

# The Theological Implications of Studies in Words

William McFetridge Wilson

PUBLISHED IN 1960, *Studies in Words* is one of the last books C. S. Lewis himself saw into print, but in many ways it is the work of his lifetime. In the lengthy introduction he tells us that the book grew out of a life-long practice—one that began as a “necessity” and soon became a “hobby.” The necessity was to instill in Cambridge undergraduates a regard for the life of languages and an eye for the drastic changes in meaning that English words have undergone; the hobby was charting semantic shifts across the centuries. “[S]emantic discomfort” soon aroused him “like a terrier,” to a game; the keeping of the score, the charting of the changes, soon filled notebooks and margins. This is the research behind the book, and what he always claims for his theology he claims here as well: it is the work of an “amateur.”

*Studies in Words* spans his life also by spanning his life as a reader. The journeys of the words he charts cross the Bible, the classics, and scores of works, literary and other, from all periods. Who can forget the closing lines of *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961) which have allured generations of students to the rewards of careful and catholic reading:

Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realize the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors....My own eyes are not

enough for me, I will see through those of others....in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.<sup>1</sup>

Amidst the complexities of his semantic charts in *Studies in Words* he pauses to reflect again, but now as amateur philologist, on his final rewards:

I am ashamed to remember for how many years, as a boy and a young man, I read nineteenth-century literature without noticing how often its language differed from ours. I believe it was work on far earlier English that first opened my eyes: for there a man is not so easily deceived into thinking he understands when he does not. In the same way some report that Latin or German first taught them that English also has grammar and syntax. There are some things about your own village that you never know until you have been away from it.<sup>2</sup>

This last sentence could have been said by the old uncle in the Narnia stories upon the return of the children from one of their adventures.

Finally, in this his most “literary” of studies, we have a direct connection to his work in theology and Christian eth-

ics. These eloquent passages suggest the connection, but the best way I know to show it is to cite a passage from Lewis as quipster. In "Christian Apologetics" (1945) Lewis draws up "a list of words which are used by the people in a sense different from ours." For example, "dogma" means an "unproved assertion delivered in an arrogant manner."<sup>3</sup> Lewis's tact with theology, I think, is focused in this remark and the others on this list, for example, that "morality" means "chastity" and that "abstract" means "vague."

These examples illustrate that no matter how he sought to defend the faith, be it by argument or debate or proof, what seems finally to make the case is not so much the logic he spins, however exacting it might be; rather it seems to lie in the appeal of the defense. The outcome, that is, always seems to resolve in the dissolution of some large and constraining notion. Lewis takes special aim at what he calls "climates of opinion." He wants to shatter "inner rings" of assumption. Thus, no matter how formal the set-up, at some point in the execution of his defense it appears that all along something like a philological howler was in the works. Something beyond the rigors of the logic springs assent, something as sudden and unexpected as a word's having changed its skin.

But if it is true that Lewis has sprung the latch in many minds, it is also true that he has slammed the door in many others. In "God in the Dock" (1948)<sup>4</sup> Lewis claims that vagueness in speech is a large hindrance to a sustained faith, but just as harmful is an inclination to trust the "specialist." For the specialist, he implies, establishes the "inner ring" that leads to the confused utterances of the "English Proletariat." but when we carefully read Lewis's works on theology and ethics, we see that the inner rings themselves are the products of vague speech. Their pillars are categories, for example, "bour-

geois," "progressive," "evolutionary process," and (the one for which he seems to harbor a particular disdain) the "science called textual criticism."

The interesting thing about this discovery of linguistic sloth on both parts—one pedestrian, the other elite, one the effect, the other the cause—is that Lewis treated *both* with an equal and off-handed dismissal. He handles "progressive," a term in Lewis's day that was not recognized to be a loaded word, in the same way he handles "dogma." The commoners responded by buying his books in the millions; the keepers of the inner rings forbade him entrance. *Studies in Words* crosses the divide. Its special gift is that it shows the one philological principle that, when appreciated, may not bring about a conciliation but will, nonetheless, break down the stereotypes applied to Lewis by some.

