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“Any good?’ ‘Will this do?’”: Reflections on the Poetry of C.S. Lewis

In his lifetime Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) was a very popular author thanks to his fiction (stories for children – The Narnia Cycle, a space trilogy and a novel – *Till We Have Faces*), his theological and philosophical writings of various kinds (satirical, e.g. *The Screwtape Letters*; meditational, e.g. *A Grief Observed*; explanatory, e.g. *The Four Loves*) and – last but not least – his literary criticism. All his prose texts, characterized by lucid, clear and attractive style, by wit and dialectical bias, breadth of references and formidable erudition made him famous as a literary historian, a Christian apologist and a lecturer.

The fact that Lewis was also a poet, that he wrote poetry all his life and had some of it published is, however, not generally known. Even serious encyclopedic publications and companions to English literature rarely mention the fact. It might then mean that his poetry does not merit much praise, is considerably less interesting than his other work or insufficient in terms of material to be seriously studied. However, the latter is definitely not the case: over 180 short lyrical poems and four long narratives should not be ignored and, as has been pointed out in an essay on the language of his poetry, “there is room for a book-length study of Lewis’s poems” (Huttar 1991: 86). Still, no matter whether the critical opinion of Lewis the poet is high or low, it is important for his readers to know what kind of poetry he wrote, what were its themes and characteristics of style. It does not only satisfy the curiosity of those who appreciate Lewis’s other work, or admire him as man,¹ but it also enlarges our vision of Lewis the writer. The scope of the present paper does not allow a more extensive investigation to find thematic links between his poetry and prose.

¹ There are a few societies in Europe and America propagating his work and his philosophy of life, the most important and the oldest of which is The C.S. Lewis New York Society, founded in 1969.

What will be attempted here is much more modest, but still the motif of essential affinity between Lewis the poet and Lewis the prose writer will run at the background of the present text. The paper has, then, two objectives: a brief and general description of Lewis's poetic work and a commentary on a few chosen poems from the volume *Poems* published posthumously in 1964. The aim behind these is to point out the basic consistency of Lewis's views upon man, the world and art expressed in his poems and prose and to highlight the most characteristic features of his poetry.

It comes as a surprise to many readers of C.S. Lewis that he started his literary career as the author of poetry, and not as a literary critic, a fiction writer or a religious apologist. In the words of one of his biographers, already at the age of eighteen Lewis "had a burning desire to be 'a poet'" (White 2011: 44). Such a wish was not unusual among the young people of his generation and background, that is middle-class romantic intellectuals who fought in the trenches of World War I. However, Lewis's first volume of poetry, entitled *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics*, published in 1919, included only two poems about the experience of war. The book was received with very little interest and earned only a few anonymous reviews,² lukewarm and not encouraging. The volume went thus practically unnoticed and the tiny issue of 750 copies was sold only in an insignificant number to Lewis's friends and relatives.

The general opinion nowadays is that the lyrics of *Spirits in Bondage*, referring to classical, Norse, or Celtic myths and showing the influence of Keats, Tennyson, Arnold, MacDonald and Francis Thompson were felt to be outmoded in "their vague romanticism typical of 1890s rather than the postwar years" (Adey 1998: 195). Still, for modern biographers and students of Lewis's work his first book is important as providing evidence for his early interest in characteristic mythical themes and images as well as in poetic metres and stanza forms. Although it was the time of poetic experiments, the young Lewis showed that to him traditional rhyme and metre were the fundamental elements of verse. His first published poems (40 in number) employ iambics or trochees and varying line lengths, and most of them are written in couplets, tercets and quatrains, rhymed in various patterns (Adey 1998: 197).

Lewis did not seem to be much worried by the lack of success of his first, youthful volume, as he knew that it had often happened even to the greatest poets in the past. He went on working on his poetry and in 1926, when he was already a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, he published *Dymer*, a long narrative poem in nine cantos, under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton (the same

² Excerpts of the reviews are quoted in Walter Hooper's *Companion* (2005: 144).

he used for *Spirits in Bondage* seven years earlier). The choice of the metre and stanza was very significant in the context of English literary tradition: *Dymer* was written in rhyme royal – iambic seven-line stanza, with an intricate rhyme pattern, used for narrative from Geoffrey Chaucer to William Morris. Lewis had worked on the poem for several years and treated it as his major work.

