Gaining a Face
Gaining a Face: The Romanticism of C.S. Lewis

By

James Prothero and Donald T. Williams
To
Walter Hooper
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All citations are in the Chicago Manual of Style format, with the exception of citations of books by C.S. Lewis, which are so numerous to differentiate, even by date, that we have resorted to the following abbreviations for the sake of clarity:

Key to Abbreviations of titles by C.S. Lewis:

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PREFACE:
ROMANTICISM AND C.S. LEWIS

Over the years since 1950 and the publication of *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, or perhaps since 1942 and the publication of *The Screwtape Letters*, the reading public in America and the United Kingdom has been aware of the Romantic aspect of the vision of C.S. Lewis. Before that time he was a little known tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, and Christian apologist to be heard in the war years over the BBC. The broadcast talks that later became *Mere Christianity* revealed a mind given to metaphorical thinking and analogy; this chap on the BBC going on about religion definitely had a vivid imagination and the gift of communicating with that imagination. But until *Screwtape* and the Narnia Chronicles, the full depth and scope, and the sheer lushness of that vision was unrevealed to the public. “Jack” Lewis was first a believer in reason, and also in revelation. He was tutored in a hard school of logic by W.T. Kirkpatrick. His final transition to belief in the factual nature of the claims of Christ is well documented in *Surprised by Joy*. But as the autobiography details, Lewis was taken with the experience he called “joy.” That fact has been already well-documented and will not be the focus of this study. What we wish to do here is to focus on the entirety of Lewis’s Romanticism.

Before we discuss the specifics of Lewis’s Romantic side, we must address two thorny issues. The first problem in claiming a Romantic aspect for a writer like Lewis, who did not live in the four decades encompassing and following the French Revolution, is defining the term “Romantic.” There really isn’t any agreed upon definition amongst Romantic scholars that I could appeal to. And there is rather a cottage industry of scholars proposing definitions of Romanticism and disagreeing with one another. For the purposes of this study, we will use the following definition which I have developed over years of teaching Romanticism in the classroom. Students don’t care about scholarly controversy. They need something concrete. I find the following works.

Romanticism, especially the British form, is a rough grouping of several concepts that came out of the response in Britain to the French Revolution. To touch on at least a couple of these concepts in the 1798-
1832 period generally gets a writer defined as Romantic. It is not necessary for a writer to claim all these traits to be considered Romantic, so that though Byron may only claim one or two of these, Percy Shelley claims far more. Jane Austen, though she wrote in this period, claims none, and is generally not considered Romantic.

The first and central concept is the intrinsic value of the imagination. Coleridge is famous for his theories of the imagination and all the writers of this period have their own ideas on the imagination, its importance and its nature.

The second concept is the intrinsic value of nature. Here again, there is tremendous variety of definition here from Keats to Wordsworth to Byron. But this is fairly universal to all the Romantics. Though we have a range from Coleridge’s theistic transcendentalism to Shelley’s atheism to Keats’ agnosticism, the Romantics universally find some level of spiritual value to the beauty of nature. This concept gave birth to the conservation movement and our propensity to set land aside for national parks and monuments.

The third concept is the special character of children. The Romantics really popularized the concept of children as being born innocent and requiring a literature all their own, as well as the concept that we would now call “child development.” This difference in thought led many of the Romantics and some Victorians after them to oppose child labor. Blake is well known for his portrayal of the corruption of childhood innocence by the industrial revolution. Blake felt that we are born innocent and go on to (notice I did not say “progress”) experience. Shelley and Wordsworth played with the notion that children were closest to God, having been in his presence just before birth. To see the world as a child is to see it more clearly.

The fourth concept is the intrinsic value of the common man. This is a concept directly a result of the American and French Revolutions, tied closely to Locke’s principals of government and the veneration of the will of the masses in the French Revolution. Wordsworth evoked this in The Lyrical Ballads, with his portrayal of simple country folk.

The fifth concept I will use is the sense of balance in the concept of good and evil. Blake talks of the marriage of heaven and hell. Whatever else he may have meant by that, it is typical of his sense that the good in the world, usually associated with childhood and innocence, and the evil in the world, usually but not always associated with experience, are in balance. Of course, Blake’s concept is more complex than my gloss here, and his concept of evil is very complex indeed. But the point is that he sees these forces in balance. Wordsworth too will portray sorrow and joy
and try to balance them as the various narrators in *The Excursion* attempt to do. This contrasts the twentieth century view that the presence of evil negates good.