One of the leading causes of semantic change, Lewis argues in the work, stems from the inclination to use descriptive words to represent evaluations. "Super," "radical" (as in "radical dude"), and "quality" are current examples. "Bourgeois," as it is used by the specialists in Lewis's sense, has obviously taken a similar turn: it no longer describes a class of people, rather it evaluates them. "Dogma" has taken this turn: it now means a blunt and confining statement. For Lewis this process has large moral stakes. In forsaking description for evaluation, we lose that most precious of human senses, the "taste for the other." Our likes and dislikes hold sway over an appreciation of what something is or is like.

In *Studies in Words*, Lewis often acknowledges the obvious point that this kind of change is often inevitable and not always harmful. He traces the Anglo-Saxon "kind" that like its Latin counterpart "*natura*" has the root meaning of "type" or "sort." Thus we say "what is the 'nature' of something" or "what is the 'kind' of something." From here it is a

simple jump for the word to stand for "progeny": the child is of Wilson "kind" (active and loud). Next it is an adjective meaning "hereditary": "kind" land is Wilson land, *as* is the progeny. A "kindly" lord, then, is one who inherits his position. Such natural progression makes the advancing evaluative shift equally natural: "kindly" lord will soon mean "good" lord because having received his land in trust for his children, he will probably care for it. Before long, then, *any* lord who simply happens to be good will be designated as a "kind" lord.

However natural these evaluative shifts might be, Lewis insists that the word walking this route is on its way to "vericide." Even though the changes in the meaning of "kind" are healthy, "kind" will destroy itself if it is not careful in the same way that "dogma" and "bourgeois" have. For the more a word becomes simply a means of reacting, Lewis argues, the greater is its semantic loss. The phrase "Damn it," for instance, is but a gesture. It no longer carries any sense of a curse. "Villain" is another good example. It originally meant "villager," then "clod." Because we cannot trust someone from far away it came to mean "thief." Now it is an open-ended insult. As Lewis says, we use the word *not* to be accurate about the person we intend to injure. Rather, we use it to mean *anything* our adversary would least like to be called. A graphic example of what Lewis means is the Americanism "your mother wears army boots."

Vericide, of course, need not end in violence. "Kind," for instance, takes its dying breath, according to Lewis, when it stands for anyone who is simply innocuous or gentle. He does not record this final undoing in *Studies in Words*. We find it in his theology where, like "dogma," it does more than linguistic harm. In his theodicy, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), Lewis suggests that the reason we, like him, find it so hard to hold that God is

finally, despite human suffering, good, is that the highest virtue we can cite is "kindness." Linguistic sloth has forgotten *agape*.<sup>5</sup>

Here we have an excellent example of his philology's direct influence on his theology, of how he would resist delivering the moral or theological blow until the appropriate occasion in the appropriate book. But there are in *Studies in Words* a number of histories that end up being of theological interest simply by the semantic course they describe. On these occasions Lewis does not hesitate to speak his mind. His tracking "world" is a good example. In Anglo-Saxon there are two senses: one means "age" as in the "world" of Johnson or of fashion; the other is the more expected "region that contains all regions." But these two meanings give immediate birth to a third. Lewis quotes Boethius: "...in how bottomless a pit the mind lies suffering when the mutabilities of this *worulde* beset it." The philosopher does not mean the natural vagaries of the super region like climate or politics, for these would be but examples of the mutabilities he laments. Nor does he mean the vagaries of an age, for he laments an eternal predicament. No, according to Lewis, "world" has taken on the meaning of something along the lines of a human "common lot," a state which is as lasting as the super region but, nonetheless, remains as unaccountable as the vagaries of any given age. Shakespeare says in *As You Like It* that the region of regions has a certain "wag" to it. This "wagging" is now itself a world.

