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## REASON, TRUTH, FAITH, AND IMAGINATION: LITERATURE AS APOLOGETICS

by James W. Sire

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The world of Christian books is filled with rational apologetics. Based on commonly held premises and commonly understood data, Christians construct arguments designed to convince nonbelievers to accept the Christian faith and put their trust in Christ as Savior. The shelves of churches ache with the weight of book after book of reason-based arguments. I've written some of them myself.

But literary works such as poems, stories, and novels are not given much attention as works of apologetics. Of course there are C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, especially *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and there's J. R. R. Tolkien's massive Lord of the Rings trilogy, and, what seems ancient to us, G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown stories and convoluted novels. But as far as apologetics is concerned and to our fault, little attention is given to literature itself, when it is defined as those works of creative imagination that rise to the level of art.

Why so? Why is art in general and literature in particular largely ignored? Well, primarily, I think it is because literature doesn't argue. Apologetics does. It's a defense by reason. I agree. But literature contributes something just as important. T. S. Eliot, the brilliant American-born English poet, dramatist, and general intellectual, puts it best. He says that poets do not persuade people to believe; they teach them what it feels like to believe. And, I would add, when people begin to feel the Christian notion of reality—God, the creation, and humankind—they yield to the wooing of the Holy Spirit, and genuine Christian faith ensues.

I am not dismissing reason. I am pointing to an immediate perception of truth. Sometimes we lay aside argument; we know how it goes. We understand what we are called to believe. But we only believe when we see that what we've learned about the Christian faith is true.

## PERCEPTION OF TRUTH

What, for example, do we see in C. S. Lewis's sudden perception of the truth of the divinity of Christ? As he writes, "I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. Yet I had not exactly spent the journey in thought. Nor in great emotion. 'Emotional' is perhaps the last word we can apply to some of the most important events. It was more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake."<sup>1</sup> Lewis has suddenly, unwittingly, put together all the information, argument, and stories by Tolkien, Chesterton, MacDonald, and others. He has awakened. He has "seen."

This often happens when we read literature. It is as though we sit in a theater and view the action on stage through the proscenium arch. Our first experience is aesthetic, an experience of the art. Then we begin to experience the inner world and life of the art. This turns to an experience of the worldview of that art as we feel what it is like to live there.

So let's slightly modify Eliot's thesis: *Poetry does not persuade people to believe any particular ideology or worldview; rather, it evokes an experience; it makes us feel what it is like to believe and to live worldviews it assumes.*

## REALITY

But lest we conclude that the worldview we suddenly perceive is true, we must step back. We may experience that worldview and suddenly recognize that something is awry with that vision. In other words, at almost one and the same time, a reader is immediately confronted by the truth or the falsity of that worldview. A reader "sees," "perceives," or "feels" the author's vision of reality, and that of his characters. Literature jolts readers, challenging or confirming their own understanding of reality.

Let me explain: an artful Christian poem awakens readers to the multidimensional reality of Christ and the world He's created. An artful atheist poem evokes a sense of atheism in its various manifestations; readers grasp the attraction of its vision of autonomous humanity but at the same time recognize its inevitable

nihilism. I will illustrate with two short poems, the first presenting our frequent sense of an extrasensory dimension of reality.

As a child, this anonymous poem sent me into...well, you feel what you feel. I'll wait to tell you my reaction. Read this a couple of times before you read more.

*Yesterday upon the stair*

*I met a man who wasn't there.*

*I met him there again today.*

*God, I wish he'd go away.*

The poem scared me. It triggered my own fears of the dark. I felt an Unseen; I seemed to have an encounter with evil. The poem still chills my bones. Why? Because there are things in the world—or are there?—that can't be seen. Are they angels? Demons? Saints? Spirits with no good in mind for me? Primitive experiences like these propel us to seek the truth. What is real? What is the really real? Is the world inside or outside of myself? What is really true?

Even if the answers do not quickly come, the poem has sensitized our minds and hearts. We are then ready to read, to hear, and to experience visions that expose reality more deeply. This following simple poem by Stephen Crane does exactly that. But we will probably not be satisfied by the results.

*I saw a man pursuing the horizon;*

*Round and round they sped.*

*I was disturbed at this;*

*I accosted the man.*

*"It is futile," I said,*

*"You can never —"*

*"You lie," he cried,*

*And ran on.*

Here is autonomous man setting out on a quest—a quest that will end successfully only if he is able to encompass the whole of reality, capture it in such a way that it's his and his alone. But the man and the horizon whirl endlessly, and a word from the wise is ignored. It's a simple but terrifying vision; the reader feels this and is not satisfied. Something is wrong—very wrong—about this quest. So what should the man be doing? The poem gives no hint. We only see that in this quest lies foolishness.

