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Review of Sunbeams and Bottles: The Theology, Thought, and Reading of C. S. Lewis

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sees all aspects composing the sum of Lewis's journey.

Once again, Poe delivers a satisfactory reading experience with *The Completion of C. S. Lewis*. Poe's clear insight, unwavering devotion to quality research, and innovative narration make these books a library staple for any Lewis fan or scholar. Poe remains an entertaining and informative guide into many aspects of Lewis's life that others ignore or dismiss. His final section, which outlines what Lewis teaches us through his life and works, is the perfect conclusion to Poe's trio of biographies. Poe's literary approach is fair and balanced, weighed and reasoned, much like Lewis himself.

CRYSTAL HURD

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James Prothero. *Sunbeams and Bottles: The Theology, Thought, and Reading of C. S. Lewis*. (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2022). 442 pages. \$22.99. ISBN 9781935688327.

James Prothero has been teaching, contemplating, and otherwise living with C. S. Lewis for a very long time. In his new book on Lewis, this dedication shows. *Sunbeams and Bottles* reads like a collection of thoughts gathered in notebooks over decades, waiting for the moment they would be gathered together into a comprehensive study of a single author whom the writer of this book has rightly obsessed over for a lifetime.

The contents of the book alternate between numbered chapters on a variety of topics and "Key Idea" chapters enumerated by the Greek alphabet. It took a few chapters to realize that the numbered and "Key Idea" chapters are not directly correlated, at which point I realized that the alternating approach allows the reader time to digest what is being covered. This means, though, that readers must choose how they want to use this book: a text to read cover to cover or one to use as a reference for specific topics. The numbered chapters include content on Lewis defying the categories of thought of those who try to appropriate him to their causes, placing Lewis in his philosophical and theological historical context, ideas central to Lewis's theology, people central to Lewis's life and thinking, the

“mereness” of Lewis’s Christianity, Lewis’s literary theory, and his take on a variety of twentieth-century hot topics which are still relevant today. The “Key Idea” chapters include content on the nature of morality, truth, hell, prayer, predestination and free will, joy, being less than human, the necessity of paradox, imitation, and adoration, plus much more.

While this book has much to enjoy, there are a few criticisms which must be addressed. The first can be covered quickly enough. Prothero spends a great deal of time discussing Lewis’s concept of Romanticism. However, when he turns to *Pilgrim’s Regress* to discuss the topic, he leaves out Lewis’s clearest definition of Romanticism which appears in the Afterword.

The author claims that Owen Barfield’s “thesis” in *Poetic Diction* is “that all language is a growth and development of frozen metaphors” (147). Prothero mentions this idea at least one more time in saying, “language is made up of frozen metaphors from the past” (136), and also describes it as “Barfield’s concept of language as originating with comparisons” (273). In his own summary of *Poetic Diction*, however, Barfield claims his central thesis to be about the emergence of poetic language from earlier stages of language and from the poetic imagination, and that from this understanding we gain proof for the “evolution of consciousness” (*Barfield* 29-30). It is true that in his wonderful essay, “Bluspels and Flalansferes,” Lewis emphasizes the emergence of literal language from forgotten metaphors, but this is not Barfield’s emphasis at all. Barfield’s claim is that of “semantic unities,” wherein all meanings in language, including literal and figurative, as well as subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious, abstract and concrete, and even the distinction between sign and signified, were present in the earliest languages as singular, united meanings. The very distinction between metaphor and literal statements didn’t exist, and so “frozen metaphors” or “language originating in comparisons” would have been impossible early in the development of language.

Chapter twenty, “Educated by Joy: Lewis’ Maturing Understanding of Women,” was my least favorite section. First of all, Prothero builds an argument out of some very interesting detective work regarding Lewis’s relationship with a woman named Vida Wiblin. However, I think he makes too much of this in his reading of Lewis’s later life under the assumption that his conclusions about Wiblin and Lewis are true. My main problem

with the chapter is that it reads like an indictment against Lewis for having twentieth-century views about women, which don't match up to twenty-first-century standards.

In chapter eight of *Sunbeams*, Prothero takes up the relationship between imagination and truth. He rightly notes differences between Lewis and Barfield on the issue, and indicates that for Lewis, the relationship between imagination and truth is problematic. Other Lewis scholars have wrestled with that. This author's solution, however, is inaccurate. Though he points out the importance of Reality in Lewis's total epistemology, Prothero fails to capture the full range of Lewis's definitions of truth, confuses Lewis's use of the word meaning, and misses when he tries to find the right relationship between reason and imagination.