The sixth and final concept we will use here is the Romantic fascination with utopias, perfect worlds: finding them, building them, and exploring the vision of the perfect world. Romantics are in a search for paradise, or Heaven, or perhaps Heaven on Earth. Coleridge and Southey participated in the ill-fated utopia they were going to build in the wilds of Pennsylvania called “Pantisocracy.”

The second thorny problem is as we look at Wordsworth and MacDonald and subsequently Lewis, and the divine transcendence they find in nature, we become aware that they are not the first to find the divine in nature. Going back to the writing of Psalm 19 at the very least, humanity has seen the creator in creation. However, the Romantic age was to a large degree a reaction to the rationalistic 18th century before, which tended to see nature as a deistic clock. There is in these four decades revisioning of the view of nature that brings a new emphasis to man’s view of nature. Wordsworth made his reputation as the “poet of nature” in this respect, and in this study we will be looking at the way that Wordsworth’s vision grows and changes as it passes from him to MacDonald to Lewis. Combined with the heightened respect for the imagination, the Romantics brought a very different quality and a resurgent energy to the concept of nature, that is commonly recognized and not the subject of this study.

Thus in this study, we are going to follow the manifestations in the works of Lewis of: 1) the beautiful, especially as it shows itself in natural imagery, what Lewis calls “sensibility to natural objects”, and of the transcendental view of nature; 2) Lewis’s utopianism expressed in the focus on Heaven, getting to Heaven and the imagery of Heaven that works its way into his fiction; 3) the childlike state that is found in MacDonald’s fiction and makes its way into Lewis and how Lewis adopts this childlike clarity in his own view of literature. These three features, after Lewis’s central concern with joy, are the most prominent marks of the Romantic side of his thought and fiction.

Lastly, it would be unjust not to acknowledge R.J. Reilly’s excellent 1971 book, *Romantic Religion: A Study of Barfield, Lewis, Williams and Tolkien*, which is full of shrewd insight on the subject. However, as insightful as Reilly has been on Lewis, there are elements originating in the thought of Wordsworth and MacDonald, specifically in Lewis’s imagery, his sense of paradox, his characterization and his stance toward criticism, that Reilly does not explore to the depth we will do so here. We will examine how the Romantic sense permeates Lewis’s thought over a
century after the Romantic period, and how that resurgent Romanticism offers an alternative to the patterns of thought that began with Modernism, and creates a strong opposition to the prevailing trends.
CHAPTER ONE

BEAUTY, WORDSWORTH, AND LEWIS

Something has always bothered me about the English Romantic poets. I fell in love with them as an adolescent reader because they were such an oasis of beauty in the arid deserts of Neoclassicism that preceded them and of Modernism that followed. (I’ve since realized that I was not being quite fair to the eighteenth century, though I remain unreconciled to much of the twentieth—but those are other stories.) The Romantics did not reduce Nature either to the perfect clockwork operating by universal laws of the preceding century, nor to the grinding, indifferent, impersonal machine of the following one. To them she was a living being larger than they were who enabled them to experience humility, wonder, and adoration—responses that made the Romantics, to my mind then as now, more fully human than people in whom those feelings are atrophied or absent.

Like Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” I aspired to have “an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,” believing that only thus could I “see into the life of things” (ll. 47-49, Wordsworth 1988, 164). And like Wordsworth in the same poem, I thought that I had felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (ll. 93-102, Wordsworth 1988, 164)

This was a good place to start, the beginning of a Quest to last a lifetime. Wordsworth apparently thought so too: Renwick observes of
“Tintern Abbey” that the poet “spent the rest of his life expanding, glossing, commenting upon that poem” (158).

The Problems

So what was the problem? There were two. First, such feelings were inspiring, but they could only take one so far. Was this Presence that disturbed us with elevated thoughts a personal God? Something like the Force of Star Wars? A Platonic Idea? A mere personification of Nature (whatever that meant)? A sheer illusion? Nature gave you a sense that there was Something behind her that made you want to think her more than just atoms in motion, but she couldn’t tell you much more than that; and this vague Something could fully satisfy neither Religion nor Philosophy. Nature made you feel like she was helping you to ask the right question, but she couldn’t give you the answer to it. She gave you some very interesting hunches, but no more—and no sure way to confirm the validity even of the hunches.

