

C. S. Lewis's (Theistic) Conversion Era Poetry

An Extremely Initially Preliminary Study

by

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As a Humanities professor, I always taught my students that there is a difference between giving up on your dreams and surrendering your dreams to God. In the latter, we keep our dreams but let God guide them, fulfill them, redirect them or even deny them as He wills. In surrendering our dreams to God, we remove them from the pedestals on which we place them—pedestals which can easily turn our dreams into idols if we don't surrender them to God. C. S. Lewis's life as a poet exemplifies the dangers of dreams and the joy one finds in surrendering them to God. Having failed as a poet in the "earthly" sense of the word, Lewis found, once he came to belief in God, that poetry, for which he gained a renewed passion, was one of the best responses he could offer to the God to whom he'd surrendered.

Lewis wrote a letter to Arthur Greeves on 18 August 1930 (a couple of months after Lewis's conversion to Theism according to Alister McGrath and Andrew Lazo) in which he wanted to offer some comfort to his friend who had just received a rejection notice on a book. According to Walter Hooper,

Lewis wrote...to say that they were both in the same boat because God was being merciful in not allowing them a literary success later to be revealed a "dust and ashes". It is tempting, he said, to suppose that it would be "ample bliss" if your book was published even if it was read only by your friends. "This is an *absolute delusion*...I am *still* as disappointed an author as you. From age sixteen onwards I had one single ambition, from which I never wavered, in the persecution of which I spent every ounce I could, on wh. I really & deliberately staked my whole

contentment: and I recognized myself as having unmistakably failed in it...Depend upon it, unless God has abandoned us, he will find means to cauterize that side somehow or other” (Hooper, Intro to *Collected Poems* xiv-xv).

The ambition on which Lewis staked his life was not just to be an author but a poet. He considered himself a failure because his books had been, in terms of sales and critical reception, duds.

Hooper continues:

In his next letter, of 28 August 1930, Lewis admitted that now that he no longer regarded himself “officially as an author” ideas had begun to “bubble and simmer”. “It is a very remarkable thing,” he said, “that in the few religious lyrics which I have written during the last year, in which I had no idea of publication & at first very little idea even of showing them to friends, I have found myself impelled to take infinitely more pains, less ready to be contented with the fairly good and more determined to reach the best attainable, than ever I was in the days when I never wrote without the ardent hope of successful publication” (xv).

Once being a poet no longer mattered, writing poetry became a passion for Lewis again.

What’s more, it may be that Lewis did more than just write a “few religious lyrics” upon becoming a Theist. Using a variety of dating methods including a system I’ve developed for dating Lewis’s handwriting (the LHC or Lewis Handwriting Chart), it may be possible to argue that Lewis’s strongest response to his becoming a Theist, was a pouring out of poetry in a matter of only a few weeks. The man who thought he’d failed as a poet, lifted up his worship to God in the form of some of the best poetry he ever wrote. More intriguing is the possibility that dating

Lewis's conversion era poems may give us a reason take a second look at the nature (if not the date) of Lewis's Theistic conversion.

Keys to Dating the Poems

The first key to dating the poems is Lewis's handwriting. My LHC maps out changes in Lewis's handwriting throughout his lifetime. With the chart it's possible to look at a handwritten Lewis manuscript and set dates for when it was written, often to within a three year period, sometimes more, sometimes less. In the case of Lewis's conversion era poetry, there are two markers to look for.

The first is Lewis's letter "g." Between October 1926 and October 1931, Lewis wrote his "g's" in a very peculiar fashion. I have dubbed this five year period, "Lewis's Great War G," and I describe the letter as either an "s-curve" or an "open ended figure eight." Taylor University's Brown collection provides nice examples of this period in the *Summa* notebook written between Lewis and Barfield. **[SHOW EXAMPLE FROM SUMMA PAGE 1 (the contents page)]**

The second marker to look for is one I actually discovered in the *Summa* itself, and in this case it allows us to break this five year period down to sub-categories of as little as a year and a half. Notice the cursive letter "f" on the first page of the document. This longest portion of the *Summa* was finished in November of 1928 (Lewis dated it so on page 68). After that, Owen Barfield wrote a response essay (pages 71 to 109). Lewis then replied to this reply. Take a look at the transformation in Lewis's letter "f" in 1929. **[SHOW EXAMPLE FROM SUMMA PAGE 110]** Dates in Lewis's letters tell us that this non-cursive "hockey-stick" or "candy-cane" "f" began in February or March of 1929. We also know that it lasted until the last week of July 1930 (with some exceptions), and this is a key date. In the last week of July of 1930, Lewis

begins using both cursive and non-cursive “f’s” in his writing for the remainder of the “Great War G” period.