The poem is an allegorical story of the adventures of the eponymous young hero, who having lived in a kind of Platonist republic suddenly leaves the city one day and, impressed by the beauty of the countryside, starts a journey in search of something very elusive and indescribable, but irresistibly beautiful which produces in him a strong mysterious longing. Having experienced strange events that let him taste love (immediately lost), attraction of art and occultism, among others, Dymer is killed by a wild-beast that has been following him for some time. At the end of the poem, however, the flowers springing from his grave and birds singing at sunrise signify a victory of the hero, probably through a kind of resurrection or through the assuming of immortality. The story of Dymer, although more violent and obscure than those of Alastor or Endymion, has something in common with the romantic journeys of Shelley’s and Keats’s heroes. What has also been frequently noted is the influence of George MacDonald’s allegorical fantasies – *Phantastes* and *Lilith* – on Lewis’s narrative (Adey 1998: 17).³

Although the critical reception of *Dymer* was a little warmer than that of *Spirits in Bondage*, the book did not sell well either. When Lewis had it reprinted in 1950, he commented on that situation in the Preface in an ironic way: “At its original appearance in 1926, *Dymer*, like many better books, found some good reviews and almost no readers” (Hooper 2005: 153). He sadly had to accept the fact that the kind of poetry he valued most – long verse narratives like Spenser’s *Fairy Queene*, Romantic tales of wonder, Tennyson’s, Browning’s or Morris’s poems – did not appeal to his contemporaries at all. In a letter to his friend Arthur Greeves, of 18 August 1930, Lewis wrote with moving frankness about the frustration of his hopes to become a successful poet:

From the age of sixteen onwards I had one single ambition, from which I never wavered, in the prosecution of which I spent every ounce I could and on wh. I really & deliberately staked my whole contentment: and I recognize myself as having unmistakably failed in it.” (Hooper 2004: 925)

³ Lewis speaks openly of George MacDonald as his favourite author several times in his works, e.g. in Chapter XI of his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, or in Chapter IX of *The Great Divorce: A Dream*, where MacDonald – similarly to Virgil in *Divine Comedy* – is the narrator’s guide in the Valley of the Shadow of Life.

Apart from a firm statement about Lewis's poetic tastes and standards, already signaled in *Spirits in Bondage*, *Dymer* provides the reader with important message about the author's preoccupation with the theme of romantic longing – “*Sehnsucht*” or “Joy.”

The first description of this experience comes from his poem “Joy,” published in 1924 in *Beacon* 3, No. 31 (May). The presence of Joy is there compared to a visit of a big bird that awakes the speaker brushing him with its feathers and makes him look at the Northern Irish landscape in a new way which arouses in him feelings of deliverance and freedom. This happy sensation is, however, very brief and fleeting – the essence of Joy is its transience. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, written almost 30 years later, Lewis attempted a description of this experience which eventually, after his conversion to Theism in 1929 and to Christianity in 1931, took on religious colouring and gave unity and meaning to his life. In Chapter I he refers to the experience of Joy as constituting the foundation of his existence. In the definition of Joy that he provides there, he distinguishes it both from happiness and from pleasure, but stresses its paradoxical and compelling nature since anyone who has experienced it will want to feel it again. Lewis points out that it is a feeling that may be even similar to unhappiness or grief, but still it is of the kind that needs to be experienced again (Lewis 1955: 20). As critics have rightly noticed, his “Joy” has much in common with Goethe’s “blissful longing,” with Matthew Arnold’s “wistful, soft, tearful longing,” and also with the spiritual experience and the state of mind often revealed in poetry, in prose fiction and drama, both British and American. It is found, among others, in Blake, Wordsworth, Thomas Wolfe, Dreiser, or O’Neill (White 1970: 109). *Dymer* experiences such longing and the search for something that would satisfy it provides the plot for this allegorical story.

