SLAYING THE ZEITGEIST: *THE PILGRIM'S REGRESS* AND THE AIMS OF CLASSICAL EDUCATION

by Devin O'Donnell, Dominion Classical Christian Academy

Christians love C. S. Lewis. Indeed, some have said he is the "patron saint of Evangelicalism."[1] Whatever truth this statement holds, however, only makes more palpable the dramatic irony of how little those same evangelicals actually hold in common with him, beyond the mere fact of being a Christian. In other words, many Christians today are happy to accept Lewis's spiritual wisdom for the care of their souls, yet they remain ignorant of or wholly unwilling to accept his admonishments in regard to the imagination; or, at the very least, they fail to assent to his criticisms of modern education, a subject on which he was not in the least bit silent. For Owen Barfield once remarked, "Somehow what [Lewis] thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything."[2] One finds that more careful and scrupulous readings of Lewis's works prove this. So we should not be surprised, for instance, to find his criticism of modern education even in his "children's stories" *The Chronicles of Narnia*, especially in that dear fool Eustace Scrubb. A more perceptive and sympathetic reader will also see that the overwhelming majority of us living today are all like Scrubb, having read the wrong books and are now repenting and making up for our miseducation in the "experiment houses" of the modern school system.

However veiled it may be in some works, what Lewis has to say about education is a brightly threaded theme woven throughout the fabric of his writing.[3] He, like Augustine before him, received the benefits of a classical education. But, like Augustine before him, those benefits lay dormant until the trumpet blast of his conversion to Christianity recalled those benefits to new life. One work that makes this most clear is the first book Lewis wrote after his conversion to Christianity. Though it has been criticized for its "needless obscurity" (even by Lewis himself),[4] *The Pilgrim's Regress* is his first sincere polemic against modernity; and though it is often overlooked and perhaps underrated, we find in it the fecund seeds from which the themes of his greatest works grow. The title of this work is an obvious pun on John Bunyan's spiritual allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, but Lewis doesn't reveal true meaning of the title until the very end; here his pilgrim "John" (another nod of the head to Bunyan) realizes that after his conversion what he thought was the end of his journey was only the beginning.[5] Lewis's semi-autobiographical allegory shows a man who follows his "dialectic of desire"[6] through all the valleys and moors, caves and mountains, pastures and pits of the modern wasteland of ideas. This narrative is important not merely because it sheds more light on the character of C. S. Lewis himself, but also because it teaches us about the pitfalls in our own lives. We inhabit that same

Devin O'Donnell is the upper school head at Dominion Classical Christian Academy. He teaches Latin and has been teaching the humanities for 10 years. He has a perfect wife and four sinless children whom he loves. He has published essays, fiction, and poems. He has a blog called credulitas.wordpress.com.

"wasteland" that John traverses.[7] And a foundational lesson we as educators and parents can draw from this work takes place in a most dynamic scene.

On his journey, John passes "Through Darkest Zeitgeistheim" and attempts to leave the country of Mammon, which is owned by a giant named Zeitgeist.[8] Before he can escape this land and the foolish and ridiculous people who dwell there, he is caught by the authorities. They explain to him that although he is free to enter this land, he may not leave it. "All this country," they tell him, "belongs to the Spirit of the Age."[9] And so John is thrown into the dark and dank dungeon of Giant Zeitgeist.

But he is not alone. In the dungeon he meets other prisoners who have been taught—or are in the process of learning—to parrot the "right" beliefs and politics.[10] It is irrelevant whether such assumptions are true or good or beautiful. What matters is that the prisoners confess and agree with the Spirit of the Age. John begins to go mad, but just as he gives himself up for lost, a "flash of steel smote light into John's eyes," and a knight rides to his rescue.[11] The knight's concealed identity surprises even John, and it proves important for the reader. It is "Reason." Reason asks the Giant Zeitgeist three riddles as a wager for his head. Upon the third riddle, "The giant muttered and mumbled and could not answer, and Reason set spurs in her stallion and . . . galloped up his foreleg, till she plunged her sword into his heart."[12] Following a great noise and landslide, "the Spirit of the Age became what he had seemed to be at first, a sprawling hummock of rock." After John is rescued, Reason tries to compel the other prisoners with him to leave the dungeon as well. She breaks open the door and proclaims, "You can all come out."[13] But no one moves. They are committed that to keep imitating the Spirit of the Age is the only way to live. To John, Reason comments on their condition: "This psittacosis is a very obstinate disorder." Lewis is having fun here, for *psittacosis*, is commonly known as "parrot disease."[14]