Two examples from Lewis’s poetry show us the distinction:

[SHOW “THESE FAINT WAVERING FAR TRAVELL’D GLEAMS”]

Notice in this poem the use of the particular “g” of the period. Now notice the exclusive use of the non-cursive “f.”

[SHOW “WHEN THE GRAPE OF THE NIGHT IS PRESSED”]

Now look at this second poem in which the “g” still belongs to the period but now both non-cursive and cursive “f’s” are being used.

This makes it possible to divide the most important period in Lewis’s thought life—the one where he went from Atheism to Idealism to Theism to Christianity into very short spans of time, thusly:

October 1926 – January 1929 (“Great War Era ‘g’”)

February 1920 – July 1930 (“g” plus non-cursive “f”)

July 1930 – October 1931 (“g” plus both “f’s”)

We have never before truly been able to look at Lewis’s poetry and see how it represented transitional moments in his thinking at this time. Now we can.

In addition to these dates, two more dates are significant. The first is the date of Lewis’s conversion to Theism. This date has been recently re-evaluated with much notoriety by Alister McGrath and Andrew Lazo. Lewis had written that his conversion to Theism (not yet Christianity), occurred in 1929. McGrath questioned this date upon reading Lewis’s letters in

that and subsequent years. Lazo rather “sealed the deal” in his work on the *Early Prose Joy* manuscript. Lazo writes,

In a pair of letters to Arthur Greeves from July 1930, Lewis recounts a late-June visit to Barfield, during which they enjoyed some “lovely bathes.” During the week of his visit, Lewis recounts, “I learned to dive, wh[ich] is a great change in my life & has important (religious) connections.

In the “Early Prose Joy” manuscript, Lewis later records that he learned how to dive “in the same year and the same month” that he gave in to God and converted to Theism. And because we know that Lewis likely learned how to dive during the last week of June, 1930, we can therefore conclude with some certainty that the Theistic conversion took place that month. But we can get closer.

On 10 June 1930, Lewis wrote a letter to Barfield and, as was his habit, he included the draft of a poem, requesting feedback. This poem, later published as “Prayer,” explores how deeply the human soul needs God, all the more in the act of praying. Therefore, by June 10th, Lewis had in all likelihood both prayed and written a poem about it.

If Lewis gave in to God in the same year and month that he learned to dive, June 1930, and he began to pray no later than June 10th, we can conclude with confidence that Lewis’s Theistic conversion took place one evening between June 1st and June 10th, 1930 (in Lazo, “C. S. Lewis Got It Wrong: A Reliable Date for Theistic Conversion”).

Lazo’s argument for the month of June 1930 is very strong. We’ll come back to it.

The last significant date to keep in mind is the composition of a little collection of poems Lewis put together for Owen Barfield called “Half Hours with Hamilton.” It is possible that all the poems in this collection were written first and then gathered later, but still the date of the collection lets us know the *latest* possible date for the poems’ composition. The handwriting allows us to date the document to between August 1930 and October 1931. It contains the “Great War ‘g’” and both the cursive and non-cursive “f.” However, according to Walter Hooper, this document was sent to Owen Barfield in the summer of 1930 (*Collected Poems* xv). In that case, the “Hamilton” poems were recorded in August or September of 1930.

One more note: several poems appear in Lewis’s semi-autobiographical *Pilgrim’s Regress*. Those poems which seem closely associated with the protagonist’s conversion may very well have been written at the time of Lewis’s conversion (though *Regress* takes up Lewis’s Christian conversion as well—a factor which needs to be accounted for).