## THE POWER OF POETRY

Poetry from the point of view of the autonomy of human reason can, and often does, trigger a recognition that the notion that we human beings are on our own leads to despair. We then are ready for—and hope to find—a vision that brings hope. Darkness stretches before us. Give us some light, some reason to hope. What would such a poem be? Here's one by Gerard Manley Hopkins, a profoundly Christian writer from the end of the nineteenth century.

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.<sup>2</sup>*

“God’s Grandeur” is, first of all, a poem written completely within the Christian worldview. Many of the major concepts of that worldview are presented in bold relief—God as Creator of a world that reveals His glory, the rebellion of human beings and their pollution of His glorious creation, and the restoration of the world through the work of the Holy Spirit. The poem, in fact, is a Christian takeoff on the central theme of Psalm 19: to wit, that the skies and the material world bristle with signals of transcendence. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the ancient poet. And Hopkins echoes, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.”

Then the poem’s brilliant, flashing images point sacramentally to a realm beyond the material world. Material reality—the universe as a whole (lines 1–3a) and human beings in particular (lines 3b–9)—signals the existence of the biblical God. Even in its fallen and broken condition, the world is not left to itself but is being renewed by the Holy Spirit (lines 9–14).

The poet sets fallen human beings firmly in their place as rebels against God and, long before the green movement, as polluters of the Earth. Nonetheless, the Earth is not lost. It will be reborn not by human effort but by the Holy Spirit, who sustains it, mothers it, and fosters its return to its rightful place in the kingdom of God.

A truly artful poem embodies Christian theology at a profound level and testifies to the truth of the Christian faith. This is the way it is, the poem literally says. And the artifice of the poem—its rhymes and images and sprung rhythm—reinforces the message. If we read this poem well, we will gain an aesthetic experience of what it would be like to believe that the world is like this. If we are Christians and good readers, our aesthetic experience will be difficult to distinguish from our spiritual experience. We will be tempted to exclaim, “Hallelujah!”—a temptation not to be resisted. This poem, in other words, is an icon. We look through it into the mystery of God Himself. The grandeur of God electrifies not only the world but also the poem.

### **THE INEVITABLE NIHILISM OF NATURALISM**

It’s quite unfair to pit Hopkins’s rich and elegant poem against Crane’s minimalist poem, but the two poems illustrate well the difference in the lived-out feeling of these worldviews. Crane’s poem presents a small part of a naturalist worldview that acknowledges the nihilism of the naturalist’s worldview. Some scientists, philosophers, and intellectuals pursue the ultimate horizon of the cosmos; that is, they try to find the single proposition or mathematical expression that explains the essence of everything that exists. And they do this by accepting the autonomy of human reason. They admit

no revelation, such as “In the beginning God created....” They are limited to what the human mind and senses can discover. It’s highly likely that this can’t be done.

Christians should have no difficulty saying that it certainly can’t be done. Of course, Christians assume that only God can fully know what He knows and know that He knows it. This assumption of omniscience can’t be proven either. In fact, all arguments rest on assumptions (beginnings) that are accepted without final proof of their truth. Christians begin with God Himself as the foundation of their being and knowing.

The presuppositions yield coherent explanations of what we perceive with our senses and understand with our minds. Naturalism does not give an adequate explanation of the human mind’s ability to perceive the truth of reality. A simple way to put this conundrum is to ask why anyone should trust their own or another’s theory of reality when the very brain that is used to do the calculations has originated from an unintended evolution fueled by natural (mindless) selection and the survival of the fittest. In other words, how can reason come from nonreason, intending creatures from unintended matter? It’s like a banker auditing his own accounts. Granted, many scientists are convinced that one day they will be able to answer these questions. Other naturalists, including the poet Stephen Crane, think this quest is like a man pursuing the horizon.

In *The Cyberiad*, Stanislaw Lem writes the clever story of Mymosh the Selfbegotten. Here a purely material robot, born of coincidence and entropy, tries to find out who he is. He thinks he has done this, but he fails and doesn’t know it.

Mymosh, you see, has come into being inside a material cosmos (think of it as a box, the totality of all that exists). At first he could see that there was something other than himself inside the box. But an accident occurs and he loses his senses. He continues to have a mind, but he no longer is aware of his material constitution. Without any sense data at all, he thinks his mind (his consciousness) is all that exists. He doesn’t know that his self-conscious consciousness is supported by electrochemical circuitry. So when he thinks about who he is, he concludes that nothing other than himself exists.

Eventually, coincidence and entropy take their toll. His material brain collides with a piece of broken pottery, and the circuits are broken. In his case, the thoughts he thinks are all there is to his reality. So when the electrochemical machinery of his brain no longer functions, he ceases to exist. He never came to understand who he really was: a robot.

Here is the point: Mymosh could know who or what he really was only if something or someone outside the box, that is, the cosmos, would reveal this to him.

But everything that is inside the box. Lem as storyteller knows who Mymosh is; and we readers know who he is because Lem tells us.