Second, even the hunches tended to fade if they remained no more than that. Nature and her beauty could get you started on the Quest, but she couldn’t sustain you in it, much less complete it. Wordsworth felt this problem acutely in his “Ode on Intimations of Immortality.” The cataracts and mountains used to haunt him like a passion, but while he still loves them and still appreciates their beauty on some level, he has to that “The things which I have seen I now can see no more” (l. 9, Wordsworth 1988, 460). His own loss of vision would be bad enough, but it seemed to be more than that: “There hath passed away a glory from the earth” (l. 18). And so he cries out in a desperation like Paul’s “O wretched man that I am” (Rom. 7:24), “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (ll. 56-7, Wordsworth 1988, 460).

The first problem could be put on the back burner, but this one was immediately pressing. The young man still haunted by passion felt quite threatened by the promise of losing it, and he had the nagging dread that Wordsworth knew what he was talking about. Worse, the poet’s attempt to cope with his own loss smelled strongly like a blatant orgy of rationalization:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind:
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind. (ll. 177-86, Wordsworth 1988, 461)

The problem with these lines is that the poet’s more “mature” stoic resignation does not necessarily connect with or logically flow from the stimulus that supposedly gave rise to it. To cut one’s losses is the gambit of the Poker Player, not the Nature Mystic. One ought to sympathize with suffering humanity anyway, whether one has ever been passionate about cataracts or not, and whether that former passion is moderating over time or not. And it takes more than some vague, elevating Presence to explain how any thoughts arising from human suffering can be “soothing,” or to be the ground of any “faith that looks through death” to find a justified hope of something good, as opposed to oblivion, on the other side. If this is the “philosophic mind” that the years bring, we would be wiser to remain naïve but impassioned adolescents.

Keats, the greatest verbal craftsman of the Romantics, had his own way of arousing and disappointing the same hope. His Grecian Urn had told him that “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty.’—That is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (ll. 49-50, Keats 1970, 210). Endless attempts have been made to figure out what Keats meant by this assertion. Those scholars are no doubt right who try to limit its scope: Beauty is truth “is the most important thing men need to know concerning the subject at hand (the relation of art to life)” (Patterson 1970, 180-81; cf. Wasserman 1964, 138). That is, some such interpretation most successfully renders a statement that makes sense. Yet Keats’ words, like quicksilver, refuse to be contained by such analysis. His equation is not the “most important” thing we need to know; it is all. Surely it expresses at least the Wordsworthian hope that beauty is not just a mere epiphenomenon, a Yeatsian “spume that plays / upon a ghostly paradigm of things,” an appearance, or a mere subjective response on our part, but somehow connects us to the deepest Reality—to Truth.

Now this would be a wonderful truth to know, if we could know it. But is Nature capable of telling us that it is so? Or are she and the truth she seems to offer us merely the occasion for our own wishful thinking, an exercise in selectivity that simply turns a blind eye to the fact that her beauty somehow manages to coexist with a certain cruelty and indifference, red in tooth and claw? Nature can raise this question, but by herself she cannot answer it.
One way of testing our beliefs is to try to live by them, and Keats makes a noble attempt to live by his. In doing so he illustrates C. S. Lewis’s observation:

We do not merely want to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. (WG 12)

The poetic depiction of this attempt is the “Ode to a Nightingale.” The bird is the personification of a beauty that seems to transcend “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” (l. 23) of human life. Eschewing the intoxication proffered by Bacchus as a way of getting there that can produce only illusion at best, Keats strains to fly to the bird “on the viewless wings of poesy” (l.33). But all his efforts serve only to highlight the contrast between the ethereal immortality of the bird’s song and the clod-like dullness and darkness of his own state. His attempt to be one with beauty through poetic imagination is inspiring and admirable, but it is also an admitted failure:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf. (ll. 71-4)

He ends up, like the knight at arms in his “Belle Dame sans Merci,” on the cold hillside, called out of himself by the song of the bird, but unable to answer the call and not even certain of what has happened: “Do I wake or sleep?” (l. 80, Keats 1970, 207-9).