As has been mentioned above, the failure of *Dymer* affected Lewis not only on the personal level (his ambitions had been frustrated), but also in a more general way: as a poetry lover⁴ he was deeply saddened to have realized that both as a poet and a reader he had experienced an important, but grievous moment in English literary history – that is the end of the narrative poem. He wrote about this to his brother Warnie in a letter of 2 August 1928:

It sounds astonishing but English poetry is one of the things that you can come to the end of . . . I do mean that there is no longer any chance of discovering a new long poem in English which will turn out just what I want and which can be added

⁴ In his lecture “De Descriptione Temporum” Lewis emphatically says of poetry: “this is . . . the art I love best” (Hooper 1969: 8).

to the *Faerie Queene*, *The Prelude*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Ring and the Book*, the *Earthly Paradise*, and a few others – because there aren’t any more. (Hooper 2004: 776)

Since his early days as a reader Lewis’s taste was chiefly for narrative poetry. He somehow could not understand that narrative poems went out of fashion and that in spite of the fact that John Masefield – who was to become Poet Laureate in 1930 – did write verse tales himself, this mode of writing was irretrievably lost to the modern public and modern poets.

Lewis’s attachment to the form of poetic narrative was, however, so strong that – in spite of his lack of success with *Dymer* – he composed three more narrative poems simply for the pleasure he derived from writing such verse. They are imaginative tales on medieval themes of love, adventure and enchantment, their titles suggestive of their romantic contents (“Launcelot,” “The Nameless Isle,” “The Queen of Drum”). Lewis never tried to publish them and they appeared in print, together with *Dymer*, only six years after his death, in the volume *Narrative Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper (1969). The reviews of the poems were fairly complimentary, particularly towards “The Queen of Drum” (which was a substantial poem in five cantos), but all the critics, in one way or another, expressed their regret that Lewis did not want to go “the way the stream was flowing,” but stubbornly opposed it and clung to writing verse tales, which could have been much better if he had written them in prose (Hooper 2005: 168).

Apart from long narratives, Lewis kept on writing short lyrical poems even when – after the unsuccessful publication of *Dymer* – he officially accepted his defeat as a poet and sought fulfillment in various kinds of prose. For over thirty years, until the late 1950s, he had written many short poetic texts and sent most of them to be published in various journals, but not many appeared there under his own name. Those published in *The Oxford Magazine* or *Punch* were signed “Nat Whilk” (or the related initials “N.W.”), which was a pseudonym meaning “I know not whom,” that is “anonymous,” in Anglo-Saxon. Some of the poems Lewis wrote were included in his prose works. This was the case, for instance, of sixteen lyrics of religious character which were incorporated in *The Pilgrim’s Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism* (1933), the first book he published after *Dymer*. Lewis’s first readers and critics were his friends, in particular Owen Barfield,⁵ to whom he always

⁵ Owen Barfield, the author of *Poetic Diction* (1928), a philosopher, poet and critic, had been Lewis’s friend since their first term at Oxford in 1919. In the dedication to *The Allegory of Love* Lewis called him: “the wisest and best of my unofficial teachers.”

sent a copy of his new poem with a note asking “Any good?’ ‘Will this do?’” (Hooper 2005: 174).

It was also Owen Barfield who first knew that Lewis began collecting and revising his poems for publication in a volume entitled *Young King Cole*, after he was made Professor of Medieval and Renaissance English at Cambridge in 1954 (Adey 1998: 207). However, due to his wife’s illness the work had to be given up and Lewis did not manage to complete it before his death in 1963. Walter Hooper continued compiling and editing the texts for a volume entitled *Poems*, which appeared in 1964. It was the first collection of Lewis’s non-narrative poetry after *Spirits in Bondage*, containing 127 pieces – that is, with very few exceptions, practically all important short poetic texts hitherto hidden among Lewis’s papers at home, scattered in various journals or included in his prose works (*The Pilgrim’s Regress*).⁶ Since quite a few of the poems were not dated, the editor followed a thematic order, not a chronological one, dividing the texts into five parts whose titles had been borrowed from Lewis’s works (*Surprised by Joy* and the Narnia stories).

