Stealing Past the Watchful Dragons:
C. S. Lewis’s Incarnational Aesthetics and Today’s
Emerging Imagination

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ABSTRACT: In its dazzling attempt to embody the Gospel in postmodern contexts, the Emerging Church (EC) movement embraces the arts with unprecedented enthusiasm. Through story, symbol, and the ambience of mystery, “we want the aesthetics to scream out who we are,” a leader of the movement declares. In marked contrast with late modern evangelicalism, the “emergent conversation” resonates with C. S. Lewis’s incarnational aesthetic—especially his use of the sympathetic imagination, an essential ingredient in his “smuggling” of Christian ideas, morality, and ethics into post-Christian contexts. I will explore this understanding of the poetic vision, and survey leading practitioners and theorists in the EC in light of Lewis’s expansive theology of Incarnation.
Not long ago, at a gathering in Lambeth Palace, London, an “alternative worship” service was vividly described as follows:

“On the first visit to a service, the main impression is visual. Screens and hanging fabrics, containing a multiplicity of colours, moving and static images continuously dominate the perceptions. There are other things: the type of music, often electronic, whose textures and range seem curiously attuned to the context of worship, smells, the postures adopted by the other worshippers, . . . . As the mental picture begins to fill up with details, there is a growing appreciation that considerable technological complexity is sitting alongside simplicity and directness. The rituals—perhaps walking though patterns, tying [sic] a knot, or having one’s hands or feet anointed—are introduced with simple, non-fussy directions. The emphasis is on allowing people to do what will help, liberate, and encourage their worship rather than on the orchestration of a great event. . . . Where something is rather obscure, its purpose is to invite further reflection, perhaps teasing the worshippers to look deeper beyond the surface meaning. . . . For many of those who stay, they have never before had an experience of Christian worship like it. It is as though they have come to a new place which they instantly recognize as home.”

Then, as now, the Rev. Dr. Paul Roberts pleaded for a renewed appreciation of the artistic sensibility in worship, not for art’s sake alone, but as part of a “vibrant missionary engagement” with postmodern aesthetics—embracing its “richer, multi-layered, and more fluid textuality—envisioning meanings and appreciating multivalence through a variety of media.”

Roberts presently serves Anglican parishes in Bristol, England while co-hosting “alternativeworship.org,” a self-described “gateway for anyone researching Alternative Worship and new forms of church.” A similar web-based service is provided at Vintagechurch.org by a counterpart to Roberts on my side of the pond, Dan Kimball, pastor at Santa Cruz Bible Church in California. Accordingly, Kimball wants the aesthetics at his church “to scream out who we are and what we are about the moment people walk in the doors.” Neither enterprise sees itself as trendy, seeker-sensitive, or mere window-dressing. Rather, the basic conviction is that arts speak to more fundamental concerns regarding the transcendent realities of truth, goodness, and beauty. Assuming that “people who value beauty might eventually look for truth,” the arts become a tool of evangelism, a pathway to God. Indeed, Brian McLaren, a leading spokesperson for the Emergent Church/Conversation [EC] in the U.S., believes that “image (the language of imagination) and emotion (including the emotion of wonder) are essential elements of fully human knowing, and thus we seek to integrate them in our search for this precious, wonderful, sacred gift called truth…” Otherwise, the gospel remains “flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane,” observes McLaren—with a message stuck in the small world of “Sunday
School Christianity,” unable to connect with a postmodern culture that is visually inclined, aesthetically charged, and open to—if not in outright pursuit of—mystery.  

Seasoned insiders to the EC like Alan Roxburgh, a writer and theological educator in Vancouver, B.C., admire such “wonderfully creative movements of bright young leaders,” while, at the same time worrying that they might cater to self-actualization, becoming “purveyors of more experiential, artsy, aesthetic forms of religious goods and services.” The aesthetic media may very well morph into the message, confusing style and substance—“undeniably cool,” yes, but never actually answering the question, “What is the Gospel?” Scott Bader-Sayre and Andy Crouch, authors of two important cover-page articles on the EC in *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* (respectively), heartily endorse the recovery of a sense of mystery and transcendence through the arts—especially for those who have given up on the “small life” and superficiality of contemporary evangelicalism. Perhaps the emerging experience—in worship gatherings as well any artistic engagement with the wider world—will also nudge today’s alienated youth to see beyond their angst, into the numinous, finding a spiritual place they can call home. But all this relevance, according to Bader-Sayer, will have to be “modulated” by resistance—by the counter-cultural move to “[interpret] the culture to itself” in light of the hope conveyed in the story of Jesus Christ. Lauren Winner expresses the tension well when she asks, “How do you simultaneously attend to the culture and be a pocket of resistance?”

If any of this sounds familiar, it is likely because the contemporary EC interest in artistic expression is reminiscent of the challenges and opportunities C. S. Lewis encountered as he smuggled theology into his own post-Christian world through the literary media of fantasy and myth. I see two significant areas of correspondence here. First, regarding context, Lewis was just as persuaded then as the EC is now that the church was in a “missionary situation.” Writing in 1945, he observed: “A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the Faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct infidels.” Given the pervasive spiritual alienation of his day and, indeed, of his own early life, Lewis advised an indirect or “latent” approach to evangelism that nurtured, through the poetic and mythic imaginations, a disposition to hear (pre-evangelism) then believe (pre-apologetics) the Gospel. Just as Paul Roberts hopes that today’s “alternative” worship services will “tease” their participants to “look deeper” at life and its ultimate destination, Lewis hoped his fantasy writing would, at the least, awaken deep longings for transcendence. Both see re-enchantment and its attendant aesthetic
practices as evangelistic endeavors in a world filled with competing ideologies and narratives, or perhaps a world that has no story to tell at all.12

