancers, straining to hear the dead sing."[2] So while certain postmodern critics are busy critiquing power structures of a dead literary past, maybe someone should write a literary analysis of the pervasive death imagery that powers postmodern criticism.

Such a literary analysis of predominating tropes of death in postmodern criticism would demonstrate, however partially, that the literary as a category retains importance in its own right and deserves serious study. Lewis speaks of Sidney's *Defense* and the general emergence of the category of fiction in the Renaissance as a legitimate "activity distinct from history on the one hand and lying on the other."[3] Taking a step back, he views this significant moment as the stile it took Western poetics a thousand years to overcome.[4] Plato's charge that the poet removes our attention away from reality held on for a long time, a conviction shared by the long-lived dominance of allegory as a literary form. In the allegorical outlook, the diversity one encounters, every manifestation of variety, must reflect some superior gnosis. If poetics in the West took so long to rise above allegory as the only alternative to history and falsehood, then how has poetic theory fared? Time does not permit an historical overview, but consider a few prominent figures:

Plato: absolute forms v. misrepresentation
Puritans: revealed truth v. lies, falsehood
Kant: purposiveness v. non-purposiveness
Freud: reality v. dream
Marx: material base v. superstructure
Speech-act theorists: to assert v. to pretend to assert
Saussure and Derrida: language v. more language
New historicists: power relations v. representations
Greenblatt: social energy v. "voice of the dead"

For these theorists and critics, literature is "unreality." Do you see the pattern in the list? Define what the "real" is first, then one can talk about literature. Once the "real" is established, "reality"-oriented criticism becomes the tool for looking through the unreal literary surface to discern the real underneath. These theorists may rely on something like the Kantian distinction between phenomena and noumena, or even the old distinction between appearance and reality, one certainly not alien to literature itself. Nonetheless, they position literature on a true-false axis, where literature bears some derivative or shadowy relationship to the true. To establish how literature reveals the true, such critics ultimately resort to an allegorical approach where the literary text becomes a *roman à clef* and theory the key.

But do we have to take a position on the transcendental ego, on the origin of language, on the Lacanian stages of psycho-linguistic development before we can read literature aright? Do we need to have our politics aligned to a certain view, subscribe to some non-negotiable tenets about the nature of social reality? If we could just figure out the world first, then we could make sense of literature, right? In this way, theorists since the 1960s have accelerated the push to explain literary content. In classical times, the substance of literature may have been a gift of the gods, something handed down from heaven or to which the poet had special access, and, even after divine inspiration fell into disfavor, thriving literary traditions still abided the mystery of literary invention. If not a supernatural endowment, then the poet simply possessed a power to see things others didn't see, and to see them so well, in fact, that the poet could make others see them, too.

But for the allegorical cast of mind, there is only one world, the one of which every text directly or indirectly speaks. For this outlook, the one world there is is the one the critic is certain of, and all diversity the critic encounters is seen as so many masks on that one world, whether that be the Marxist, the Freudian, or whatever—the world from which all masks must be stripped. The text does not project a world of its own, but always reveals the critic's world. The promise of allegorical criticism is that it always stands in a position to shed unique light on a text, supplying a hidden meaning that was lacking.

Anyone who disagrees with the above characterization might consider the following. If one looks at the MLA Index from 1963 to the present, one finds the following number of articles under the following names:

Traherne: 154
Auden: 907
Tolkien: 1208
Lacan: 1259
Twain: 1369
Derrida: 1553
Bakhtin: 1766
Jonson: 1841
Dickinson: 1951
Nietzsche: 2972
Psychoanaly*: 4951
Marx*: Matched too many terms.