Part I, entitled “The Hidden Country,” refers to the world of the imagination which offered shelter to the things particularly dear to Lewis – mythology, the Bible, fairy tales, fantasy, folklore. The poems in this section often deal with classical myths, biblical motifs and folk and fairy stories re-told from a different perspective or shown in a new light. So here we find the imaginative “Narnian Suite,” the frightening, quasi-apocalyptic dream vision “Pan’s Purge,” reflections on the biblical situations of the First Man on the Earth (“The Adam Unparadised,” “The Adam at Night”) and on the Bethlehem scene (“The Turn of the Tide”), or the touching story of the Unicorn that was not accepted in Noah’s Ark (“The Late Passenger”). “The Hidden Country” also includes poems which deal with literary and cultural topics, such as upsetting characteristics of modern poetry and culture that Lewis felt strongly about (“A Confession,” “The Birth of Language,” “A Cliché Came Out of Its Cage”). Poems from Part II – “The Backward Glance” – express a general feeling of nostalgia for literary and cultural values of the past, which is often revealed through a satirical bias towards the present (“Evolutionary Hymn,” “On a Vulgar Error,” “On the Atomic Bomb: Metrical Experiment,” “The Condemned,” “To Andrew Marvell,” “Scholar’s Melancholy”). Part III – “A Larger World” – refers to subjects of more general interest, such as religion, morality, love or suffering. Among the most impressive poems here are “Deadly Sins,” “The Meteorite,” two elegies

⁶ The volume was included (together with *Spirits in Bondage* and a few previously unpublished texts) in *The Collected Poems of C.S. Lewis*, edited by Walter Hooper and published in 1994.

addressed to Charles Williams⁷ and three moving personal sonnets on the theme of suffering and grief – “Joys That Sting,” “Old Poets Remembered” and “As the Ruin Falls.” Part IV, entitled “Further Up and Further In,” (the words of the Unicorn from *The Last Battle* referring to the home-like welcome of the “real” Narnia), includes poems that deal with the themes of God and prayer, as well as death, suffering, despair and love in the context of transcendence. The most memorable poems include five sonnets that Lewis wrote after the death of his wife, Joy Davidman, which are thematically related to the episodes in the process of mourning described later in *A Grief Observed* (1961). Part V, called “A Farewell to Shadow-lands,” contains 17 epigrams and epitaphs expressing various reflections on the subject of death and loss. The interesting thing is that even in this section Lewis shows his satirical vein, writing a witty epitaph (No. 14) on a person who – having lived in incessant noise and nonsense prating – died both “of” and “for” democracy.

Even such a general survey of the contents of the 1964 volume can tell us that the range and number of themes touched upon in these poems are amazing: literary topics, classical mythology, biblical stories, religious concerns, cosmological motifs, political and social matters, ecological issues, friendship, beauty, love, death, suffering and many others. A great variety of speakers and characters that appear in these texts is also impressive: down-to-earth animals (e.g. donkeys, birds, bees), mythological and fantastic creatures (the phoenix, the unicorn, the dragon), planets and stars, magicians, druids, wizards, philosophers, poets and kings, angels and saints, psychoanalysts, theologians *et al.* What is also striking about the contents of Lewis’s poetry, is a considerable number of poems that touch upon the problems of modern life and art and often comment satirically on various aspects of social, political and cultural reality. The most interesting among these are the texts in which Lewis deals with matters related to the meaning and style of poetry.