In Latin, "world" may be *terra*, the earth, or it may be *orbis*, the inhabitable earth. Or it may be *saeculum*, as in the phrase "children of the world," the "worldly" as opposed to the otherworldly. This last meaning generally translates into Greek *aeon* that can mean one's life of a sort of any life. Thus it comes to mean "fortune." "Fortune" can become fortune in general, *e.g.*, fate or destiny. Thus,

what once signaled a definite period of time, now means an age of ages, a super period of all times. At this point, Lewis warns, both literature and theology students must watch their translations. For instance, when Matthew 12:32 is translated “neither in this world nor the world to come,” the reader is inclined to assume that the evangelist is referring to what Lewis calls a “land of the happy dead” rather than to the *age* in which God’s rule will be undisputed, as Matthew’s use of *aeon* intends. The translation of *aeon* to “world” is correct, but “age” is even better.

Lewis says that he would bet “fifty pounds” that the translator chose “world” and the readers took this for “region” because faith has collapsed from a hope in the coming reign of God for all flesh to see, to one in “going to Heaven when you die.” One can feel at this point Lewis’s wanting to turn directly to theology. But he awaits the proper occasion. And how many times on those occasions do we hear him excoriate the idea that heaven is a “damp cloud,” a damp cloud where everyone is “kind.”

Theological verbicide by the experts occurs in the history of the word “nature.” “Nature” means “kind” or “sort.” It can also signal the world apart from rational life; then it can mean all life *including* rational life. Finally it can mean a moral standard as in “it is natural to resist murder.” Thus, the word is hegemonous and often demands of its users the prefix “super.” With this tag, so ripe for verbicide, the theological issue arises. Commoners will kill the idea of a world “above” or “beyond” nature by making “supernatural” mean “spectacular”; but the experts kill it by rendering it to mean the “non-existent.” For Lewis this move does not end, as we have seen with other examples of verbicide, with a vague idea; rather it ends with a ridiculous one. If fairies don’t exist, he asks, why call them supernatural? Why not

say the same of books that have never been written?

But perhaps we could say that it is Lewis, not the experts, who has prejudged the issue and left an aura of evaluation around the word. The experts’ translation of “supernatural” might not be verbicide at all. It might be simply the result of a principled investigation which has determined that, like it or not, there is simply nothing beyond nature.

This question does not invite a theological consultation; it demands one. *Miracles* (1947, 1960), especially that brilliant section where Lewis takes on the grand skeptic David Hume,<sup>6</sup> provides us with help. Hume holds that the regularities of nature rule out miracles, rule out the “supernatural.” “Each fresh experience confirms our belief in regularity,” Hume calmly reminds the reader, “and therefore we reasonably expect that it will be confirmed.” Lewis’s counter is that *regularity* cannot be “expected”—it cannot be “unexpected.” Statements of probability, rather, are *based* on regularities: if you put your hand in the fire it will most likely burn; but the chance that this uniformity might be suspended or overruled cannot *itself* be judged on the basis of uniformity. The chance of canceling a class cannot be determined by the schedule.

Here we probably have the reason Lewis was so quick to say in *Studies in Words* that the experts’ translation stems from a biased evaluation. Lewis quotes Sir Arthur Eddington: “...in science we sometimes have convictions which we cherish but cannot justify...we are influenced by some innate sense of the fitness of things.” And that a thinker as careful as Hume, whose skepticism is otherwise so thorough and honorable (as Lewis is quick to state), commits such an error at such a vital juncture indicates that some conviction too deep for detection must have been at play.

But though we must do some particu-

lar theological investigation to uncover his entire case here, anyone who knows anything about Lewis can cite a host of lines from any genre of his work to show that he greatly feared the consequences of this single act of verbicide and the resulting acclaim for sheer natural fitness and regularity. For example, early in *The Screwtape Letters*, Screwtape advises that the moment his "patient" has a glimmer of thought on glory, Wormwood should turn the patient's thoughts to the normal and everyday. "Have him watch a bus go down the street," Screwtape counsels; with this act his thoughts will jump back into their "proper patterns."