Allow me to give a more specific example. If the allegorical mode of interpretation brings its own categories of meaningfulness to a text, those that may or may not agree with the categories that inform the text's meaning, then where might we find real live instances? Well, we've all read Foucault's analysis of the panopticon in the French penal system. But did you realize that an article has been published in which the author finds a panopticon in O'Neale's *Long Day's Journey into Night*? Someone else argues that novelist John Fowles has a "panoptic vision." Another critic else discovers a "syntactic panopticon" in Mallarmé. This last is remarkable because it shows how far some are willing to stretch a text to fit some aspect of their pre-established world. Syntactic panopticon indeed! As a wise professor of mine remarked of this interpretive over-eagerness, "Once named, it's everywhere!" Now we can continue to go to literary texts like this, looking for the panopticon, looking for Lacanian stages, looking for specific power themes. We can exhaust those, then wait for the next master theory, so we can then exhaust it. But at times like this, one is reminded of the old saying: "When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail."

SYMPATHETIC READINGS

How does one master this allegorical method of reading; how does one become adept at this form of critique? One widely used anthology of literary theory speaks of instructing students in this manner:

> When they read Louis Marin's structural analysis of Disneyland . . . as much as possible they should 'become' structuralists and see the world of experience of capable of being subjected to 'textual analysis.' When they read poststructuralism, they should come to know a text as centered by the play of difference and learn to read by undoing the fixation of hierarchical authority. As Marxist critics, they should try to understand a text as situated within an ideological superstructure in relation to a historical and 'material' base, while as feminist or gender critics, they should self-consciously read with a sense of the overwhelming importance of gender in relation to the understanding of personal and cultural experience.[5]

What is so surprising about the above statement is that in it one finds an apology for reading theory sympathetically, but nowhere else in the anthology a similar apology for reading literature. Nowhere among the critical approaches in this, one of the most comprehensive critical readers available, will one find an apologia for reading literature with the same sympathy suggested to students who try to make meaning out of the essays on cultural, social, and linguistic theory. One wonders why, and the easy answer might be that the allegorical mode of criticism is always assimilative, so one shouldn't expect for there to be a theoretical justification for reading literature sympathetically. Similarly, the theories are meant to explain literature, so after they succeed perhaps one has no need to read literature sympathetically. Of course, either point leaves unaddressed the more significant problem: in order to access the theories in the book in the first place, the preface enjoins us to the most sympathetic (dare we say imaginative?) readings of the texts possible.

But if for theory, why not for literature? Now we can say that the literary past is dead and that we need some new theory to breathe life into it. We can agree with Christopher Norris who argues in his "Poststructuralist Shakespeare" that because of the hopeless complications of literary interpretations we can no longer read literary texts; we can only read ideologies.[6] His is yet another example of the allegorical approach. If texts bear no discernible meaning, but are rather the site of ideological contest, the clash of competing discourses, the confused and conflicted marks of dubious dead voices, where criticism must intervene to tell us what the text is *really about,* that may indeed be the best we can do in our postmodern and poststructuralist condition. But we still have left unanswered our earlier question: has criticism overcome, indeed can criticism overcome, the stile that poetics was able to surmount in the sixteenth century?

LEWIS ON LITERATURE

This is where Lewis gives us some of his best assistance. Just as the theory anthology asks us to receive theory, look at it carefully, look at the world through its eyes, rather than looking at it through one's own, Lewis, in *Experiment in Criticism,* distinguishes between *using* and *receiving* a work of literature. By this distinction, he means that as much as possible, we should take a literary text on its own terms and not our own. Lewis comments, we can be "so busy doing things with the work that we give it too little chance to work on us." Particularly disastrous is a hostile or suspicious approach to reading. He illustrates:

> If you already distrust the man you are going to meet, everything he says or does will seem to confirm your suspicions. We can find a book bad only by reading it as if it might, after all, be very good. We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open. There is no work in which holes can't be picked; no work that can succeed without a preliminary act of good will on the part of the reader.[7]

When we come to a work "armed to the teeth" with our critical preoccupations, works may indeed lose whatever life they had. It would be very much to the point to ask ourselves whether our critical definitions and theories open the text to us or close us off from it? I don't mean to settle the issue one way or another here, but simply acknowledge Lewis's points: "An amazing knowledge of Chaucerian or Shakespearian criticism sometimes co-exists with a very inadequate knowledge of Chaucer or Shakespeare."[8] Yes, Lewis sees a place for criticism and even adverse criticism, but if approached with no preliminary act of good will and a careful reading, we may find in our intentness to do things with texts that "increasingly we meet only ourselves."[9] So whether praising or damning, the critic ought to display an "extreme rarity of conscientiousness in that preliminary work which all criticism should presuppose."[10]