As has been mentioned earlier, Lewis’s poetic taste had from the start been opposed to the experimental trends in the poetry of the early 20th century, particularly to Vorticism. Writing to his father (on 6 June 1920) about his and his friends’ plans to publish an annual collection of their own verse, he expressed his conviction that in spite of the popularity of the models of Vorticist form and content, “the possibilities of metrical poetry on sane subjects [were] not yet quite exhausted” (Hooper 2004: 492). Although the ambitious editorial plans were not carried out because of the costs involved, Lewis remained faithful to what he considered to be the basic condition of good poetic practice,

⁷ Charles Williams, a poet, novelist and theological writer, was C.S. Lewis’s close friend from 1936; he greatly influenced Lewis’s fiction. His sudden death in 1945 was a terrible blow to C.S.L.

i.e. attendance to rhythmic patterns in verse and to the choice of subjects which should be rationally pleasing (or “sane”). No matter how fashionable and widespread free verse had become in contemporary poetry, Lewis never agreed to its superiority over traditional metre and all the poetry he wrote himself was metrical and most often rhymed. What is more, he showed his defiance of the prevailing poetic mode also by making sarcastic comments upon the modern poets’ inability to scan or rhyme, or upon the modern literary reviewers’ ignorance of traditional prosody. In his “Introductory Letter,” written in 1963 for the volume that he had been preparing, he addressed a presumably typical modern literary editor in a sardonic vein, instructing him in matters concerning rhyme and hoping that the reviewer will understand and appreciate the poet’s efforts in this respect. (Adey 1998: 204).

Lewis’s dislike of modern poetry was not caused only by technical matters of metre and rhyme. What he could not accept was the type of imagery introduced by modern poets who – in his opinion – used obscure language, inadequate metaphors and strange idiom in their description of the world. The poet he attacked most often in his criticism was T.S. Eliot and even though he came to like and respect the author of *The Waste Land* as a man and critic later in his life, he could never understand Eliot’s poetic sensibility. The poem entitled “A Confession,” which alludes to Eliot’s verse and is a satirical complaint about modern poetic meaning and style, belongs to his best known texts. It is a tongue-in-cheek admission of the speaker’s inability to see the sense of modern poetic images: “I am so coarse, the things the poets see / Are obstinately invisible to me” (ll. 1–2). Clearly referring to the opening lines of “Love Song of Alfred Prufrock,” the apparently simple-minded speaker says that in spite of his twenty-years’ efforts he has failed to see a similarity between any evening and “a patient etherized upon a table.” The speaker lists a few things and phenomena traditionally considered beautiful that have been degraded in modern poetry by absurd comparisons drawn from inferior or squalid elements of city life. He rejects these similes because they defy his experience as man and reader of poetry. So, for instance, “red dawn” does not resemble “a chilblain on a cocktail-shaker’s nose” (l. 13), “waterfalls” are not similar to “torn underclothes” (l. 14), glaciers do not remind him of “tin-cans” (l. 15) nor does the moon look to him like “a hump-backed crone” (l. 16). The list is concluded by a reference to Laforgue’s line in which “the white sun on the winriest day” is compared to a spitting in a common pub or bar (“en crachat d’estaminet” – ll. 21–2).

In place of the rejected comparisons the speaker of “A Confession” provides the similes that he finds acceptable, both true and beautiful. So we learn

that each evening has been to him, like to earlier poets, similar to a departure of a ship that leaves behind – “gracefully, finally, without farewells, marooned mankind” (l. 10), or the moon seems to him “a riddle glaring from the Cyclops’ brow” (l. 18). The poem is then not only a criticism of modern poetic practice, but also a plea for the earlier type of imagery, traditionally accepted and understandable, which is pleasingly surprising, but never shocking. The problem that bothers the speaker of “A Confession,” although presented in a good-humoured way, refers to much more serious matters than simply poetic decorum. The final part of the poem reveals the question that in Lewis’s opinion really lies behind the choice of words in poetic imagery, namely the problem of “stock responses.” The idea, borrowed from I.A. Richards, was adapted by C.S. Lewis to his own use and written extensively about in Chapter VIII of *A Preface to ‘Paradise Lost’* (1942). It is clear that for Lewis – unlike for Richards – “stock responses” were not injurious mechanisms that through their conventional character caused problems in literary criticism and in the reception of literature, but organized attitudes necessary for keeping up civilized order in the life of an individual, as well as of society. In his book on *Paradise Lost*, he reminds us of the educational, civilizing function of old, traditional poetry that was carried out by employment of certain recurrent themes concerning important matters, which relied on the right response from the readers, for instance, “that love is sweet, death bitter, virtue lovely, and children or gardens delightful” (Lewis 1959: 56). Lewis is worried that what is attacked in the rejection of these traditional attitudes is the power of human reason, the basis of Western civilization. He is sure that on the maintenance of stock responses “depend both our virtues and our pleasures, and even, perhaps, the survival of our species” (Lewis 1959: 55).

