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**Gary L. Tandy, *The Rhetoric of Certitude: C. S. Lewis's Nonfiction Prose*. Review by Simon Vaughan  
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Gary L. Tandy, *The Rhetoric of Certitude: C. S. Lewis's Nonfiction Prose* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2009). 135pp. ISBN 978-0873389730.

I feel uneasy sometimes when I read Lewis. I am convinced by what he says, but am I convinced by the strength of his logic or by the skill of his rhetoric? And is the waning of my conviction, when I am not reading him, down to my own weak will or to the passing of a transitory effect that has been worked on me?

Reading Professor Tandy's book, which makes explicit the rhetorical techniques Lewis employed in his non-fiction works, has reminded me of this uneasiness, though it has not allayed it. This is because of the decision by the author to deal with Lewis' rhetoric in isolation from the merits of his arguments. Such an approach may be desirable when Lewis is treated as a 'cult figure', championed by Christians but largely ignored by 'mainstream' literary scholars. Isn't it time we studied Lewis the writer, not Lewis the Christian writer? It also has the benefit of bringing into view Lewis' works of literary criticism, which are often dealt with (if they are dealt with at all) as an adjunct to his apologetics rather than as the soil from which all his thought grows. But I was left wondering whether the approach was rendered unsatisfactory by the terms of Lewis' own writing. If Lewis' aim was to convince, can an analysis of his rhetoric that is indifferent to the validity of his arguments serve as anything other than an inventory of tropes and figures?

A further troubling question is whether Lewis' defence of Christianity is separable from his attack on modernity. As Tandy observes at the beginning of his book, Lewis, though not ignorant of modern culture, was averse to its messiness, and it is from this observation that Tandy proceeds to his thesis: that 'Lewis's rhetorical theory and prose style reflect [an] attitude of simplicity in the face of complexity, certainty in the midst of doubt' (17). But implicitly the question is raised, only to be side-stepped: did Lewis identify Christianity too closely with, and seek its justifications too narrowly within, his cultural preferences? After all, the greatest modernist poet, T.S. Eliot, became, like Lewis, a convert to Christianity.

In the second chapter, Tandy attempts to establish that there is a tacit theory of rhetoric in Lewis' non-fiction. The focal point of this theory is not the writer himself – the autonomous artist demanding the recognition that is his due – but the reader for whom the message is intended. Unlike some modernist writers, Lewis was not indifferent to the capacities of his readership but adapted himself to them, testing the results empirically. Style was for him a strategy, not an outgrowth of personality. Out of this approach, however, comes a danger, which Tandy does not consider. Lewis effaces himself, but by 'locking onto' his readers he risks becoming their pursuer. A more 'self-centred' writer might rather beckon.

The third chapter introduces some terms from classical rhetoric. Tandy distinguishes aspects of Lewis's rhetoric according to Aristotle's categories of *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. Unsurprisingly, Lewis is seen to prefer the rational appeal to the emotional, but the chief finding is his reliance on analogy in making his arguments. Here we encounter again the limitations of Tandy's method. Implicit in his analysis is that the analogical is not necessarily the logical – analogy may have the effect on us of proof, but it does not constitute proof – but he does not tease out the implication. Similarly, he draws our attention to certain fallacies found in Lewis, such as *argumenta ad ignorantiam* and *ad hominem*, but the verdict that these may invalidate some of Lewis' arguments remains latent.

It is not until the fourth chapter that Tandy, having found established schemes of rhetoric a poor fit for Lewis' prose, brings in the book's central notion of 'the rhetoric of certitude'. This he borrows from an article of 1968 by Winston Weathers in *The Southern Humanities Review*, which puts forward alternative rhetorical categories, based on the 'posture of mind maintained in a piece of writing', which are intended to 'reveal, not only the effect the author wishes to produce, but also his – or his persona's – attitude toward a subject'. The category of 'certitude' is contrasted with those of 'judiciousness', 'involvement', and 'absurdity'. According to Weathers, the work of a writer of certitude is characterized, among other things, by 'the high incidence of pejorative diction' and 'an emphatic use of words denoting the absolute'; 'obverse iteration, denial, and diminutions as standard means of expressing and developing ideas'; 'the elaborate use of exact word repetition, both within the sentence for coherence and from one sentence to another for momentum'; and aphorism. What follows from Tandy is a list of examples drawn from Lewis' non-fiction that are (or, more rarely, are not) consonant with these characterizations. This is the best part of the book, and Tandy shows his skill at parsing Lewis' prose. The fifth and final chapter does not add much, merely reiterating the underlying unity of style in Lewis' theological and critical writings.

Though short, the book is a tiring read because of its bittiness. It gives the impression, not of being ‘through-composed’, but of having been assembled from quotations from other sources with the author providing linking material. In the fourth chapter, in which Lewis’ rhetorical figures are distinguished and analysed, this is justifiable; in other places, where the author builds his theoretical framework from secondary sources less quotable than Lewis, I wished that Tandy had followed Lewis’ example and assimilated his reading before he began writing. The many quotations from Lewis also show up a lack of variety in Tandy’s own syntax, but this is not an especial fault: Lewis shows up everyone.

As I have suggested, however, the principal shortcoming of the book is the faintness of its conclusions. It is not clear – because of his abdication of judgement – whether Tandy thinks certitude a good stance or a bad. The book’s dedication indicates that he is a Christian and a Lewisian, but listing Lewis’ rhetorical devices one after another has the effect of an initiation in a magician’s tricks. Perhaps, however, if the two tasks were undertaken together, we should find that Lewis is no illusionist: that his rhetoric is inseparable from his logic, and that, as in a Gothic cathedral, beauty is married to structural soundness.

Simon Vaughan