What kind of theoretical justification would this principle of receiving the text require? Isn't it true that if I don't use the text, the text will use me? Perhaps as readers we should therefore be the ones to strike first. Or is there a way out of this deadlock where all the participants appear engaged in a life-and-death struggle for power? I would argue there is a way out. Such a view would maintain that we can see literature not as *allegoria vis*—the allegory of power—but as *vis poetica*—the power of poetry, i.e., its power to conjure, to project characters, places, events, worlds. According to this notion, literature carries a life of its own, and that not simply as an *objet d'art*; but as Umberto Eco states, "Every text has an ontology of its own that must be respected."[11] While we cannot launch into a technical analysis of the text theory that would establish this idea of the text as a possible world,[12] Lewis isworking with many of its principles, even if informally. That makes the idea no less suggestive. A way out of the power struggles that seem to have gripped critical discourse today is to acknowledge that literary works present many possible worlds rather than to fight over the one into which they must be allegorically subsumed. In that informal spirit, then, perhaps it's not too out of place to quote Milton, especially in light of the death imagery above: "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them."[13] And likewise Joyce writes of Stephen Dedalus, "The pages of his timeworn Horace never felt cold to the touch even when his own fingers were cold: they were human pages . . . the dusky verses were as fragrant as though they had lain all those years in myrtle and lavender and vervain."[14]

UT PICTURA POESIS TRADITION

But how does literature carry its own life and project its own worlds? Through what semiotic or other processes is the effect accomplished? While the scientific and post-scientific approaches of twentieth-century theory may have indeed killed the word by making it an object of scientific scrutiny, the *Ut Pictura Poesis* tradition runs much closer to the spirit of Milton and Joyce. Long ago it answered the question of how literature propagates a vitality of its own. The tradition can be traced back to the ancient Greek poet Simonides, from the sixth century B.C. Plutarch credits Simonides with its central formulation: "*poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*" ['poetry is a speaking picture, painting a silent poem']. The idea is that poetry conveys to readers its unique vision of the world—not only by description, but also by depiction. So the way the literary artist renders a scene in a poem is not unlike the way the visual artist renders a scene in a painting. The result is something a hearer, or observer, *beholds*. In other words, poetry does not solely convey a message already known to those listening, signaling a convention that invokes an already-known meaning; no, through its inventive use of language it manifests a power to convey meanings entirely new. Although attributed first to Simonides, the principle is condensed and codified—"*ut pictura poesis*" ['as in painting, so also in poetry']—in Horace. The idea is also to be found in such notables as Aristotle, Quintilian, Vives, Sidney, Puttenham, Peacham, Jonson, and even da Vinci, among others. While eighteenth century critics later apply *ut pictura poesis* with literalist vigor, converting it into an interpretive schema and precise method for reading both paintings and poems, the earlier tradition made more of it in terms of poetry's power to conjure a vision, the poet's, or confer an experience entirely new to the reader.

Listen to Sidney on this point. He speaks of "A perfect picture," given by the poet, who

> yeeldeth to the powers of the minde an image of that whereof the Philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pearce, nor possesse, the sight of the soule so much, as that other doth. For as in outward things to a man that

> had never seene an Elephant, or a Rinoceros, who should tell him most exquisitely all their shape, cullour, bignesse, and particuler marks, or of a gorgious pallace an Architecture, who declaring the full bewties, might well make the hearer able to repeat as it were by roat all he had heard, yet should never satisfie his inward conceit, with being witnesse to it selfe of a true lively knowledge: but the same man, as soon as he might see those beasts wel painted, or that house wel in modell, shuld straightwaies grow without need of any description to a judicial comprehending of them, … which notwithstanding lie darke before the imaginative and judging power, if they be not illuminated or figured forth by the speaking picture of Poesie.

