

Rowan Williams's address during the service to dedicate a memorial to C. S. Lewis

Westminster Abbey, London, 22 November 2013

The scene is the planet Mars. In the presence of the angelic ruler of the planet and representatives of its races, the wicked scientist Dr Weston is trying to explain to the Martians exactly why it would be right for the human race to colonize the rest of the universe. Unfortunately, Dr Weston has all the skill in foreign languages characteristic of British academics, and so has to find a translator. His translator is the philologist Ransom. And we watch, as the scene unfolds, and Weston's vastly complicated, verbose, highfalutin words are rendered into plain Martian by Ransom. Weston will talk about the manifest destiny of the human race, how its capacities lead it to ever-ongoing expansion and elevation at the expense of those less gifted and less powerful. And Ransom is able to render this in plain terms, telling the Martians that, since the human race thinks it is bigger and cleverer than them, it has the right to kill them. Weston, who is beginning to get a few words of the native language, interrupts at one point to try to explain that the human race is constantly moving onwards and upwards, constantly becoming greater and more complex, and moving into an unknown future. Sadly, the only words in Martian he can come out with are "strange," "big." It's not a very compelling moral case.

But this wonderful and eloquent satirical scene is very typical of one aspect of Lewis's apologetic that we sometimes overlook: his profound, sophisticated, and witty sense of the terrible things we do to language. You might even say that, for Lewis, the abuse of language is one of the things which would tell you immediately that you couldn't trust someone, that the person you were listening to didn't understand what it was to be human.

Lewis is interested in de-mystifying the myths that we tell ourselves – the myths about the intrinsic nobility of the human race, entitled to exploit not only its own planet but every other one in the universe; the myths we tell ourselves about how our will and our imagination can somehow make us more than human. And in spelling that out, he shows us how the aspiration to become more than human leaves us profoundly less than human.

The jargon-spouting Dr Weston ends up, in the second volume of Lewis's science-fiction trilogy, as the terrifying Unman, the de-humanized, diabolical figure that Ransom fights with in the caves of the planet Venus. But we can see the same interest at work in the third volume of Lewis's science-fiction trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, in the climactic* scene there of the banquet, where the skills of language and intelligence desert the speakers. Now we have most of us been at banquets where something rather like that appears to have happened; but this is a more drastic instance. This is High Table choreographed by Quentin Tarantino. One by one, the speakers begin to lose the capacity to make sense and utter sense, and the disguised Merlin stands up in the midst of them, and cries out loudly, in Latin, that because they have turned their backs on the Word, the Word has abandoned them. Intelligence has left them. Not the least impressive of that aspect of that narrative is how very slowly some people realize that the speakers are talking nonsense. But that's another story.

But in these two vignettes from the science-fiction trilogy, Lewis puts before us two of the most typical and most disturbing abuses of language that we can suffer from. There is the language we use to hide from ourselves, to tell ourselves that our ignoble habits and our selfish aspirations are really elevating and moral; and there is the language that prevents us, truly, from thinking about things, about reality, language turning in upon itself in an endless spiral of nonsense. And for Lewis, our delivery from those two kinds of error and corruption is an intrinsic part of the delivery and the renewal of our very humanity. The liberation of words is essential to the liberation of our human nature. Indeed, we could say that it is part of our growing into that humanity where, as Lewis says in his last and perhaps greatest fictional work, we have faces. We uncover ourselves to the truth. Because God sees us in the face, we discover we have a reality, a truth, a face, and words to speak. And even as we grow into having words to speak that are honest and truthful and undefended, we are drawn nearer and nearer to that point where, as Lewis says in *Till We Have Faces*, questions fall away[†]; where we have nothing to say because there is too much to say; where, as we heard in that wonderful passage from *The Last Battle*, "the things that began to happen (...) were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them."

* *sic*; correctly "climactic".

[†] "Before your face questions die away". – *TWHF*, last paragraph before the priest Arnorn's closing note.