In *Studies on Words*, Lewis as philologist is quite clear about this fear. He traces the history of "Life" from standing for "breath," a property of the body, our soul, our vitality, our moral career, our vocation, our common lot, and much else. But in our era "life" has taken on the nation of being "all there is." Perhaps the phrases "all there can be" or "all we can abide" capture best what Lewis sees us doing when we speak of "life." Thus Henley, Lewis recalls, sings "...Life! Life! 'Tis the sole great thing this side of death." Lewis's first response is to poke some fun at this clarion of the modern hero: it is not just the sole "great" thing, he says; it is the *only* thing at all this side of death. But his mirth is intended to point out the pathos of a civilization whose only flag, whose only cause, whose only joy, is found in the mere fact that it exists. Our peculiar zeal, our "vocation," our "career," seems now to be only for that "breath" to suck the affections dry. We no longer wish life on things because we love them, he says; rather we love them because they are in "life." This leads to the horror of our own late time. For if life is our rudimentary evaluative term, then what we do not like, we say, ought not to be life.

And so we finally come to the classic *The Abolition of Man*. What does Lewis

do in this great book but show that the suicide of the West is being performed by verbicide, and that it is not simply being performed: it is indeed being counseled. The "Green Book," that English text he leaves nameless, *teaches* the young that our appreciations are merely evaluations. The authors, Lewis reports, contend that the phrase "the beautiful waterfall" says nothing at all about the waterfall; it refers only to the speaker's emotions, likes, and dislikes. They tell the young, then, to trust their "primitive" instincts. It is Lewis's lot to remind us that an act of verbicide against "primitive" can, and most often does, go the other way. The word can signal "savages" as well as "innocents."

*Studies in Words*, then, teaches the philological lesson. In the word "simple," another of Lewis's entries, we have in its literal sense a sign for an object as it is simply in itself, as it is in the round, as it is in its unique integrity. A quick move of modern verbicide, however, results in the current meaning, that is, something we are superior to, as Lewis says, "something that leaves our self love secure," something innocent or savage.

There are several other examples of a trade between philology and theology in *Studies in Words* that support Lewis's depiction of the tragic plight of the self which follows the self's voting for itself at the expense of an appreciation for the other. Lewis is not a philologist who simply could not resist making sporadic moralistic remarks, nor did he write the book in order to do just this. That Lewis is the Lewis whom the experts dismiss and the commoners idolize—a man who moves his studies with *ad hominem* appeal and assurance. But the beauty in *Studies in Words* lies entirely in the axiom which Lewis defends and renders so well: true and lasting moral comment is made by leaving selfhood behind and pursuing the objective. Prescinding from the range of the reading and the complexity of the

tracings, this pursuit of the objective is the power, too, of the book. In following semantic change simply, we stumble, we fall, at times we stop and weep over modernity. A philological discovery concerning semantic change is found to be a lesson in faith and ethics as well.

Lewis took this match and dovetailed genres. In *The Four Loves*, also published in 1960, Lewis analyzes "love" by explaining the meaning of four Greek words: *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*—affection, friendship, sexual love, and charity. In this book word-studies come to the di-

rect aid of theology and ethics. Given that the topic is love—the highest regard we can give the other—and given the recurring lesson his notes on semantic change were leaving, as we discover in *Studies in Words*, Lewis must have felt that apologetics by way of philology was his only recourse.

1. (Cambridge, 1987), 140-41.
2. (New York, 1960), 311-12.
3. *The Grand Miracle*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York, 1970), 71.
4. *Op. cit.*, 148.
5. (New York, 1962), 89.
6. (New York, 1960), 100-104.