Initial Conclusions

With these dates in place, we can now draw some initial conclusions. I have not seen every Lewis poem in manuscript form, so there may be some missing from the following list. But I can confidently argue that the following poems were written between February 1929 and September 1930 using either handwriting analysis alone or that plus other means (or other means alone). The poems are as follows:

Title	LHC Date of Feb. '29-July '30	In "Hamilton" by September '30 or other source	In <i>Regress</i>
"He Whom I Bow To" ("Footnote to All Prayers")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	Yes – position in <i>Regress</i> may suggest written before Lewis was a Theist but content suggests the opposite
"You Rest Upon Me All My Days" ("Caught")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	Yes – position strongly suggests by Lewis as Theist
"My Heart is Empty" ("The Naked Seed")	Yes but a single cursive "f" may mean later		Yes – third poem in conversion chapter
"Nearly They Stood Who Fall" ("Nearly They Stood")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	Yes – this and poems below appear later in <i>Regress</i> but probably pre-date Christian conversion
"Because of Endless Pride" ("Posturing")	Yes	There is an apparent gloss to this poem in a letter from January '30, 1930! <i>CLI</i> 877-8 Who is "Thou?"	Yes
"Once the Worm Laid Egg Broke in the Wood" ("The Dragon Speaks")	No—Aug '30'-Oct '31	Yes (Hamilton) which dates the poem August or September '30	Yes
"I Have Come Back with Victory Got" ("Dragon Slayer")	No	Yes (Hamilton)	Yes
"These Faint Waivering Far-travell'd Gleams" ("Sweet Desire")	Yes		

Title	LHC Date of Feb. '29-July '30	In "Hamilton" by September '30 or other source	In <i>Regress</i>
"Essence" ("Essence 1940")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	
"The Shortest Way Home" ("Man is a Lumpe...")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	
"Of This Great Suit Who Dares Foresee the End"	Yes		
"Till Your Alchemic Beams Turn All to Gold" ("Noon's Intensity")	Yes		
"Break Sun My Crusted Earth" ("A Pageant Played in Vain")	Yes		
"When Lilith Means to Draw Me" ("Lilith")	Yes	Appears in a letter of 29 April 1930 A pre-conversion poem about moral struggle??? And Yes (Hamilton)	Yes
"Passing To-day by a Cottage I Shed Tears" ("Scazons")	Yes	Yes (Hamilton)	
"I Am Not One that Easily Flits Past in Thought" ("When the Curtain's Down")	No	Yes (Hamilton)	
"They Tell Me, Lord that When I Seem" ("Prayer")	No	Yes (Hamilton) and in a letter of June 10 th 1930 to Barfield—probably written very close to that time	

Title	LHC Date of Feb. '29-July '30	In "Hamilton" by September '30 or other source	In <i>Regress</i>
"I Woke from a Fool's Dream, to Find All Spent" ("Epigrams and Epitaphs 3")	No	Yes (Hamilton)	
"Save Yourself. Run and Leave Me. I Must Go Back" ("Epigrams and Epitaphs 6)	No	Yes (Hamilton)	
"Quick! The Black, Sulphurous Never Quenched" ("Quick!" and "Forbidden Pleasure")	No	Yes (Hamilton)	Yes

Here, then, are twenty poems (probably an incomplete list) written around the time of Lewis's Theistic Conversion. What we do with them next becomes somewhat more a matter of interpretation.

Possible Conclusions

One possible conclusion is what first drew me to writing this paper. It is the possibility that Lewis's response to becoming a Theist was a sudden burst of poetic creativity. If the content of these poems clearly suggests (as Lazo argues of one of them—and I agree) a Lewis who had come to believe in God, then the dates of these poems can be narrowed to June or July of 1930. The conversion was in June of '30. Most of the poems in the list were written by the third week of July. Whichever of these poems is clearly Theistic in content (and perhaps others as well), was very possibly written in that brief six week period—a powerful outpouring of poetry to God by a man who had come to believe he was a failure as a poet. But determining which of the poems fit this narrow slot of weeks must include some interpretation on our part. Which of the poems,

then, seem most likely written by Lewis the Theist? Which aren't? And which are possibilities but interpretation doesn't make them definite?