Notice that Sidney's view runs counter to the linguistic nominalism and subjectivist prejudices involved in such critical views as deconstruction and reader-response theory. Nevertheless, Sidney's arguments display a plausibility that may not be apparent in our theoretical earnestness to emphasize differences among readers. Sidney seems to say that many will never see a rhinoceros in real life, but we will surely gain some knowledge when someone either illustrates or vividly describes the rhinoceros to us. While Sidney's words will probably not persuade a theorist who thinks we can never understand anything aright nor ever share information with one another such that we come to a "meeting of the minds," Sidney's comments suggest a series of significant questions. If we can we truly learn when we experience something firsthand, then why not when we see the same thing depicted on a canvas, or for that matter, on a television screen, when much the same sensory information we acquire in real life can be proxied through an effective medium? And if in either of these, then why not in a literary language that brings its own visual and auditory information as well? At its most basic level, the *Ut Pictura Poesis* tradition places great stock in the expressive powers of poetic language.

LEWIS ON LITERATURE AND SPEAKING PICTURES

Now in light of this all-too-brief background on "speaking pictures" and "mute poems," read a passage from Lewis's book *Voyage of the Dawn Treader,* in a chapter entitled "The Picture in the Bedroom," which I quote at length:

> "Do you like the picture?" he [Eustace] asked.
>
> "For Heaven's sake don't let him get started about Art and all that," said Edmund hurriedly, but Lucy, who was very truthful, had already said, "Yes, I do. I like it very much."
>
> "It's a rotten picture," said Eustace. . . .
>
> "Why do you like it?" said Eustace to Lucy.
>
> "Well, for one thing," said Lucy, "I like it because the ship looks as if it was really wet. And the waves look as if they were really going up and down."
>
> Of course Eustace knew lots of answers to this, but he didn't say anything. The reason was that at the very moment he looked at the waves and saw that they did look very much indeed as if

> they were going up and down. . . . The look of the waves in the picture make him feel [sea]sick. . . .
>
> What they were seeing may be hard to believe when you read it in print, but it was almost as hard to believe when you saw it happening. The things in the picture were moving. It didn't look at all like a cinema either; the colours were too real and clean and out-of-door for that. . . . At the same moment . . . Lucy felt all her hair whipping round her face as it does on a windy day. And this was a windy day; but the wind was blowing out of the picture towards them. And suddenly with the wind came the noises—the swishing of waves and the slap of water against the ship's sides and the creaking and the over-all high, steady roar of air and water. But it was the smell, the wild, briny smell, which really convinced Lucy that she was not dreaming.
>
> "Stop it," came Eustace's voice, squeaky with fright and bad temper. "It's some silly trick you two are playing. Stop it. . . . —ow!"
>
> The other two were much more accustomed to adventures, but, just exactly as Eustace . . . said "Ow," they both said "Ow" too. The reason was that a great cold, salt splash had broken right out of the frame and they were breathless from the smack of it, besides being wet through. . . .
>
> And by this time either they had grown much smaller or the picture had grown bigger. Eustace jumped to try to pull it off the wall and found himself standing on the frame; in front of him was not glass but real sea, and wind and waves rushing up to the frame as they might to a rock. . . . There was a second of struggling and shouting, and just as they thought they had got their balance a great blue roller surged up round them, swept them off their feet, and drew them down into the sea. Eustace's despairing cry suddenly ended as the water got into his mouth.[15]

Notice in the story first the presence of a pretentious art criticism that stultifies artistic enjoyment. Notice, too, the close association between the power of story and the power of painting. As suggested by Lewis's portal opening directly to adventure, art may be enjoyed very much because it does seem to come alive and draw us into its world of people we have never met before and places we've never visited. Who, for example, can read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* without feeling as if one has picked up some new friends and acquaintances along the way? Think about your own favorite work and ask if it passes this test. We do genuinely learn something and have our experience of the world expanded whether we read biography, history, or literature. Now the question is, Is this observation about going outside ourselves metaphorical, or is there something theoretically significant about this experience of reading, something we must not falsify in our theory of literature? Literature does indeed seem to possess a power of taking us outside ourselves and to confer on us new experiences.