There is a second important area of correspondence between the missional aesthetics of Lewis and the EC, and that has to do with the way both understand the stealthy relationship between artistic or literary expression and apologetics. Lewis actually used the term *smuggle* in reference to his fictional works much the same way that EC proponents speak today of the subversive ways they are communicating the Gospel in the eclectic vernacular of postmodern culture. In a letter to Anglican nun Sister Penelope (CSMV), written in the summer of 1939, Lewis observed how “any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.” He recalled his early experience of “*almost* believing in the gods”—indeed, feeling something akin to “holiness”—through George MacDonald’s “fantasies for grown-ups.”13 Later in life, in a more familiar passage from his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said,” Lewis observed:

> I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. . . . But supposing that by casting all these things [Christian teachings] into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday school associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could.14

Indeed, Lewis knew those “watchful dragons” quite well because he had moved in fits and starts beyond the smallness of his Sunday School Christianity into a “region of awe”—a spiritual journey of deconversion and reconversion that anticipated much of the religious autobiography we see among today’s self-described postmoderns.15 Smuggling was, in effect, an act of “redemptive deconstruction,” according to Louis Markos: “Lewis dissociated the signifieds of Christian theology from their typical, uninspiring signifiers (their Sunday school associations) and attached them instead to a new set of signifiers with the power to reinvigorate and inspire young and old alike.”16 He accomplished this through bold use of allegory, myth, and symbol—genres and literary devices that are most amenable to an incarnational aesthetic, the “transposing” of divine presence or, at least, transcendent meaning into a “lower” medium of communication.17 Little wonder that emergent writers like Charlie Peacock, Brian McLaren, and the late Mike Yaconelli admire Lewis for his “imaginative and mystical sensitivities,” especially his literary “portals” which lead the reader beyond the confines of the self and the stifling pragmatism of contemporary evangelicalism into a world of “dangerous wonder.”18
There remains, however, a crucial, yet often overlooked, social aspect in Lewis’s incarnational aesthetic—an aspect I term the sympathetic imagination. Because this horizontal dimension directly challenges the persistent individualism of late-modernity it seems particularly relevant to the EC’s aesthetic engagement with contemporary culture. We begin with Lewis’s most explicit statement concerning the role of sympathy in the exercise of the imagination, as found in Miracles (1947). In his chapter on the Incarnation—“the Grand Miracle”—he explains how God becoming man is replicated “in a very minor key” throughout all of nature by the sympathetic relations humans enjoy with each other and even with animals:

> What we can understand, if the Christian doctrine [Incarnation] is true, is that our own composite existence is not the sheer anomaly it might seem to be, but a faint image of the Divine Incarnation itself—the same theme in a very minor key. We can understand that if God so descends into a human spirit, and human spirit so descends into Nature, and our thoughts into our senses and passions, and if adult minds (but only the best of them) can descend into sympathy with children, and men into sympathy with beasts, then everything hangs together and the total reality, both Natural and Supernatural, in which we are living is more multifariously and subtly harmonious than we had suspected. We catch sight of a new key principle—the power of the Higher, just in so far as it is truly Higher, to come down, the power of the greater to include the less.19

An awareness of these “transpositions”—especially through an exercise of the poetic imagination—means that we must not “overlook the rich sources of relevant imagery and association” available through our deepest apprehensions.20

At this point, Lewis is most interested in developing the incarnational principles of recapitulation and vicariousness as they intimate the Grand Miracle, but he also acknowledges their profound social and moral implications. In marked contrast with the natural human tendency of self-sufficiency, he emphasizes how identification with and sacrificing for others, and receiving their selfless offerings in return, is a way of disclosing, albeit imperfectly (or “faintly”), a fundamental attribute and activity of the Divine Life in the world. “Self-sufficiency, living on one’s own resources, is a thing impossible” here, because “[e]verything is indebted to everything else, sacrificed to everything else, dependent on everything else.”21 In this way, our everyday world begins to take on new meaning and significance:

> Thus, as we accept this doctrine of the higher world we make new discoveries about the lower world. It is from that hill that we first really understand the landscape of this valley. Here, at last, we find (as we do not find either in the Nature-religions or in the religions that deny Nature) a real illumination: Nature is being lit up by a light from beyond Nature. Someone is speaking who knows more about her than can be known from inside her.22
Lewis had long been interested in what Thomas L. Martin calls “possible-worlds semantics.” The artistic imagination was never just about the way things were, but the way things might be, or even should be. When the reader, for instance, encounters a literary world that seems strangely beyond her own time or place, she finds in the language—in the combination of words, especially metaphors—as well as the stories and their interactions an alternative reality. The text has an ontology all its own that not only enables her to move beyond the this-worldly limitations of language and literary form, but the provincialisms of the self as well. To read on is to accept the other world on its own terms.23 J. R. R. Tolkien’s appeal to the power of myth and the sub-creating role of the writer are well-known sources of inspiration for this literary quality in Lewis, but we should also credit his close friend, Owen Barfield, with a deep appreciation of “imaginative vision” and its moral dimensions. In the unpublished letters exchanged during their so-called “Great War” debate, Barfield had encouraged Lewis’s growing appreciation of the “felt change of consciousness” brought about by poetic imagination.24 While never able to embrace Barfield’s subjective idealism outright, Lewis did recognize the imagination’s capacity to awaken a sense of “universal empathy” and a “growing wholeness” marked by sympathetic and reciprocal relations between living things—a vision that combined the aesthetic and mystical, as well as cognitive and moral dimensions of consciousness. During his (re-)conversion to theism, Lewis speculated that the most significant outcome of this poetic insight was “an enriched and corrected will” guided by the “universal good” as manifested in moral intuition.25