The biggest problem with *Sunbeams and Bottles* is that it needs better editing, both in content and form. In form, it is a text with too many typos for an author to want in his book, including one that ruins a joke (instead of the OHEL we get the OHE [221]). It also has some needless repetition that a content editor would have likely removed. In content, it is a book that needed someone to point out the little mistakes. For instance, the author mentioned Digory's statement, "It's all in Plato!" was made in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* (173) when it only appears in *The Last Battle*. Another example is the fact that "Spencer" is actually spelled "Spenser" (220). A content editor would have also encouraged the author to break up his book into two or three separate volumes. *Sunbeams and Bottles* reads as the culmination of a lifetime of work in which the author wants to place everything he has to say about C. S. Lewis, but this is a mistake. Prothero's book is about Lewis in his intellectual times, the way people co-opt Lewis for their own purposes, and Lewis's most important ideas. The author tries to do too much, and the result is a book that doesn't do several things well enough.

On the other hand, Prothero's text also has many strengths. Prothero takes risks and makes bold claims. He forces the reader to think about Lewis in new ways: to consider that Lewis's primary mode of thought is narrative not systematic, to look at Lewis in light of the Victorian and Edwardian worlds in which he lived, to meditate on the possibility that, though Lewis was against the personal heresy, he may have been guilty of committing it on himself! Prothero takes scholars to task in pointing out that Lewis

was not as pro-imagination as we have made him out to be. He speculates on diverse ideas like how Lewis's poetic style may have improved after his wife's death (161), the way Penelope Lawson's *The Wood for the Trees* may have impacted *Mere Christianity*, and why Lewis's understanding of the Catholic Church is of that Church as it existed before 1622.

Prothero's central thesis, that we can't pigeonhole Lewis, is strong. The categories we wish to impose on Lewis in theology (conservative vs. liberal, Catholic vs. Protestant), or politics (conservative vs. liberal vs. libertarian, capitalist vs. socialist), are just that—impositions, not the real thought of C. S. Lewis. Our author offers detailed proof of all failures to capture Lewis's sunbeams in their personal bottles.

The author's knowledge of philosophy, theology, and literary criticism is encyclopedic—it is an education especially in twentieth-century thought. I learned more new material from Prothero's work comparing Lewis's thought to that of contemporary theologians (like Barth and Vidler), and from his placing Lewis's literary criticism in the context of his times, than from any other chapters in the book. I find his claim that Lewis and Tolkien represent a Romantic counter-cultural response to their times to be another of the bolder statements which Prothero forces me to think through. Not to mention, his complete re-reading of postmodernism should be something all Christians give deep thought to.

A number of additional highlights are worth noting: Prothero's reading of *The Great Divorce* is very good. His emphasis on the importance of free will in Lewis's thinking is, I think, far too absent from what has been written about Lewis's theology. His study of magic (99-104) is first rate. He rightly reads the results of the Lewis/Anscombe debate, including blasting the lie that Lewis wrote no other apologetical works after that time (what of *The World's Last Night*?). He also emphasizes Lewis's ideas of "Clear versus Thick Religion" and "The Sin of Encore"—these ideas deserve more attention from Lewis scholars. What he says about Lewis's concept of Joy is unique. Chapter sixteen, "Lewis to Leavis to Foucault to Derrida" may be the best chapter in the entire book—an excellent help for all of us who still struggle with modern and post-modern literary critical theory.

James Prothero has given us new insights into C. S. Lewis. We can't ask much more in an age when Lewis is a staple of the publishing industry. What else can be said about him? Prothero's answers to that question can be found in *Sunbeams and Bottles*. However, he gives us even more: he

comments on the ways in which we who love Lewis are reading ourselves into him rather than Lewis into us. Prothero gives us a book that *can* be consulted as a reference for years to come. I argued above that there is too much in it, yet that also means that there is much we can return to. He writes for both scholars and a general audience. Thus, the book is a good resource for all Lewis aficionados. Prothero's book is a corrective for and a warning to all of us who have been guilty of a kind of Lewisolatry—a kind that turns him into the Christian we need him to be for our own causes.

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