The English Romantics then show us that the beauty of Nature raises questions it cannot answer and inspires hopes it cannot fulfill. They start us on our Quest but cannot see us to the end of it. We must be grateful for what they give us, but we must also ultimately go beyond them or else fall back into cynicism, naturalism, and despair. So the pressing question becomes whether there is anyone who can supply the missing pieces to the puzzle. C. S. Lewis offers some pieces that are at least worthy of our consideration.

**Lewis and Beauty**

Lewis invites us to read his own quest in Wordsworthian terms by choosing as the title of his autobiography a phrase from one of
Wordsworth’s sonnets: “surprised by joy.” Lewis used joy (along with the German word sehnsucht) as a technical term for the stab of romantic longing generated by beauty. More cosmopolitan in his tastes than Wordsworth, Lewis could receive it not just from Nature (the Castlereagh Hills) but also from literature (Norse mythology), music (Wagner), or art (a toy garden made by his brother on the lid of a biscuit tin and brought into the nursery). Indeed, he records, Warnie’s toy garden “was the first beauty I ever knew,” not important at the moment but “important in memory” (SBJ 7). For a few years later, “There suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, that memory of the earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery” (16). The memory filled him with an acute longing. What did he want? Not the biscuit lid nor his own past, but something not yet nameable that was represented by the remembered beauty. He could only describe the experience as an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction” (18). And this experience of Wordsworthian haunting became nothing less than “the central story of my life” (17).

Like Wordsworth, Lewis was haunted by beauty. Like Keats, he wanted the truth; but, unlike Keats, his hardnosed logical thinking, learned from “the Old Knock,” his tutor William T. Kirkpatrick, was not making any facile identification of truth with beauty possible. By his adolescence he had reached the point where he cared only about Balder and the great myths but believed only in atoms in motion. Thus he found like Wordsworth that the glory was passing away, only he did not have the comfort of Wordsworth’s rationalizations of that passing to console him. And so by early manhood he could say, “As for Joy, I labeled it ‘aesthetic experience’ and talked much about it under that name and said it was very ‘valuable.’ But it came very seldom and when it came it didn’t amount to much” (SBJ 205). Had the story ended there, Lewis would have had little to add to what we had already learned from Wordsworth and Keats.

But of course the story does not end there. Lewis was running into Christian writers like George MacDonald and Christian friends like Neville Coghill, Hugo Dyson, and J. R. R. Tolkien, who were forcing him to reconsider whether atoms in motion were a sufficient explanation for the world as he experienced it. His journey from Atheism to Idealism to Theism to Christianity is fully narrated, literally in Surprised by Joy and allegorically in The Pilgrim’s Regress, and it is outside the scope of this study to repeat it here. Our question is rather, given that Lewis became convinced that God exists and has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, what
effect did this conversion have on his relationship to beauty, or, as he put it, to “joy”?

It had the effect, interestingly, of reversing the disappearance of the glory from the earth. Let Lewis tell the story in his own words:

I cannot indeed complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bitter-sweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, “Look!” The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority who set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. “We would be at Jerusalem.”

(SBJ 238)

Beauty as a Second Thing

What is happening here? On the surface, it seems paradoxical that a demotion of beauty in importance should lead to a renewed and greater appreciation of it. Yet Lewis came to understand this paradox as the exemplification of a pattern basic to all of life. It was in fact “a universal law”: “Every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made. . . . You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first” (GID, “First and Second Things” 280).

This law is certainly widely true. If you try to hit home runs, you just strike out and pop up a lot. If you swing the bat with good form and keep your eye on the ball, you hit line drives, some of which may go over the fence. If you try too hard to make friends you may just push people away. If you care about others more than yourself, you may end up with some very good friends. If you put all your hopes for meaning into subjective experiences of beauty, they may leave you empty. If you pursue the truth and find it, you just might get beauty thrown in. That, in any case, is how Lewis interpreted his own experience.

Now, another way of confirming our beliefs is by their fruitfulness. By fruitfulness, philosophers of science do not mean utilitarianism, but rather
the way in which a belief that leads you to other true beliefs tends to be confirmed by that fact (Polanyi 1964, 147). So it is significant that Lewis’s conversion to Christianity helped him to see the very principle that illumined his experience. Corbin Scott Carnell explains that

Many writers became disillusioned with Romanticism in the twentieth century precisely because they expected too much of it. Lewis retained his faith in the basic validity of Romantic literature because he believed it was compatible with a Christian ontology. The sense of nostalgia cannot be valued for itself, at least not for long. Sehnsucht has genuine meaning only in an ontology which has a place for it. (158-9).