Lewis’s restrained acceptance of this amalgam of thought-feeling-awareness was based in part on an important distinction made by idealist philosopher, Samuel Alexander, between enjoyment (or desire) and contemplation. In Surprised by Joy, Lewis noted how incompatible the emotions of love, gate, fear, hope, or desire associated with an object were with the contemplation of these “inner activities” themselves. For example, “You cannot hope and also think about hoping at the same moment; for in hope we look to hope’s object and we interrupt this by (so to speak) turning round to look at the hope itself.” In this way, Lewis observed, “all introspection is in one respect misleading” because it actually shuts down the passage of hope, longing, desire, etc. by deflecting our attention away from the object.26 With regard to Joy, in particular, he learned not to long for it as an “aesthetic experience,” but instead to hear Joy
proclaim, “You want—I myself am your want of—something other, outside, not your nor any state of you.” As we read on in Lewis’s autobiography, we see how Joy became the “Who” that he desired—the God with whom he could find “personal relation.” Even at this critical stage, however, Lewis recognized the wider re-unifying implications of this spiritual longing:

In so far as we really are at all (which isn’t saying much) we have, so to speak, a root in the Absolute, which is the utter reality. And that is why we experience Joy: we yearn, rightly, for that unity which we can never reach except by ceasing to be the separate phenomenal beings called ‘we.’

Realizing that the object of this yearning was a Who and not a What brought Lewis into “the region of awe”—with its “road right out of the self,” its “commerce” with, and submission to, the numinous, its disturbing ability to remind us of our “fragmentary and phantasmal nature.”

Eventually, as we shall see, this region became an intersubjective arena as well—one conspicuously marked by sympathetic relations.

In the midst of his intense philosophical exchange with Barfield, Lewis’s Oxford brand of idealism—combining Kant’s moral imperative with classical moral philosophy and an emerging theism—was also modulated by Coleridge’s theory of the creative imagination. This was an important development for Lewis because it was his growing interest in the imagination that enabled him to eventually see Christianity as a solution to some nagging concerns: the relationship between desire and the metaphysical reality of natural law, and, more generally, between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Instead of an unreachable and unknowable Absolute, Lewis saw how natural law reflected the Divine will and grounded the moral life of humanity. Lewis felt he could actually participate in this life with a degree of concreteness and resolve that had heretofore evaded him. But it was through an imagination attuned to sympathetic relations that he most acutely perceived its goodness, truth, and beauty.

Barfield’s understanding of Coleridge and the poetic imagination was critical to this realization. It was as if language was able to restore to humanity the intuitive sense of “conscious participation in the world-process,” or, as Lewis came to prefer, the heavenlies. From a literary standpoint, this intuition operated chiefly through metaphor: “Reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can now only be reached by an effort of the individual mind—that is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor.” Based on Coleridge’s notion of the “secondary” or “esemplastic” imagination, Barfield highlighted the mind’s participation in the phenomena, enabling it to construct something that is both meaningful and
felt, eliciting the reader’s sympathy toward the immanental truth conveyed in and through the literary medium. While initially reluctant to embrace the truth-bearing aspects of this romantic theory of imagination, Lewis grew to appreciate how it helped him perceive, albeit in a limited way, what the Spirit perceived, especially in terms of an “absolute relevance” that saw each object in its proper relation and context. Through poetic language, a moral sense arose in which one saw particulars in relation to wholes, disclosing truth not in themselves, but in their relations to what was outside them. This exercise of the imagination possessed moral value, elicited a moral response, and enriched, even corrected, the will. In doing so, metaphors and other tools of the imagination restored the “connective tissue,” the relationality or mutuality of things. This is what it meant to see the world that was “actually out there” more spiritually—“more really.”

Later, in a brief, but highly suggestive discussion in the Epilogue to *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), Lewis correlated this sympathetic disposition with the benefits of literary practice and experience. Chiefly among them was the capacity of the imagination to enter into the perspectives and experiences of others:

> Good reading, therefore, though it is not essentially an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person’s place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favor of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandize himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this.

For Lewis, the immediate “good of literature” was that it “admits us to experiences other than our own,” and, in so doing, “heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality.” Of course, this required a “baptized imagination”—one that permitted any artistic or literary endeavor, even the “sub-Christian” variety, to point upwards to God. But, again, note that for Lewis, this imagination had a profound horizontal dimension as well—one that began and ended in a phenomenology of sympathetic relations with others.

Here, we find the sort of concreteness that Lewis appreciated in the “spontaneous tendency of religion” to resort to poetic expression. After all, for Lewis, it was poetic, not “ordinary” language that conveyed the presence of the object, or the other, as much as its meaning. This is what I think Lewis had in mind when he extolled the remarkable powers of great literature—the way it used “factors within our experience so that they become pointers to
something outside our experience.” To what can he be referring except the arena of intersubjectivity, where love, transgression, alienation, and forgiveness all provide opportunities to “verify” fundamental Christian ideas? Forgiveness, for one, resists precise definition, but it can be communicated with uncanny specificity and emotional impact in poetic language and a wide array of other artistic forms. Ultimately, Lewis despaired that while this storehouse of “hints, similes, [and] metaphors” was crucial to late-modern apologetics, it was under-appreciated, and, consequently, under-utilized.  