What can we learn from this? Aside from being a story, allegory begs to be unpacked. Lewis translates *Zeitgeist*, literally German for "time spirit," as the "Spirit of the Age." His point here is that every age has a "Spirit of the Age." Every generation has its sins and every age has its prophets and priests who are its mouthpieces to parrot the conventional wisdom of the world. The giant and those who dwell in his dark land represent those popular (and often unexamined) ideologies dominating the time, which frequently prove at odds with Christian orthodoxy. This is nothing new; the gospel can be countercultural in every epoch. In Lewis's day it was philosophical naturalism or Freudianism or communism or feminism, etc. But whatever "spirit" is dominant at a given time, a mature Christian must come to see that there is always some antithesis between what the Spirit of the Age says and what Christian wisdom says. This might be obvious to classical educators, but it is not always clear to parents, especially to those parents who might not understand the vision of the classical Christian school, or who, like the prisoners with John, might suffer from the "psittacosis" of parroting the culture. They go along with the crowd. Whatever is hip and cool, whatever is new and flashy, these are the dungeons and pitfalls for many, even Christians. And even in Bunyan's day, when Christendom was not yet in ruins, the temptation was still present, which is why Bunyan puts his own warning against the zeitgeist in the character of Mr. Worldly Wiseman. So it was in Paul's day as well. Or why else does he admonish Christians to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ," if not to warn Christians of the dangers of the zeitgeist?[15] This is the cultural battle all Christians must fight. In his epistle to the Corinthians, Paul explains this: "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God." But notice that Paul's language is inherently violent, for the violence of judging the Spirit of the Age does not change; it is only the weapons.[16] Addressing the believers in Ephesus, Paul gives the

same exhortation: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Such cultural warfare—though less "carnal" and more spiritual (and rhetorical) in nature—is no less violent in force. The pagan culture of Paul's own day bears no small likeness to the nihilistic zeitgeists of our age, and perhaps Lewis best captured the essence of what Paul meant here in the scene where Reason plunges her sword into the Zeitgeist and reduces it to rubble. Thus, the question to ask is not, "Is there a Spirit of the Age in our time?" but, "What is the Spirit of the Age in our time, and how can we slay it?"

Identifying and slaying the zeitgeist is ultimately the business of education, which is ultimately the responsibility of Christian *parents*. But educators (administrators and teachers alike) help by giving parents, not merely the students, the vision to see and discern the giant for what it really is, just a "hummock of rock." Note that Lewis has the Zeitgeist appear in the form of a giant, which often seems to surround us on every side. We hear that truth is relative, that goodness is an irrelevant concern, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, that children are a burden, that a woman's body should bear no signs of children, that marriage and the family are subordinate to the state, that homosexuality is a legitimate lifestyle, that choice itself is the highest good, that education is measured by the job or salary one receives, that public school is civic responsibility, that public education is good for culture. I could go on (and on). Whence comes all these lies? Where are people today being taught to parrot the Spirit of the Age? Mass entertainment. The media. The public school itself.[17] Although we want Christian parents to avoid the potential psittacosis in public schools, private schools should be wary too. And to those parents who *do* understand the work of classical Christian education, believing anything contrary to what the Spirit of the Age says often seems like facing off with a giant. That's because it is.

The good news—the news told us by the mouths of prophets from ages past, the news borne in the wicker carriage of fairy tales, the news sung by the hoary poets on ancient hills—is that giants can be slain. Notice the character who rescues John. If it were Bunyan, he would have had "Faith" or "Doctrine" ride in to save the day.[18] Instead it is Reason who slays the Spirit of the Age. This does not mean that faith and doctrine are less important: faith is how we know things. Reason, though, is how we *think* about things. "Reason is the natural organ of truth," says Lewis, "but imagination is the organ of meaning."[19] Reason affords us the ability to judge rightly. If Christ says with a little faith we can move mountains, how much more leverage might we have if that faith were accompanied by reason? As truth slays falsehood, so Reason slays the giant. Reason emancipates. Plato told us no differently in his "Allegory of the Cave," and Lewis makes the same point: those who, like bestial parrots, ignorantly repeat the wisdom of the Zeitgeist are not free, but prisoners. And, like Plato's prisoners, the prisoners of the giant need Reason to free them. That Reason is described by Lewis here as a "virgin"[20] suggests that her strength lies in her purity. There is a correlation between one's *moralitas* and *ratio*. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