Christian faith, in other words, provides a basis for distinguishing first and second things. If God exists and created the world, then there is an objective hierarchy of goodness that begins with and proceeds from the basic distinction between the Creator and the creation (Williams, “The Mind is its own Place”). This distinction gives us a basis for avoiding what Meilander calls “the sweet poison of the false infinite.” He sees it as one of Lewis’s most central themes that “To be fully human involves a certain stance toward the things of creation: delighting in things without seeking our security in them” (8). If, on the other hand, the world just exists on its own or evolved by chance, then there is no basis for such a distinction, for everything just is, and all hierarchical rankings are arbitrary.

We are back to living out our beliefs as a way of testing them. Can we really live as if there is no valid distinction to be made between first and second things? Lewis’s conclusion was “no.” And that “no” seemed to explain the difference between his experience of beauty and Wordsworth’s.

Lewis wrote a lot about this insight as related specifically to the experience of beauty, not only in his autobiography but also in expository works like *The Four Loves*, where he makes the first and second things even more explicit in Christian terms. “We can’t get through; not that way. We must make a detour—leave the hills and the woods and go back to our studies, to the church, to our Bibles, to our knees. Otherwise the love of nature is beginning to turn into a nature religion” (FL 38). The reason why turning Nature into a religion is a mistake is that “Nature cannot satisfy the desires she arouses nor answer theological questions nor sanctify us . . . But the love of her has been a valuable and, for some people, an indispensable initiation” (39). If God is God and Nature his creature, this is just what we should expect.

In fact, those who allow no more than this to the love of nature seem to be those who retain it. . . . Nature ‘dies’ on those who try to live for a love of
nature. Coleridge ended by being insensible to her; Wordsworth, by lamenting that the glory had passed away. Say your prayers in a garden early, steadfastly ignoring the dew, the birds, and the flowers, and you will come away overwhelmed by its freshness and joy; go there to be overwhelmed and, after a certain age, nothing will happen to you. (39).

We also have this, from The Weight of Glory:

Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter . . . [But] the books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. (WG 4-5)

All right, then. Treating Nature and her beauty as a Second Thing, as a creature of God rather than as an end in itself, allows Lewis to have both God and beauty. At least, that is his experience as he reports it. If we grant this truth, then, what else follows from it?

The Objectivity of Beauty

One further conclusion is the objectivity of beauty. The very existence of first and second things flows from the existence of a good creator God who expressed His character in His creation. If this is the case, then the very consideration that keeps beauty from being a first thing also makes it a real thing. If a personal God values His creation, then the values He has placed in it are really there, waiting for our response and not merely caused by it. Lewis is very much aware of the contradictions that ensue from denying this idea, as he explains in Abolition of Man:

Gaius and Titius comment as follows: “when the man said That is sublime, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall . . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really I have feelings associated in my mind with the word ‘Sublime,’ or shortly, I have sublime feelings.” (AM 14; cf. Williams 2006, 26-39)

But of course that is not what the man is intending to say at all. And if we pretend it is, we will soon be subjectivizing his statements about the moral law and even the laws of logic as well—with the result that we will then not be able to think about anything at all (cf. the argument from
reason in *Miracles*; “The Poison of Subjectivism”; etc). The alternative is to believe “the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it . . . that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt” (AM 25). The doctrine of objective value holds that “certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.” This means that “to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not” (29). It follows then, to return to the topic of beauty, that

There is no reason why our reaction to a beautiful landscape should not be the response, however humanly blurred and partial, to something that is really there. The idea of a wholly mindless and valueless universe has to be abandoned at one point—i.e., as regards logic: after that, there is no telling at how many other points it will be defeated nor how great the reversal of our nineteenth century philosophy must finally be. (CR “De Futilitate” 71)

Lewis’s analysis of the psychology of love and desire in *The Four Loves* is consistent with this perspective. Some pleasures—like a drink of cold water—are dependent on our subjective state or our need. We only really appreciate the water if we are thirsty. But then there are also what Lewis calls “Pleasures of Appreciation,” which are not dependent on our subjective condition but “make us feel that something has not merely gratified our senses in fact but claimed our appreciation by right.” A person passing a garden planted with sweet peas “does not simply enjoy, he feels that this fragrance somehow deserves to be enjoyed. He would blame himself if he went past inattentive and undelighted. It would be blockish, insensitive” (29). He continues,