This may not be the case today, especially considering the EC’s enthusiastic and, at times, exotic attempts at new forms of Christian worship and community. The EC, in fact, describes itself as both aesthetically driven and intensely relational. Writing for Emergentvillage.com, Troy Bronsink insists that “[t]he church must find a way, like Ezekiel, to imaginatively indwell the story of God’s mission through the performative nature of the arts.” The problem, as Paul Roberts and others inside the movement observe, is that EC aesthetics and ecclesiology are “still unformed and provisional;” they are only just beginning to recover something comparable to Lewis’s imaginative breadth and substance. It would be much too modern, of course, to build anything on a blueprint, let alone one blueprint(!), but the distinctive poesis offered by Lewis is remarkably fluid, adaptive, and missional. More importantly, it modulates the EC’s passion for relevance with a relational phenomenology of sympathetic imagination that strongly resists, as St. Anne’s did in That Hideous Strength, potent cultural pressures of competitive individuality, on the one hand, and reductive homogenization (the proverbial “lowest common denominator”), on the other.

So what sort of connections, albeit tentative, exist between Lewis’s incarnational aesthetic and the recovery of the poetic imagination in today’s emergent Christian communities? Who is translating the modern Lewis into a postmodern “missionary situation,” and what, in particular, draws them, consciously or otherwise, to his peculiar mode of “redemptive deconstruction”? The emerging “conversation” is often organized into collaborative endeavors between popular practitioners, on the one hand, and theologians or, dare we say, “theorists,” on the other. Among the popularizers, Brian McLaren, Charlie Peacock, and Lauren Winner are particularly attentive to the “re-imagining” project. McLaren marvels at how Lewis’s fantasy literature “depends on something beyond mere rationality,” requiring imagination and vision as venues of “the mystical, where ‘consciousness is engulfed’ by something beyond itself.” Lewis
represents that venerable Christian tradition of rebuking “arrogant intellectualizing” and its “conceptual cathedrals of proposition and argument.” His appreciation of poetic language, especially the evocative power of metaphors, was balanced by a hermeneutical suspicion of its idolatrous potential. Anticipating the postmodern debate regarding the efficacy of language, Lewis likened such language to a “window through which one glimpses God, but never a box in which God can be contained.” Citing Lewis’s poem, “A Footnote to All Prayers,” McLaren recalls how Lewis warned people against self-deception in prayer, “thinking that their images or thoughts of God are actually God.” He then affirms Lewis’s concluding petition that God “take not . . . our literal sense” but translate, instead, “our limping metaphors into God’s ‘great, /unbroken speech.’”

McLaren is joined by Leonard Sweet and Jerry Haselmayer in a co-edited book suggestively titled, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church*. Under “N is for Narrative,” the authors credit Lewis and the Inklings with reminding us of how easily we are “dulled and desensitized to the splendor of the Christian story,” alluding to Lewis’s recollection of the visionary paralysis caused by “Sunday school associations” and their “watchful dragons.” Indeed, for emergents the time has come to follow Lewis’s literary strategy: “We need to go out and come in again” via the “priceless galleria of images, stories, metaphors, rituals, and hymns as well as historians, philosophers, dramatists, novelists, poets, scientists, and prophets.” Here are echoes of his Epilogue to *An Experiment in Criticism*: “One of the things we feel after reading a great work is ‘I have got out.’ Or from another point of view, ‘I have got in’; pierced the shell of some other monad and discovered what it is like inside.”

The imagination, for Charlie Peacock, is “necessary to moral and ethical reflection and often inspires the actions that come out of such reflection.” It can be a “perfectly tuned engine of a truly good, creative life.” It is a mode of spiritual vision, but it has epistemological significance as well. Citing Lewis’s description of the imagination as an “organ of meaning,” Peacock marvels at its capacity to show God’s brilliance and serve as a “way of knowing that leads to ways of being and doing congruent with the will of God.” Similarily, it is the imagination that enables us to see in the shadows of the present life a glorious future with God—a vision Lauren F. Winner sees beautifully portrayed in the final volume of the Narnia Chronicles, *The Last Battle*. In the concluding scene, which depicts the end of time, she quotes from Lewis:
... the things that began to happen ... were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”

This eschatological vision evokes powerful human responses in the here-and-now—promptings of longing for, and praise to, God. It is, of course, triggered by Lewis’s “baptized imagination” and its gaze through or beyond the “appearances” and “successive moments” of this life into the region of awe—a region that is ultimate ... no longer successive. It is a vision that is shaped and colored by a literary imagination, with its grand narratives and potent metaphors of “homecoming” and “reunion with a beloved.”

Winner, Peacock, and McLaren share with Lewis an “Enlightenment cynicism” and a journey of deconversion out of the epistemological confines of modernity. At the very least, for Winner, “the sum of the parts will never capture the whole” because there is such a thing as “the real story” and its “eternal reality”—a reality that beckons even now through the workings of the imagination. In this respect, Lewis was remarkably prescient, as Donald E. Glover observes:

One of the most fascinating aspects of Lewis’s conversion is often lost in the critic’s hurry to get on to what Lewis became, forgetting what he was before. Up to this point, Lewis had been the typical intellectual student and then tutor of his day. ... Yet [his] letters show a gradual shift toward the thoughtful analysis of the role played by emotion and sensuous response in an otherwise rational man’s life. ... The result of his quite rational consideration of the meaning and role of the imagination as it created images of beauty in the reader’s mind was the realization that he had stopped short of understanding the aim of this delight, mistaking it for an end in itself.