In the end, this is a fitting argument coming from Lewis, whose eventual conversion finally summoned the full power of his own reason. Lewis did not convert from atheism to Christianity overnight; one might say it was a long "journey" through the intellectual and spiritual wilderness of modern life. And if it was a journey, then what was his compass? If Lewis was in bondage to the Zeitgeist before his conversion, then who was his rescuer? Judging from his semi-autobiographical *The Pilgrim's Regress*, we can conclude that it was his reason. Alan Jacob's recent biography *The Narnian* gives special attention to Lewis's education, and it is no secret that

from his boyhood Lewis was classically educated.[21] And however much of a sinner C.S. Lewis was, he received an education that, if it did not save his soul, it certainly saved his imagination, for it still allowed Reason to ride through the landscape of his mind and rescue him from the dungeon of merely parroting the unexamined assumptions of popular culture. His classical education gave him the freedom to judge rightly the Spirit of the Age, find it wanting, and slay the giant.[22] As classical educators, if students leave our schools parroting the Spirit of the Age, then we have failed. Our end is to equip students and parents with the ability to call upon Reason and slay the Zeitgeists before them.

NOTES

1. Phillip Ryken, "Inerrancy and the Patron Saint of Evangelicalism: C.S. Lewis on Holy Scripture," Desiring God National Conference, October 29, 2013, http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/conference-messages/national-conference-rebroadcast.

2. Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 162.

3. Lewis' criticism of modern education is more direct in such works as the final novel of the Space Trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*; his lectures at Dartmouth, *The Abolition of Man*; selected sermons, *The Weight of Glory*; and the newly released *Image and Imagination*, just to name a few.

4. C.S. Lewis, "Preface to the Third Edition," *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971), 5.

5. We see a similar plot device in G. K. Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, whose own quest for giants leads him inexorably back home to the giant he was living on the entire time.

6. Ibid., 10.

7. The pilgrim John is not alone here. He is, by allegorical extension, Lewis himself. But many others besides Lewis have traversed that wasteland of modernity, not least of which was T. S. Eliot who wrote about it.

8. Ibid., 49–64.

9. Ibid., 57.

10. We might call these the "politically correct" views. Lamentably, this is often what passes as "critical thinking" in many of the learning institutions in our land, especially the state-funded ones.

11. Ibid., 63.

12. Ibid., 64.

13. Lewis, 66.

14. "Psittacosis" is contracted by exposure to bacteria found in the fecal matter of macaws and the like. Obviously, Lewis is having a go at those who buy into the contemporary foolishness of the times.

15. II Cor. 10:4. Aristotle makes a similar argument. In a recent essay on classical education and the "eudemonia" of the good life, Trenton D. Leach notes Aristotle's emphasis on the ability to judge the Zeitgeists of the world: "Now each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. And so the man who has been educated in a subject is a good judge of that subject, and the man who has received an all-round education is a good judge in general." Trenton D. Leach, "Classical Education and Human Happiness," *Classis*, XX:3 (2013): 14.

16. II Cor. 10: 3–6. "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal."

17. Eph. 6:12

18. One need only drive by the public school buildings to see how closely they resemble the hideous dungeons in Lewis' allegory. And yet the public school is not only the dungeon but also the giant.

19. As it is, Bunyan's pilgrim Christian finds the key called "Promise" in his bosom, which allows him to escape out of Doubting Castle.

20. C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 265.

21. Lewis, 66.

22. Jacobs discusses Lewis's education in detail in chapters 2 and 3 of *The Narnian* (Jacobs, 19–52). Before becoming a pupil of "the Great Knock" [Ed. note: William

T. Kirkpatrick] for what we might justly call the "logic" and "rhetoric" phase of his classical education, Lewis's father sent "a sample of Jack's translation from Latin poetry." The Great Knock was more than impressed: "The verse translation which you send takes away my breath. It is an amazing performance for a boy of his age—indeed for a boy of any age. The literary skill is one which practiced masters of the craft might envy" (Jacobs, 36). Though it was not Christian, Lewis's education was indisputably classical.

23. In the chapters that immediately follow the scene of Reason slaying the giant, we see Lewis's skill for dialectic. The pilgrim John asks the meaning of the riddles that Reason put to the Zeitgeist, and as she unpacks each hard saying we find revealed the strength of Lewis's training in logic. Such a mind only comes of the rigors of classical education.