The speaker of “A Confession” cannot understand modern imagery because he has always been “compelled to live on stock responses” (l. 26) to be able to make use of “dull things.” There is clear irony implied in the list of those dull things that are far from being uninteresting in their poetic potential: they include creatures and things attractive and delicious (peacocks and honey), remote and fascinating objects (the Great Wall and Aldebaran), lovely natural scenes (new-cut grass, a wave on the beach), most beautiful shapes (horse, woman), as well as cities rich in historical and poetic associations (Athens, Troy, Jerusalem). It has been rightly pointed out that the ending of the poem is really a “charmingly ironic pastiche” of the famous lines (ll. 374–76) from *The Waste Land* on the “Falling towers” of “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London” (Adey 1998: 206), which implies that even Eliot himself had to resort to “stock responses” while writing these verses.

“A Confession,” the opening poem in the volume, presents to us the best qualities of the type of poetry that Lewis often practiced, that is – closely related to his work as a literary critic and medievalist, a “dinosaur” defending old Western European values. In a short poem of 30 lines we find a wealth of thought, literary erudition, intellectual honesty and courage of opinion, as well as strong argument, attractive and disarming wit, ease of poetic phrase. Although this poem is topical in its nature, and such poetry dates very quickly, “A Confession” – thanks to the poetic value of its “polemical” imagery, its clear argument and humour – remains of interest to the readers of the 21st century enlarging our vision of possibilities once perceived in the art of poetry and its role in supporting our civilization.

In Part II – “The Backward Glance” – there are a few good poems concerned with issues related to those implied in “A Confession” (e.g. “Evolutionary Hymn,” “The Prudent Jailer”), but in order to diversify the topics discussed another poem has been selected as meriting special mention – that is “The Salamander.” It can be called a typical Lewisian poem because it employs his favourite, Narnian motif of “talking animals.” Unlike in Narnia, however, a communication between a human being and an animal creature is used here to make an apparently gloomy comment on life. The speaker, sitting before a fire and observing in it hellish images of destruction, notices a salamander crawling among the flames. The creature talks to the speaker about what it sees outside the fire, in the dark room. The salamander’s vision is dim, whatever shapes he notices outside are in his opinion only reflections of his fire, and he thinks that the real world is only where he is (“There is no other fire but this” – l. 22); outside the fire there is only silence, coldness and emptiness. In the last lines the salamander asserts that he no longer accepts the tales about the world outside the fire that his ancestors believed in and that “with fearless eye” he faces the prospect of nothingness.

Already in the second stanza the speaker makes it clear that he sees a close analogy between the situation of the salamander and mankind. The salamander “with sad eyes” looked out into the quiet room, “as men looked into the skies” (ll. 8–10): a search for the meaning of life outside the physical reality is in both cases doomed to failure as men, like the salamander – sadly and courageously – refuse to recognize any other reality outside the material world.

The poem is melancholy in tone and the image of the sad salamander is poignant in its implications on the human level. Some critics consider this text not as typical of Lewis’s work, but as revealing “a distant voice” not often heard in his prose, characterized by uncertainty or ambivalence towards matters of life (King 1989: 175). The presence of this voice in Lewis’s poetry cannot be

questioned (it is quite loud in some of his poems on suffering and loss), but it seems that in the case of “The Salamander” this voice, striking nihilistic notes, belongs to the poor creature, not to the speaker of the poem, and clearly not to the author. Since there is no comment in the poem on the salamander’s words describing his own situation, the position of the speaker remains ambivalent. There is sympathy expressed towards the creature at the beginning, but nothing is said about the salamander being definitely wrong since there is a real world outside the fire in which he lives. If there is an analogy between the salamander and the human beings, it must also refer to the mistaken assumptions they make about the worlds they live in. So, although the distant voice is heard, it does not dominate the poem’s message and the notes of nihilism and religious skepticism do not prevail, which allows the text to end in what can at best be called intriguing ambivalence.