Lewis, as we have seen, gradually overcame this limitation in much the same way that a new generation of postmoderns has deconstructed the boundaries of the modern imagination. For this reason, they are drawn to the spatial metaphors of Lewis’s “region of awe” as well as his mythic forms and their powerful ability to fuse horizons between author, text, and reader. In short, the Emerging Church/Conversation finds in Lewis inspiration and, in some sense, legitimation for its own imaginative improvisations.

When we turn to the EC-friendly theologians and theorists, we encounter an equally varied range of links to Lewis’s incarnational aesthetics. David C. Downing has noted how effectively Lewis speaks to our present era of postmodern deconstruction “because of his
intellectual agility, his willingness to adopt de-centering strategies at the operational level, while rejecting self-canceling denials about the possibility of ‘a still point in the turning world.’”

Lewis was certainly aware of the social construction of knowledge, the inaccessibility of pure objectivity, and the historical relativity of models. In the Epilogue to *The Discarded Image*, he observed:

> No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known at a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many. But also, no less surely, each reflects the prevalent psychology of an age almost as much as it reflects the state of that age’s knowledge. . . . It is not impossible that our own Model will die a violent death, ruthlessly smashed by an unprovoked assault of new facts. . . . But nature gives most of her evidence in answer to the quests we ask her. Here, as in the courts, the character of the evidence depends on the shape of the examination, and a good cross-examiner can do wonders. He will not indeed elicit falsehoods from an honest witness. But, in relation to the total truth in the witness’s mind, the structure of the examination is like a stencil. It determines how much of that total truth will appear and what pattern it will suggest.

Of particular concern, then, is the relationship between truth and imagination, especially the literary imagination—a concern that preoccupied Lewis and those who find in him a unique capacity to hold together a “metaphysical affirmation and epistemological humility.”

Along these lines, the Lewis-inspired phenomenology of philosopher Dallas Willard and theologian Kevin Vanhoozer has proven especially relevant in EC circles. Willard is best known for his books on spiritual formation, including *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (1991) and *The Divine Conspiracy* (1998), and it is in this arena that he is often viewed as a mentor for the emerging church. But behind the scenes, the more theologically and philosophically inclined emergents also pay attention to his work on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenology of knowledge. It is out of this background of scholarly pursuits that Willard writes with unusual clarity and conviction about the “inner gathering of the self,” the benefits of solitude and silence, and, perhaps, most challenging of all, a robust understanding of the correspondence theory of truth. Willard is particularly concerned with an enduring evangelical tension between the personal experience of God and the authority of the Bible, as it is actually believed and practiced. Post-evangelicals, especially emergents, are drawn to his provocative redefinition of the spiritual life in light of this tension—a project that is closely connected to his phenomenological epistemology.
Regarding the latter, Willard identifies Lewis with the “classical” theory of correspondence—the idea that “truth is a matter of a belief or idea (representation, statement) corresponding to reality.” Borrowing from an illustration in Lewis’s Mere Christianity, Willard explains:

In the course of rejecting the view that moral laws are mere social conventions he [Lewis] insists that they are, to the contrary, ‘Real truths.’ ‘If your moral ideas can be truer, and those of the Nazi less true,’ he says to his reader, ‘there must be something—some Real morality—for them to be true about. The reason why your idea of New York can be truer or less true than mine is that New York is a real place, existing quite apart from what either of us thinks. If when each of us said ‘New York’ each meant merely ‘the town I am imagining in my own head,’ how could one of us have truer ideas than the other? There would be no question of truth or falsehood at all.’

Acknowledging the difficulties that this theory faces in a postmodern climate of “disdain of truth,” Willard defends Lewis’s epistemology, in part, on phenomenological grounds, stressing how its objective ground for meaning “is a relation of a wholly new kind, as remote, as mysterious, as opaque to empirical study, as soul itself.” Lewis understood that “real truth” and its relation to meaning and reason is objective in a “strong” or intuitive sense, “comprehensible even though non-empirical.” The reality of this truth is “unyielding in the face of belief, desire, tradition and will,” while, at the same time, our beliefs and perceptions are relative. What matters is the means by which we aim these beliefs, perceptions, and resulting actions toward truth: “by comparing them to what they are about, or by careful inference, or even by acting on them, just as we can check in various ways whether the sighting mechanism on a rifle is ‘true’—possibly by firing it and comparing the result with the setting of the sighting mechanism.”

This dispositional approach to the “truth question” is paramount throughout Willard’s writings, but it is most rigorously developed in his scholarly discussions of intuition in Husserlian phenomenology—an analysis that not only exceeds the scope of this paper, but also remains far beyond the direct purview of most EC readers. What is most important to note, for present purposes, is that this understanding of intuition possesses for both Willard and Lewis a potent mystical quality. By mystical, Willard means that our deepest intuitions or insights are constituted by a kind of non-empirical “viewing” of objects and objectivity that actually brings us into relation with them, as part of a greater whole. Consciousness, in fact, bends towards the reality of things even before we rely on language to organize or define the experience. This “inner experience” is also mystical in terms of the classic directness of the “phenomenological
imperative”—“seeing for oneself” or knowledge “by acquaintance.” This is the sort of “essence intuition” that is implied throughout much of Lewis’s work as well, especially, as we have seen, after his encounter with Barfield and his embrace of Coleridge’s theory of imagination. For Willard, this literary enterprise, with its associated “feelings, memories, images, perceptions, valuations and so forth” is ultimately grounded in “underivative intuitions of the objects” which prompt these varied responses (i.e. “experience essences”) and disclose their meanings. Willard finds Lewis helpful in demystifying some of this phenomenology for a wider audience, but, ultimately, his concern is epistemological. “We are in a world other than ourselves,” Willard insists, “and we are equipped to deal with it as it is, correcting our mistakes and misperceptions as we go.”