While I haven't time to argue my interpretations, I suggest the following poems were written by a Theistic C. S. Lewis: "He Whom I Bow To," "You Rest Upon Me All My Days," "My Heart is Empty," "Nearly They Stood Who Fall," "These Faint Waivering Far-travell'd Gleams," "Of This Great Suit Who Dares Foresee the End," "Passing To-day by a Cottage I Shed Tears," "I Am Not One that Easily Flits Past in Thought," "They Tell Me Lord that When I Seem," "Quick! The Black, Sulphurous Never Quenched," and possibly "Because of Endless Pride" (see below). Eleven of the poems, perhaps others in the list, and perhaps others I have not included, all may have been written in a six week period just after Lewis's Theistic conversion. His response to God was poetry.

There are, however, some reasons which give me pause regarding this conclusion and which move us to consider two others. A second possible conclusion may have us looking again at the date of Lewis's Theistic conversion. Would Lewis really have crammed all those poems into a single summer? Is it possible that Lewis was right and McGrath and Lazo wrong regarding the year of Lewis's conversion? I don't think so, but there are some points to consider.

First of all there is the number of poems: would Lewis have written *that* many poems in such a brief period of time? Would it not be more likely that he wrote them over several months? Then there is the content of two of the poems which we were probably not written after Lewis's Theistic conversion. "When Lilith Means to Draw Me Near" actually appears in a letter of April 30th 1930. It doesn't mention God (or any pronoun pointing to him), but it is about a moral struggle—would Lewis be having moral struggles which he felt the need to write poems about?

If so, it probably happened even earlier that year as well. “Because of Endless Pride” is at least *glossed* in a letter of January 30th 1930. Here are the first two stanzas of the poem:

Because of endless pride
 Reborn with endless error,
 Each hour I look aside
 Upon my secret mirror
 Trying all postures there
 To make my image fair.

Thou givest grapes, and I,
 Though starving, turn to see
 How dark the cool globes lie
 In the white hand of me,
 And linger gazing thither
 Till the live clusters wither. (*CPCE* 229)

An immediate intriguing question is, who is the “Thou” in the second stanza? It certainly seems a reference to God. Was Lewis a Theist that early? Did McGrath and Lazo get it wrong? We’ll come back to this question. Now listen to the pertinent passage in Lewis’s letter to Arthur Greeves of January 30th, 1930, a full four months before the McGrath/Lazo date for Lewis’s Theistic conversion:

What worries me much more is *Pride*—my besetting sin....During my afternoon ‘meditations’,—which I at least *attempt* quite regularly now—I have

found out ludicrous and terrible things about my own character...I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long.

In the poem we have, “Each hour I look aside / Upon my secret mirror/ Trying all postures there...” and in the letter we have “I catch myself posturing before the mirror, so to speak, all day long.” It’s a pretty strong echo if not a guarantee that Lewis wrote this poem before the June date of his Theistic conversion.

So what do we have, then? Two poems (or at least one poem and a letter) written about moral struggles before Lewis’s Theistic conversion? If Lazo narrows the date of Lewis’s conversion to June 1-10 based on the content of a poem, can we not question the date based on the content of other poems? Lazo’s argument for a June conversion is still strong, but perhaps the poem on prayer in the letter of June 10th doesn’t *definitively* reduce the conversion day to a ten day period. That, I think, is something serious to consider. But if the June conversion argument is a strong one, as I’ve just said, do we have evidence to consider the McGrath/Lazo date for Lewis’s conversion to be wrong. Is 1929, the date Lewis gave, still a possibility?

Let me first offer the evidence for saying no:

1. There is the Lazo argument which attaches the month of Lewis’s conversion to the month he learned how to dive. If there’s a “smoking gun” argument for June 1930, it’s this.
2. There is a Lewis letter of 3rd February 1930 to Owen Barfield in which Lewis says, “Terrible things are happening to me. The ‘Spirit’ or ‘Real I’ is showing an alarming tendency to become much more personal and is taking the offensive, and behaving just like God. You’d better come on Monday at the latest or I may have entered a

monastery.” (CL I 882-3) It looks here as if, at this point in his life, Lewis believed in some sort of Spirit (this is indicated in his “Great War” *Summa*), but not in a personal God (except that this Spirit was now acting quite personally). This idea is actually echoed earlier in the letter of January 30th to which we will return.