In the Appreciative pleasures, even at their lowest, and even more as they grow up into the full appreciation of all beauty, we get something we can hardly help calling love and hardly help calling disinterested, towards the object itself. It is the feeling which would make a man unwilling to deface a great picture even if he were the last man left alive and himself about to die; which makes us glad of unspoiled forests that we shall never see; which makes us anxious that the garden or bean-field should continue to exist. We do not merely like the things; we pronounce them, in a momentarily God-like sense, “very good.” (32)
In doing so, Lewis thinks we are recognizing a real truth and seconding, as it were, God’s pronouncement of Nature’s goodness in Genesis.

**The Function of Beauty**

Also flowing from Lewis’s basic insight is a perspective on the function of beauty. In his autobiography he called it a signpost pointing us to God. This also follows inevitably from the doctrine of creation. What God has made reflects the nature of its Maker. It does so imperfectly after the Fall, but the reflection, while dimmed and distorted in certain ways, has not been erased. So truth when we find it in the world is a reflection of God’s mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of his glory, impressed into the very fabric of what He has made (see Kreeft 2008, 23-5). This Christian ontology allows beauty to function as the signpost Lewis discovered it to be, and the response unleashed by it not only prevents Wordsworth’s loss of vision but even heightens the vision and the longing. “Gratitude exclaims, very properly, ‘How good of God to give me this.’ Adoration says, ‘What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!’ One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun” (LM 90).

Beauty pursued for its own sake dulls and disappoints eventually. Beauty received as a pointer to the God of creation leads to worship. “Need-love cries to God from our poverty; Gift-love longs to serve, or even suffer for, God; Appreciative love says, ‘We give thee thanks for thy great glory’” (FL 33). In other words, if beauty does not lead us back to its source in the creator God, it fails of its purpose. We may admire the intricacy of the Message, but we have not read it. Consequently, we eventually lose interest. Beauty read as a sign stimulates us to praise, not just of the beautiful object, but also of its Maker. “Of every created thing I praise, I should say, ‘In some way, in its unique way, like Him who made it.’ Thus up from the garden to the Gardener, from the sword to the Smith. To the life-giving Life and the Beauty that makes beautiful” (GO 50).

**Conclusion**

This chapter does not claim to have proved from the phenomenon of beauty that God exists or that Jesus is His Son. Many more factors go into the decision whether or not to believe those propositions than we were able to address here. What it does try to do is to elucidate one aspect of C. S. Lewis’s testimony, his personal witness to the existence of that God. One way of testing our beliefs is to see if they hold up when we try to live
by them. Another way is by their fruitfulness, i.e., the fact that they lead to further insights that are also confirmed by life. Lewis found that his conversion to Christianity solved for him certain problems of aesthetics that the Romantic poets were unable to solve, and that what Carnell aptly calls the “Christian ontology” was the key to that solution. Lewis’s experience was that at these points his life tended to confirm his Christian faith, and his writings give his testimony to that confirmation.

The Romantics cared about beauty but lacked a sufficient grounding for it to make it fully meaningful. Wordsworth found that it slipped through his fingers, and Keats ultimately failed to make its relationship to truth anything more than wishful thinking. Lewis discovered that his conversion to Christian faith had the effect of making beauty a Second Thing. “Lewis cautioned that beauty was the sign and not the signifier and that to make it a ‘first thing’ was to crush and lose it” (Prothero 1998, 94). Making beauty secondary to God ironically exalts beauty rather than erasing it because it enables us not only to believe in God but also in the ultimate goodness of “a world which God has inseminated with all sorts of realities that carry their hidden winsome reminders of Himself” (Kilby 1964, 41).

Lewis also realized that this move of making beauty a Second Thing ironically not only led to the preservation of his experience of beauty but also to an understanding of it that makes Keats’ affirmation of its relation to truth meaningful. We want Keats to be right; we want beauty to be more than just a subjective appearance. As Kilby says, we do not want “truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a ‘beautiful setting’” (Kilby 1961, 20). We want something more whole than that. But how can we find it?