Here, then, is a work of literature written by a naturalist that essentially undercuts naturalism as a true understanding of reality. Does Lem realize that his own story deconstructs his understanding of that reality? It seems that he must. How could he not know that the story is every bit as nihilistic as that of Stephen Crane? He describes a wholly naturalistic world that is no more capable of being understood than is the horizon pursued in Crane's poem. Still, in "The World as Cataclysm," a straightforward prose explanation, Lem affirms a strictly material cosmos—no God at all, inside or outside.

In any case, Lem's story works as apologetics in two ways. First, it presents a view of reality (naturalism) that is inherently incoherent, therefore false logically. And second, it evokes a feeling of sympathy for Mymosh: how could Mymosh be so wrong? His situation is pathetic or, maybe, tragic. So would be the situation my friends and I would face if each of us had concluded that we were the only beings in the universe. Reading this story, how could we not immediately see that optimistic naturalism must be false? This story embodies nihilism.

### **Hope: The Christian Alternative**

But none of us is really a nihilist. Even the self-confessed nihilist puts one foot in front of the other. So the story acts as an apologetic for something that gives us hope. Christianity then becomes a live option. Its story is amazingly hopeful; it makes sense and evokes—sometimes immediately—an apprehension of its truth. It's a story of how human beings came to be and how they know who they are. It is a true story that God Himself gives us through His prophets' revelation.

Some Christians, at least those who were raised in Christian homes, stand halfway inside and outside the Christian worldview. Emily Dickinson is a good example. Some of her poems express a rich experiential grasp of Christ and His sacrifice for us. Some do not. Take this one—long my favorite.

*After great pain a formal feeling comes—  
The Nerves sit ceremonious like Tombs—  
The stiff Heart questions was it He that bore,  
And Yesterday or Centuries before?*

*The Feet, mechanical, go round—  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—  
A Wooden way  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—*

*This is the Hour of Lead—  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—  
First—Chill—Then Stupor—then the letting go—<sup>3</sup>*

A close friend, a loved one, or a lover has died, and the poet first has a stiff, formal, funereal response. Her nerves are silent, her stiff heart questions: did Jesus long ago bear the sins of men and women? Did He do so yesterday? Note that she is struck with a central issue. Who are all of us—ones who live only for the now of our lives. Surely, oh surely, there is more.

Then follows an emotional dearth, an hour of lead and a slow, very slow, release from chill to stupor to a loss of all thought and feeling.

## **WONDER AND TERROR**

All literature worth the label displays the wonder and terror of the world as seen by the writer. And writers come from a wide spectrum of modern and ancient cultures and worldviews. Inherent in the nature and power of that literature are the stimulants to seeing reality and feeling a variety of worldviews. Excellent Christian literature is fueled by the power of its art to help us see and feel the reality of Christ and His world. Excellent non-Christian literature is fueled by the power of its art to do the same with other worldviews. Of course, art often displays and embodies false understandings of reality. But literary art itself is constructed with God-created linguistic forms, and they often tip off the heart to the falsity of false understandings.

I would love to expose much further the artistry and power of Christian literature to bring the Christian worldview to life. I think here not just of novels and



stories by Lewis and Chesterton, but the works of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Donne, Wendell Berry, Dorothy Sayers, Flannery O'Connor, Jan Karon, Denise Levertov, Ron Hansen, Susan Howatch, and Walker Percy.

My compass in this article is too limited to be so expansive. But the essence of my case for the apologetic value of literature is expressed in this syllogism:

There is literature.

Therefore there must be a God.

You either see this or you don't.

In Lem's *Mymosh*, there is no significance in death; there is just extinction. In Crane, there is no recognition of distinct time and space; there is only endless witless striving. Emily Dickinson exposes the depths of human longing for eternal life. Hopkins invokes and evokes the Holy Spirit as God broods like a dove over the dark world—a world we live in and experience every ordinary day of our lives—and we sense and grasp the wonder of a God who brings bright light and life into His created, fallen, redeemed, and transformed reality.

C. S. Lewis once said, literature "enlarges our being." It "admits us to experiences other than our own"; we still remain ourselves while we see with "a myriad of eyes" not our own. In literature, we experience what we see, and that experience contributes greatly to our comprehension of the world and our growing sense that the Christian faith makes the most sense of the world and everyone in it.

Meanwhile, thank you, Professor Lewis! I want to see with a myriad of eyes other than my own. And thanks, Mr. Eliot! I see now that it is the feeling of belief that lends credence to the truth of the Christian view of the world. And thank you, Lord! You, indeed, are the beginning and end of reality! In you we live and move and have our being!

**James W. Sire** is the author of *The Universe Next Door* and, most recently, *Echoes of a Voice* (Cascade, 2014). This article essay is adapted from his book *Apologetics beyond Reason* (InterVarsity Press, 2014).

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## NOTES

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), 223.
- 2 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. MacKenzie, 4th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.
- 3 *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 162 (poem 341).