From among the sonnets addressed to Joy Davidman in her terminal illness, “As the Ruin Falls” (Part III – “A Larger World”) strikes the reader by its high poetic quality, as a most poignant expression of personal loss and sorrow and as a text rhetorically very effective in its successful use of anaphora and hyperbole (Adey 1998: 218). In the octet the speaker dismisses traditional protestations of love as inappropriate in his case since he has been ruled by selfishness and self-seeking, and can talk of love only in the way “a scholar’s parrot may talk Greek” (l. 7). Still, in the sestet, by means of the images that signal the change his beloved has managed to initiate in him (the bridge over a chasm, a return from exile), he has started a process of maturing in love (“grow man” – l. 12) only to discover that she is dying. The images of the breaking bridge and of the falling ruin can be interpreted as implying the situation of his despair and her approaching death. His pain on seeing her suffer is, paradoxically, turned into a blessing in the closing couplet: it is the most precious “gain” he has received from her – the gift of sharing that comes with love.

The three poems discussed above in more detail have been included among the nine poems from the 1964 volume that Don W. King has pointed out as texts revealing “the distant voice,” signaling Lewis’s “doubts and questions about God and human meaning” (King 1989: 184). My choice of the three poems for analysis has not been influenced by this opinion. I have selected them because I have found the poems varied, rich and interesting in content and poetically appealing. Still, the fact that they have been included among those revealing a distant, disturbing tone seems to me relevant now. These three short poems are definitely clear examples of Lewis’s “metrical poetry on sane subjects,” but at the same time – possibly thanks to the echoes of that “distant voice” – they successfully combine formal lucidity with depth of thought and

with some amount of ambiguity that impressive – even if traditional – poetic imagery always allows in poetic texts.

“Any good?” “Will this do?” We do not know how Owen Barfield answered Lewis’s questions in each particular case, but we can be sure that the comments always provided honest criticism and friendly advice. In the context of the present paper the general answer to the modest questions from the title is in the positive, even we are sure that Lewis was an uneven poet. Some of his poems sound like polemical pieces on political, social or environmentalist subjects, some are too satirical in tone and quite a few read like pastiche of other texts. His wit, attractive and sparkling, sometimes took the better of him and – in a polemical fervour – he got carried away, even allowing his lines to come too close to scurrility (the notorious example from *Poems* is “Odora Canum Vis: A Defence of Certain Modern Biographers and Critics”).

On the other hand, Lewis’s poetry is never uninteresting as he often touches upon subjects that can have both topical and universal appeal: philosophy, religion, paganism, art, inadequacies and dangers of modernity in various context of human life. Its anti-modernist bias has now lost much of its strength and topicality and is no longer seen as too persistent, whereas other characteristic features of his poems – such as a great range of topics offered, wealth of biblical, pagan and classical allusion, erudite motifs and references, superb wit, linguistic and intellectual playfulness – make his poetry attractive in reading. Skilful particularly in occasional and argumentative poetry, he is not a great lyricist, although in some poems on loss of friendship or love he can be impressive and effective in his rhetoric and imagery. Although there is no doubt that C.S. Lewis will be remembered first of all as a great, imaginative writer of prose, his poetry will be read by those who appreciate metrical lines and rhymes more than free verses, lucidity of utterance more than ambiguity, attention to matters of general interest more than narrow, personal concerns. We may not find many memorable lines and phrases in C.S. Lewis’s poetry, but we may be certain that we shall meet there a man who will be always ready to share with us his knowledge of man and life and – in the best Renaissance fashion – combine his teaching with entertainment.

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