Lewis’s stress on the objectivity of beauty hints at its relation to truth, and his defense of its objectivity in The Abolition of Man is explicitly related to the objectivity of goodness and truth as well. The unity of beauty, truth, and goodness cannot be found within the horizon of temporal experience, i.e., in Nature, but only in God. Finite Nature is a prism that breaks up the light of the infinite God into the distinguished Transcendentals. Only when we see that can we see Von Balthasar’s wonderful vision in which “Beauty . . . dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another” (18). If truth is the reflection of God’s mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of His glory in the world He has made, then any of them can led us back to the Source. Lewis learned, and can teach us, to follow all three paths.
This then is Lewis’s testimony: Accepting the Christian ontology was unexpectedly fruitful in that it led to a view of beauty that enhanced and enabled a life of appreciation for beauty by supplying the missing pieces in the attempts of the Romantics to lead such a life. Beauty understood thus makes every experience of beauty one more bit of support for that world view. “This probative energy silently shouts out from its radiant form: ‘This is so; this is real, authentic, good, and true’” (Dubay 1999, 23).

We are surrounded by Signposts, if Lewis was right. Was he? Can he help us learn to read them? For what it’s worth, not only my exposition here but also my own experience of such things causes me to answer, “Yes.”
Lewis was far clearer about joy and beauty than Wordsworth; in a sense, he finishes what Wordsworth left unfinished. I have often wondered if Wordsworth, who arrived at orthodoxy late in life, and was a first rate mind, worked his way to the same conclusions Lewis did. However, there is no evidence for this either way. Wordsworth in some sense, as I will show, shared the same role in Victorian society that Lewis did in twentieth century Britain, as a spokesman for faith. But Wordsworth was reluctant to pronounce on the specifics of faith, unlike Lewis. Most accounts credit Wordsworth as being a pantheist early in his career. However, the record doesn’t bear that out. Beginning with the question of what Wordsworth did believe, I wish to explore how that concept of romanticized faith is transmitted through Coleridge, MacDonald, Chesterton and Barfield, and ultimately to Lewis.

**Wordsworth’s Alleged Pantheism**

It is commonly held that Wordsworth in his younger years was a pantheist. I have heard this now in more than one lecture and conference. And yet, when I examine the record, I find something far more complex actually occurred. In order for us to understand Wordsworth’s move to Christianity, we need to be clear about where he was moving from. The passage most often cited to prove Wordsworth’s alleged pantheism is from “Tintern Abbey”:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (ll. 93-102 Wordsworth 1988, 164)

The lines are incredibly vague. They could be made to read pantheism,
or a vague theism, or just Wordsworth’s sense of things as he felt them in
his heart. He is writing this, we know from the full title, “Lines Composed
a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye
during a Tour, July 13, 1798” on July 13, 1798. He is staying with
Dorothy at the house of his printer, Joseph Cottle in Bristol, and taking a
day trip with Dorothy across the Bristol Channel and up the valley of the
Wye. He is in Bristol because he, Dorothy, and Coleridge are overseeing
the final printing of *Lyrical Ballads*, which they hope will produce enough
money to enable them to travel to Germany. By the end of the year,
Wordsworth and Dorothy are in Goslar, Germany, and he is writing the
first version of *The Prelude*. In or before February of 1799, on the back of
a manuscript of the poem “Peter Bell,” he writes:

Such consciousness I deem but accidents,
Relapses from the one interior life
That lives in all things, sacred from the touch
Of that false secondary power by which
In weakness we create distinctions, then
Believe that all our puny boundaries are thing
Which we perceive, and not which we have made—
In which all beings live with God, themselves
Are God, existing in one mighty whole,
As undistinguishable as the cloudless east
At noon is from the cloudless west, when all
The hemisphere is one cerulean blue.
(in Jonathan Wordsworth, et al 1979, ll. 9-21, 496)

This is clearly pantheistic, unlike the lines in “Tintern Abbey.”
However, Wordsworth does not publish these lines. They were found by
scholars in the twentieth century on the back of this manuscript of “Peter
Bell.” Wordsworth suppresses these lines. Later that year he completes
the first version of *The Prelude*, the so-called “Two-Part Prelude of 1799.”
Sometime around May 1st of 1799, Wordsworth and Dorothy are back in
England at the home of the Hutchinsons. Though he does not publish it,
Wordsworth is pretty much finished with the Two-Part *Prelude*.