With all this in mind, listen to another passage from the same book, this one later, in a chapter entitled "The Magician's Book," which I quote:

> She went up to the desk and laid her hand on the book; her fingers tingled when she touched it as if it were full of electricity. She tried to open it but couldn't at first; this however, was only because it was fastened by two leaden clasps, and when she had undone these it opened easily enough. And what a book it was!
>
> [It contained a] picture of [a] man with toothache . . . so lifelike that it would have set your own teeth aching if you looked at it too long, and the golden bees which were dotted all round the [page] looked for a moment as if they were really flying" (128–29).
>
> Lucy could hardly tear herself away from that first page, when she turned over, the next was just as interesting.
>
> [Soon she came to] a picture of a girl standing at a reading-desk reading in a huge book. And the girl was dressed exactly like Lucy. [We discover that it is a picture of herself.] It was strange, considering how small the pictures had looked at first, that Lucy in the picture now seemed quite as big as the real Lucy; and they looked into each other's eyes . . .(130).
>
> [Later in the book] she came to a spell "for the refreshment of the spirit," The pictures were fewer here but very beautiful. And what Lucy found herself reading was more like a story than a spell. It went on for three pages 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, and all the pictures were real too.[16]

Moving from the picture that comes to life in the earlier part of the story, we find here the book that comes to life in much the same way. Those leaden clasps are unyielding to Lucy's first attempt, but once opened the book delivers the most amazing revelations. First, and most obviously, the book contains pictures: pictures so real they produce in the reader virtually the same sensations that they depict, including the unpleasant ones. Notice also the shift in perspective that results and particularly the change in relative size between what happens inside and outside the book. As Lucy reads, the pictures do become more "life-sized"; before long, they have become just as large as she is. Indeed, she sees not only all sorts of new things in the book but even discovers a few old things as well: the picture she beholds of herself gives her insight about herself she never had before. When her imagination is fully engaged, we finally learn this about her encounter with the book: "She was living in the story as if it were real, and all the pictures were real too."

Of course, in these passages from *The Dawn Treader*, we observe a metafictional treatment of literature as speaking pictures: we see literature coming to life, showing us, teaching us, something, communicating to us worlds, experiences, we have not known. We see both here in his fiction and in his comments on Sidney from his *Oxford History of English Literature* Lewis highlighting literature's power to create "speaking pictures" as one of its most compelling and enduring features. As the brief overview in this essay necessarily comes to a close, we still have left unconjectured what that "next master theory" will be. Curiously, whichever theory the humanities do eventually embrace, I am convinced that literature will keep on doing what it does best: speaking in speaking pictures. And the theorists will try a form of picture-making themselves, as they deploy their own metaphors. We will do best to read them, as we do the literature itself, sympathetically and with a careful eye.

So ultimately what is Lewis's relevance to our current critical situation? Loving, attentive and receptive reading, with a scholar's attention to detail and context. And, we can add, a kind of hermeneutical patience—i.e., receiving rather than using; many possible worlds rather than allegorical absorption into one; living and speaking pictures rather than dead voices—*that* is the relevance of Lewis to the current critical situation.

Notes

1. Emily Eakin, "What Is the Next Big Idea? Buzz is Growing for 'Empire'" (*New York Times* July 7, 2001).

2. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 65.

3. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 318–19.

4. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 29.

5. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer, *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Longman, 1998), xi.

6. Christopher Norris. "Post-Structuralist Shakespeare: Text and Ideology," *Alternative Shakespeares,* Ed. John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), 47–66.

7. Lewis, *Experiment,* 116.

8. Lewis, *Experiment,* 128.

9. Lewis, *Experiment,* 85.

10. Lewis, "On Criticism," *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories,* ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harvest, 1966), 46.

11. Umberto Eco, "Small Worlds," *Versus: Quaderni di Studi Semiotici* 52–53 (1989): 53–90.

12. See my forthcoming book from University of Toronto Press, *Poiesis and Possible Worlds.*

13. John Milton, "Tractate of Education."

14. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

15. Lewis, *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier, 1952), 5–8.

16. Lewis, *Voyage,* 133.

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