Willard appreciates Lewis’s cautious appeal to the imagination for much the same reason that David C. Downing and Bruce Edwards admire Lewis as a “discerning critic.” “[H]ow is it,” Downing asks, “that such an unshrinking foundationalist could also present analysis which parallels the de-centering strategies of several postmodern commentators?” How could Lewis’s rich metaphysics and mystical intuition of the “burning and undimensioned depth of the Divine Life” be reconciled with his redemptive deconstruction—as able and willing as Derrida, to “sift the text [and the imagination] for internal incongruity, contradiction, and ambiguity while, at the same time, expressing an openness to revelatory illumination originating in the “region of awe.” This remarkable way of knowing draws those who find the postmodern critique of traditional epistemology compelling even as they struggle to retain some semblance of traditional Christian belief. What attracts them, at the most basic level, is the participatory and relational aspects of the phenomenological imperative, as stated above. As an EC writer at VanguardChurch.blogspot.com observes, “Where Christian apologetics in the modern era sought to explain ‘Evidence that Demands a Verdict’ (a form of apologetics that served its purpose in the modern era but would have been of reign in the pre-modern era and is increasingly foreign in the postmodern era), Christianity in a postmodern era must instead invite people into interaction with this Living God.” Lewis anticipated this emerging mandate, and his following, as a result, includes not only philosophers like Willard, but also theologians like Kevin Vanhoozer—one of the most frequently cited thinkers in the EC world today.

The VanguardChurch blog to which we have just referred goes on to credit Vanhoozer with developing a “postpropositional perspective on Scripture.” At another EC website, he is
praised for not beginning his hermeneutical inquiries with distinctively modern concerns like inerrancy and inspiration, but rather the “drama of doctrine” as it is “meant to be played out using the script of God as its text.” Yet another EC blogger begins his posting with the following quotation from Vanhoozer to drive home the point that biblical vision is essentially a work of the imagination:

The imagination, together with its linguistic offspring (e.g., metaphor), is another of those repressed themes in modernity. Rationalists held the imagination in low regard, while romantics understood its importance but failed to discipline it. By imagination I mean the power of synoptic vision—the ability to synthesize heterogeneous elements into a unity. The imagination is a cognitive faculty by which we see as whole what those without imagination see only as unrelated parts. Stories display the imagination in action, for it is the role of the plot (mythos) to unify various persons and events in a single story with a beginning, middle, and end.

Lewis would have agreed wholeheartedly with each of these observations, so it is not surprising that he is appreciatively invoked by Vanhoozer in the next quotation:

C. S. Lewis insists that the imagination is a truth-bearing faculty whose bearers of truth are not propositions but myths. Myths enable us both to ‘taste’ and to ‘see’: to experience ‘as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction.’ What gets conveyed, therefore, is not simply the proposition but something of the reality itself: not simply information about God, but God’s triune identity itself as this is displayed in and through his creative and redemptive work. Further, the words of Scripture do not simply inform us about God but act as the medium of divine discourse. It is these words—the stories, the promises, the warnings, etc.—that ought to orient Christians vis-à-vis reality.

Vanhoozer and Lewis are very much on the same page, at least as far as the bloggers at NextReformation.com are concerned. What they most appreciate about Vanhoozer is what they appreciate about Lewis—a way to think, or, perhaps we should say, imagine as Christians about the “post/modern way.”

Whereas Willard generally emphasizes the “flow of consciousness,” its inseparability from the world, and, following Husserl, its pre-linguistic cognition, Vanhoozer more sharply focuses the consciousness on texts, especially their authorial intent as ontological grounding. In other words, Willard’s phenomenology requires that we rightly act on the text, presupposing the Holy Spirit’s presence. Vanhoozer’s hermeneutical method requires that we must rightly interpret the text first. Both agree that “it is by action that we enter the reality of the world which the Bible is about.” As Willard suggests, “It is residing in Jesus’s word that permits us to enter the reality of God’s rule and become free from domination by other realities.”
an “intention relation” is necessary, especially in the case of texts, for the disclosure of meaning. This intention is fundamentally moral in nature, as we have seen, requiring submission to the text or “active obedience” such that the text retains its objective status—its otherness.63

In an essay inspired by Lewis’s depiction of modernity in Pilgrim’s Regress, Vanhoozer expresses this intentionality in terms of a well-trained imagination:

*Theological wisdom is a matter of learning how to read and relate to reality rightly.* The wise person is the one who understands and participates fittingly in the created order. We get wisdom by letting the biblical texts train our imaginations to see how things fit together theodramatically as Scripture depicts the world as created and redeemed; this picture generates a certain ethos that in turn shapes our moral character. Scripture also depicts the love of God—which is the summation of the law and hence the essence of Christian ethics—in the face of Jesus Christ. Ethics is about how to participate fittingly in the form of the good personified in Jesus Christ. Christianity thus represents an alternative way of doing justice to the other. Thanks to the theodramatic imagination, we see the other not as an unknowable, and hence unlovable, cipher, but as Jesus sees the other, as neighbor. In sum, the Bible situates both me and the other in a larger theodrama that orients right action by calling us to love others as God has loved us."