In that Two-Part *Prelude* is the stolen boat scene that both MacDonald
and Lewis make note of. The scene is a memory of Wordsworth as a
young boy, stealing a boat on the banks of the lake, Ullswater. As he rows out into the dark lake, he sees a darker mountain rise up off the stern. The vision causes him to feel the moral wrongness of his act and he returns the boat and thinks of this (ll. 81-129). The scene, according to both MacDonald and Lewis, is significant because God in this scene is no pantheistic God who is a sum total of all beings. This is a moral God whom Wordsworth senses is a God that cares about right and wrong, including the theft of small boats. Wordsworth has still been influenced by discussions with Coleridge though while at Goslar they’ve been separated. Coleridge at this point has moved from his own early pantheism, perhaps under the influence of Kant. Whatever flirtation Wordsworth had with pantheism before February of 1799, by May of 1799 that flirtation is over. The stolen boat scene makes its way into both the 1805 and the 1850 versions of The Prelude. If there is any doubt of this, looking at another scene from the 1799 Two-Part Prelude should leave us in no doubt. In the “spots of time” portion of the poem, Wordsworth recounts at age thirteen waiting on a wind-blasted hillside near Hawkshead among some sheep, for sight of horses sent by his father to take him and his brothers home. The moment is powerful for him because the horses do not arrive. Instead, he and his brothers get word that their father is dead and they are orphans. He reflects:

That day so lately passed, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope,
With trite reflections of morality,
Yet with deepest passion, I bowed low
To God who thus corrected my desires. (ll. 356-360)

This passage leaves no doubt; this is no pantheistic god, but God, who accepts submission, who is a moral touchstone, who judges desires, and who corrects desires. And this is written by May of 1799. After his brief flirtation with pantheism, what Wordsworth does become and does remain is a panentheist. He finds God visible in nature. He does not confuse God with nature. And his concern for the moral dimension of life is the apparent demise of his short-lived pantheism. For how is a universe in which we all together are god in any way a moral universe? In fact, evidence shows that his transition to Christianity happened earlier than is commonly believed.
Wordsworth's Christianity: “Romantic Anglicanism”

There is an ongoing debate on Wordsworth’s early religious convictions, mainly due to the fact that he rarely spoke of them. Still, considering how close in other respects to Wordsworth Lewis is, the subject does bear some consideration here. The debate has included Wordsworth scholars like M.H. Abrams and Jonathan Wordsworth, who have been the most notable proponents for the widely accepted view, that Wordsworth in his younger years was a humanist and verged on the edge of, if not dived deeply into pantheism. Edith Batho, in The Later Wordsworth, argued for the view that Wordsworth was a Christian at least in some sense earlier. The most conclusive analysis is the 2001 book by William Ulmer of the University of Alabama, The Christian Wordsworth: 1798-1805. Ulmer argues persuasively for a Christian but heterodox Wordsworth as early as 1798. Ulmer marshals considerable textual and biographical evidence that Wordsworth in his early years has a “persistent belief in God” and a “submerged Anglicanism.” He writes:

. . . . Wordsworth's religious development from 1798-1805 was itself essentially continuous, an unbroken process of amplification in which latent Christian “sympathies” became overt Christian “commitments.” Wordsworth began either as a theist ready to admire Christianity from afar or, more probably, as an indifferent Christian with Anglican loyalties he found dormant but intact when prodded by Coleridge's inquiries. Faith having its different moods, the distinction between these positions need not have been absolute. (25)

Ulmer is careful to point out that Wordsworth's Christianity was of a revisionist nature and that he was aware of the Higher Criticism going on in Europe at the time. Thus Wordsworth is sometimes critical of the Evangelical theology of his time, uncomfortable with the atonement and much of the Calvinistic emphasis on humanity's sinfulness. Moreover, the influence of Coleridge is tremendous.

Even if [Wordsworth] quickly learned to dodge issues of dogma in conversations with his new friend, Coleridge by his mere presence offered a standing challenge to Wordsworth to explore and define his own religious convictions. The challenge proved all the less avoidable because poetic interests and motifs borrowed from Coleridge—the idea of the One Life above all—trailed highly specific theological implications in their wake. Wordsworth's response to that challenge thrust him increasingly toward the conventional and conservative while leaving revisionism in its place. He ended, in 1804-1805, with a Romantic Anglicanism which