All through Lewis's work these themes seem to recur. To try to be more than human is to become less than human. To try to put speech between ourselves and our reality or the reality of the world is to be condemned to nonsense. And perhaps it's that suspicion of putting speech, language between ourselves and the world, that explains something of Lewis's aversion to literary modernism. His critical judgments in this area were not, I think, infallible. But one can understand his deep anxiety over an interest in words that could actually stop us thinking about – indeed, seeing – things. And it explains, too, his apparently rather odd indifference to the beautiful and majestic language of the King James Bible. It is, he says, so beautiful and so majestic, that it can actually get in the way of our realizing what the language is about. And we need a Moffatt, a Knox, or a J. B. Phillips, to startle us again with the freshness of what Scripture is saying.

And all of that also, perhaps, helps us to make sense of one of the strangest bits of apologetic in all of Lewis's books. And that is the great testimony offered by Puddleglum, the marsh-wiggle, in *The Silver Chair*. Puddleglum, you remember, with the children who are at the center of the story, are deep underground in the stronghold of the Witch, and the Witch is explaining to them that the only reality that there is, is this underground world, lit by a lamp. There is no outside world. There is no sun in the sky. The sun in the sky is just an imaginative projection from the lamp that hangs in the cave. There is no fresh air, there is no natural light. All that is, is here, in this self-enclosed cavern. And Puddleglum, resisting both the strength of her rhetoric and the fumes of the intoxicating herbs that have been burned in the cave, protests that, whether or not she's telling the truth, there is something about the very idea of an outside world that is more appropriate to life and joy and, yes, truth-telling, in a certain sense, than what the Witch is saying. And isn't it odd that our imagination can produce so much more real and interesting a world than this narrow and impoverished cave?

Puddleglum is appealing not to reasoned argument here, but to a deep, inarticulate sense that we are in touch, that we are connected, that our language and our ideas are not everything, that we are summoned and prodded and lured into life, into knowing, into speaking. Something is given, something calls, something draws us onwards and outwards. What Puddleglum argues is that the self-enclosed world is just not good enough and not interesting enough to keep us thinking, talking, loving and enjoying. Somehow, that self-enclosed, lamp-lit underground reality has to be exploded.

Lewis wanted above all to remind us that our very reality, our very life, depended on the life and reality of God. He wanted to remind us that there was no truth, no joy, no life, that did not come to us unexpectedly from beyond. Think about yourself, think about, God forbid, your "spiritual life", think about the beauty and solemnity and emotional quality of the words you are using, and you will stay in your prison. It's the man who is only thinking about doing a good job or telling the truth who becomes really original and doesn't notice it.

So to become free enough to notice our own self-deceptions, to notice the seductions of jargon, to notice how very easily we settle down in the underground chamber – that is one of the great works of grace. And to be reconnected with the world for which we can't always find appropriate words, where we're searching, reaching, sometimes stumbling – that is the gift of the God who became, for us, and for ever, part of that real world in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Lewis's interest in words and what they tell us about humanity, is one reason, not the only reason but one significant reason, to remember today the fact that we honour him in Poets' Corner; that we honour him as somebody who, in the words of a poet with whom he had a rather fraught relationship, one who purifies the dialect of the tribe. Lewis believed that to become human was to become a speaker of honest truth, and that that could only happen in the face of the God who helps us, who enables us, to drop our masks and our delusions and have faces in His presence. He shares, perhaps surprisingly, with George Orwell a deep diagnostic accuracy about jargon. He shares, even more surprisingly, with Dietrich Bonhoeffer an awareness of how even the most orthodox and polished religious language can become stale and cease to change anything internally or externally. Only the Word, the Word incarnate with the most capital of W's, can save us, not only from nonsense, but from the self-consuming boredom of endless inhumanity, Unmanhood. And when we allow the Word to speak in us and to us, that is when – he says in a paper of the 1940s – that is when we learn how "to lay our ears closer to the murmur of life as it actually flows through us at every moment and to discover there all that quivering and wonder and (in a sense) infinity which the literature that we call realistic omits."^{*}

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* "Hedonics", *Time and Tide*, 16 June 1945.