Vanhoozer echoes Lewis’s call for re-enchantment in late modernity through a recovery of this mythos. Such a move restores, in a more general sense, our “capacity to see what is there,” which is, simultaneously, the capacity to see beyond the confines of the self. Simone Weil called this “attention,” which Vanhoozer recalls is “the ability to transcend oneself in order to see things as they are.” Just as Lewis was alert to the visionary solipsism of the Victorian romantics, Vanhoozer warns against postmodern varieties of narcissism that deflect attention away from the object of our attention toward the feelings associated therewith. Consequently, he finds Lewis’s “map” in *Pilgrim’s Regress* helpful in representing the postmodern turn.64

Vanhoozer also finds Lewis’s short essay, “Meditation on a Toolshed” particularly useful in illuminating the contours of our deconstructed world. It was originally intended to illustrate the difference between looking at and looking along. It begins with a brief story:

I was standing today in the dark toolshed. The sun was shining outside and through the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost pitch-black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no toolshed, and (above all) no beam. Instead I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences.65
For Vanhoozer, the story is about the nature of knowledge. In Lewis’s modern world, the primary goal was to look at things—“those who are a step removed from the experience on which they bring their analytic-critical technique to bear.” This required distance and disinterestedness—an attitude that prevailed in every arena of inquiry, including the study of the Bible. “By and large,” Vanhoozer notes, “biblical scholars look at the Bible—at questions of its authorship, at questions of its composition, at questions of its historical reliability—instead of along it.”

This brings Vanhoozer to Lewis’s question: “is knowing God more like seeing or tasting?” Postmoderns have offered deconstructed language, ethics, and aesthetics as possible venues for answering this question, but it is the biblical-poetic imagination that ultimately plays the leading role in our engagement with the communicative agency of God. Vanhoozer concludes by listing the essential ingredients in this renewed encounter with the Bible. First, God has designed the imagination in such a way that we can actually see what is there, “particularly when the senses alone are unable to observe it.” The imagination bears this truth, though primarily in mythic form and in accordance with the constraints of the Scriptures themselves. Secondly, in this age of “image anemia,” we can not only see what is there—in the world of the text—but participate in it by looking along its grain. There are, of course, different ways of seeing and “experiencing thinking” that allow us to enter this world, but the Scriptures remain our common “port of entry.” Thirdly, in the world of the text we see God, the world, and ourselves differently—in accordance with the divine communicative action—and we respond in faith. As a result, we become “wiser for our travels” and we “become right with God.”

Through, in part, the Lewis-inspired phenomenology and hermeneutics of Willard, Vanhoozer, and their popularizers, the EC has debunked the modern notion that “looking at is, by its own nature, intrinsically truer or better than looking along.” In whatever way Lewis’s insight is applied—in the creation of new forms of worship, new channels of literary endeavor (especially on the Internet), or new venues in the performing arts—there will remain an abiding reference to the “The Grand Miracle.” Through its “knowledge by acquaintance,” we find grounding for the sympathetic imagination. Its harmonies, associations, and transpositions subvert our self-sufficiencies, provincialisms, and pragmatic reductions. In its amalgam of thought-feeling-awareness we reunite, at least provisionally, the perceiving subject with the
perceived object. Knowledge by acquaintance becomes knowledge through participation, with a “baptized vision” of particulars in relation to wholes that elicits a potent moral response.

Through the “hints, similes, and metaphors” of the sympathetic imagination, Brian McLaren encounters the mystical, Charlie Peacock finds a deeper sense of congruence with the divine will, and Lauren Winner sees beyond appearances to a much anticipated “homecoming.” No wonder that Lewis declares the Incarnation to be “the central miracle asserted by Christians.” It was his chief source of inspiration, and he devoted most of his life to letting it work its peculiar magic in his mind and craft. “It digs beneath the surface, works through the rest of our knowledge by unexpected channels, harmonises best with our deepest apprehensions and our ‘second thoughts,’” he observed, “and in union with these undermines our superficial opinions.” For Lewis, that’s what incarnational aesthetics was all about. And, perhaps, that is ultimately what the emerging imagination is about today.
Shorter versions of this paper have been delivered at the C. S. Lewis Summer Institute, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England (24 July – 6 August 2005) and the C. S. Lewis & Friends Colloquium, Taylor University, Upland, Indiana (1-4 June 2006).


These concerns are raised by Alan Roxburgh, “Emergent Church: Filled with Creativity, Energetic Potential” [June 15, 2005], http://www.allelon.org/articles/article.cfm?id=194 (accessed June 23, 2005).


20 Ibid., p. 113.

21 Ibid., p. 118.

22 Ibid., p. 120.


24 For a detailed summary and analysis of these letters, see Lionel Adey, C. S. Lewis’ ‘Great War’ with Owen Barfield (Ink Books, 1978).

25 Lewis to Barfield, n.d., “The Great War,” vol. 1, p. 13, Barfield-Lewis Letters, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois; see also Lewis, 1929/1930 (?) “De Bono et Malo,” Ms. [photocopy], p. 8, Edwin W. Brown Collection Center, Taylor University, Upland, Indiana. The latter manuscript was Lewis’s final installment in the exchange of treatises during the “War”. Regarding the importance of Barfield in this thought, Lewis recalled: “But I think he changed me a good deal more than I him. Much of the thought which he afterward put into Poetic Diction had already become mine before that important little book appeared. It would be strange if it had not. He was of course not so learned then as he has since become; but the genius was already there.” See Surprised by Joy, p. 200; also Alan Jacobs, The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), pp. 90-91.