3. In *Pilgrim's Regress*, the protagonist, John, travels with a companion named Virtue. There Lewis describes the struggles and conversion of Virtue as very much a part of the struggles and conversion of John (who represents Lewis himself). [NEED REFS] This makes it possible for us to easily conclude that Lewis was *indeed* struggling with the life of virtue even before he admitted that God was God and the two problems which show this struggle do not at all prove Lewis was a Theist earlier than June of 1930.

So is there any evidence for saying yes to a 1929 date for Lewis's conversion? The January 30th letter to Arthur Greeves provides some evidence for but even additional evidence against this option. Here we need to consider a lengthier passage:

Now I come to a more serious problem. What I feel like saying, if I am to give you my news, is ‘Things are going very, very well with me (spiritually).’ On the other hand, one knows from bitter experience that he who standeth should take heed lest he fall, and that anything remotely like pride is certain to bring an awful crash. The old doctrine is quite true you know—that one must attribute everything to the grace of God, and nothing to oneself. Yet as long as one *is* a conceited ass, there is no good pretending not to be. My self satisfaction cannot be hidden from God, whether I express it to you or not: rather the little bit of self-satisfaction

which I (probably wrongly) believe myself to be fighting against is probably merely a drop in the bottomless ocean of vanity and self-approval which the Great Eye (or Great I) sees in me. (*CL I 877*)

Points to note: references to God and his grace—a strong argument in favor of a Lewis who believed in God. But also recall that Lewis didn't refer to his prayers in this letter as prayers but as "meditations," and further notice the reference to God as the "Great I." Compare this description to the February 3rd letter to Barfield where Lewis refers to "Spirit" as the "Real I" and that Spirit, though behaving like God, was not yet seen by Lewis as God.

Was Lewis's thinking muddled? Was he going back and forth between two belief systems? Perhaps Lewis merely wrote to Greeves using less philosophical language while he shared a more philosophical precision in his discourse with Owen Barfield. At any rate, I still don't find enough evidence to suggest the McGrath/Lazo date is wrong. But this is, as I said, a very preliminary study, and what I need to do next is a solid re-read of the pertinent parts of *Surprised by Joy* and a thorough reading of all of Lewis's letters in 1929 and 1930.

Until then, I'd still like to offer one more possible conclusion regarding Lewis's Theistic conversion, which is that Lewis's conversion should be looked at as more of a gradual process along a continuity which reached a definite conclusion in June of 1930. The emphasis in McGrath's and Lazo's discovery on the conversion date, may lead us to a tendency of thought which I don't think those authors intended. The focus on Lewis getting the date wrong and evidence proving a different date, draws perhaps too much attention to that single date in the minds of Lewis scholars. If I make it about a single date as I read the evidence, I am doing a disservice to Lewis's own description of the process in his autobiography, in his letters, and

(now we can add) in his poetry. There isn't time (again) in this presentation to explore this idea of a *conversion process*, but we can at least come to a few preliminary conclusions.

I have yet to find sufficient evidence to truly question the new date for Lewis's Theistic conversion. And I think two options are possible regarding the writing of so many spiritual poems. One is my initial conclusion: that Lewis wrote a dozen or more poems in response to his finally becoming a Theist and he wrote them within a six week period. The second conclusion (which is certainly the case for at least two of the poems) is that Lewis was already believing in God or something close to God and already pursuing a spiritual life and thought in early 1930 or before, and several of the poems he wrote in that time were part of this spiritual journey. Perhaps Lewis just hadn't admitted yet (to himself?) that he believed in God, or perhaps he still had some philosophical and spiritual kinks to work out. But it may be that many of the poems we've looked at were not written after his "final" Theistic conversion but in a process leading up to it. That would still leave the likelihood that he *did* write some, half or perhaps even most of the poems in June or July of 1930, but this option removes any definitive statement in regard to the first conclusion above. I *am* certain that Lewis wrote these poems in 1929 or 1930, and that they were written before the autumn of 1930. My tendency is to think that the poems were written in 1930 *only* as Lewis drew nearer to becoming a Theist. And I still think there's a real possibility that Lewis wrote many of these poems in only a six week period in June and July of 1930, responding to his finally confirmed belief in God with an outpouring of poems as acts of praise to Him. Lewis the failed poet, first loved his God by practicing poetry with a passion.