27 Ibid., pp. 221-223.


29 Lewis to Barfield, 1928, “Clivi Hamiltonis Summae Metaphysices Contra Anthroposophos Libri II,” Part II (“Value”), Section XIV, Ms. [photocopy], Edwin W. Brown Collection. See also Adey, ‘Great War,’ pp. 69-78.

30 Lewis, Surprised by Joy, 210: “The Absolute there ‘there,’ and that ‘there’ contained the reconciliation of all contraries, the transcendence of all finitude, the hidden glory which was the only perfectly real thing there is. In fact, it had much of the quality of Heaven.”


34 Lewis spoke of his own baptized imagination in his preface to George MacDonald: An Anthology (HarperSanFrancisco, 1946), p. xxxviii; see also Surprised by Joy, pp. 179-180.

35 The term ‘phenomenology’ is often used in the sense of Rudolf Otto’s notion of the numinous—the experience of the holy’ aside from its moral or rational aspects. Lewis appreciated Otto’s phenomenological description of the universal or essential aspects of religious experience, but he also acquired a taste for philosophical phenomenology from the lingering neo-Hegelianism at Oxford University—especially that of T. H. Green (d. 1882), F. H. Bradley (d. 1924), and Bernard Bosanquet (d. 1923), all of whom were “mighty names” in Lewis’s intellectual formation. Their cumulative effect on Lewis was to provide a door into Christianity; this according a letter he wrote to Paul Elmer More, 25 October 1934, in The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, p. 145. Green and Bradley, in particular, appropriated the venerable notion of sympathy into their modified Hegelianism as a mode of moral reasoning. It was also a more popular expression of ethical sentimentalism that influenced evangelical piety throughout the late 18th and nineteenth centuries. John MacCunn provides an introduction to Green’s version of sympathy in a standard work that was contemporary with Lewis’s philosophical studies; see Six Radical Thinkers (New York: Russell & Russell, 1910/1964), pp. 215-266. For a recent overview of Lewis’s idealist phase, see David C. Downing, The Most Reluctant Convert, pp. 123-137.

36 Lewis, “The Language of Religion,” in Christian Reflections, pp. 137-138. For a helpful survey of how Lewis accomplished this in his fictional works, see Kath Filmer-Davies, “Fantasy,” in Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis, ed. Thomas L. Martin (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), pp. 285-296. Thus, in The Narnia Chronicles, we see how community forms through the mutuality and cooperation of siblings, each with their own distinctive roles and individualities, but also varying capacities of affection and friendship. We also see how the wicked witch Jadis seeks to destroy these sympathetic relations and, in the telling of the story, we find ourselves identifying with the struggle to resist and, sometimes, redeem the resulting brokenness. The Space Trilogy takes us further into the realm of human and social psychology, but, as Kath Filmer-Davies has observed, as much through an exploration of inner space, as outer. In The Great Divorce, we plunge into the dark world of human selfishness while, in Lewis’s last novel, Till We Have Faces, we encounter the fundamental human tension between submission and control. In all of these works of fantasy, the immediate concern with interpersonal dynamics remains accessible to our (the reader’s) sympathetic imagination. Accordingly, by the very act of “good reading” we are moving about in a world that is creatively designed to nudge us beyond the tiny sphere, if not prison, of our own self-interest.


40 An example of such collaboration has been the recent series of annual Emergent-YS Conventions, each designed to break-down the modern rupture between theory and practice, especially regarding “critical concerns” like
“Creating a Climate for Creativity and Innovation in Ministry” or “Reimagining Spiritual Formation: The Role of Missional Communities,” Emergent-YS Convention, Nashville, Tennessee (18-21 May 2005).


50 Downing, ““From Pillar to Postmodernism,” p. 176.


52 For a sampling of Emergent interest in such Willard-related topics, see, for example, Hurtgen, “Stepping into Community”; and Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, pp. 11-13.


55 Indeed, this has become a cause of nagging controversy for Willard in many of his popular writings on spiritual formation. See, for example, a blogosphere “rant” on Willard’s “inner light” mysticism posted by “surphing,” entitled “John Piper Quotes Dallas Willard,” (July 6, 2006) http://emergentno.blogspot.com/2006/07/john-piper-quotes-dallas-willard.html (accessed July 17, 2006).


63 Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 74-80

64 Vanhoozer, “Pilgrim’s Digress,” p. 90.


67 Ibid., pp. 36-39.


69 Lewis, Miracles, p. 131.
Lewis enthusiasts with Puddleglum personalities, who expect at least one bad egg in a dozen, will be pleasantly disappointed. - Robert Trexler - Editor, CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C.S. Lewis Society. * This is no dry collection, but a continuation in kind of the vibrant conversations that went on between C.S. Lewis and his like-minded friends in smoky Oxford pubs and book-lined college rooms. This â€œold, old talk,â€ as he called it, gathered in themes that ranged from the homely to the cosmic, and even beyond.Â The conference proceedings book from the "Past Watchful Dragons: Fantasy and Faith in the World of C.S. Lewis" conference will be available shortly. See the announcement from the Mythopoeic Press. Leave a comment. Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. What must be kept in mind is something Lewis wrote earlier in the essay about the two motivations for writing: an artistic, imaginative reason and a didactic, instructing reason. â€œIf only one of these is present, then, so far as I am concerned, the book will not be written,â€ he writes. â€œIf the first is lacking, it canâ€™t; if the second is lacking, it shouldnâ€™t.â€ Past Watchful Dragons book. Read 13 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a...Â Start by marking â€œPast Watchful Dragons: The Narnian Chronicles of C. S. Lewisâ€ as Want to Read: Want to Read saving… Want to Read. Currently Reading. Read. Other editions. Enlarge cover.