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**Thomas Möllenbeck and Berthold Wald, eds.,  
*Wahrheit und Selbstüberschreitung.  
C. S. Lewis und Josef Pieper über den Menschen.*  
Review by Arend Smilde**

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Thomas Möllenbeck and Berthold Wald, eds. *Wahrheit und Selbstüberschreitung. C. S. Lewis und Josef Pieper über den Menschen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011). 221 pp. ISBN 9783506771575.

When the present volume of essays came to my attention, it seemed to stand out from the mass of publications on C. S. Lewis simply because it is in German. It also seemed to deserve some preferential attention for the same reason. While Anglophone writers on C. S. Lewis will never be short of potential readers, anyone writing about him in another language struggles to be even briefly noted by the wider world. Yet, if new light on the subject is still to be expected at all, it is now perhaps as likely to come from outside the English-speaking world as from within.

The book is a collection of nine pieces, five of which were presented as papers for a symposium at the Theological Faculty of Paderborn in June 2010 about the intellectual legacies of Lewis and the German philosopher Josef Pieper (1904-1997). The symposium's title was 'In the wider World: on C. S. Lewis's and Josef Pieper's View of Man'. The book's title can be translated as *Truth and Self-Transcendence: Lewis and Pieper on Man*. As appetizers, an unpublished 1954 letter from Lewis to Pieper and a brief talk on Lewis given by Pieper in 1984 precede the main fare.

In addition to the quality and importance of most of these pieces, the book may have one or two more surprises in store for Anglophone and other non-German readers. One is the note on Norbert Feinendegen in the list of contributors, more particularly the reference to his 2008 dissertation *Denk-Weg zu Christus: C. S. Lewis als kritischer Denker der Moderne*.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who will take the trouble to get hold of that 616-page tome will soon realize that this is a truly monumental work. It is dedicated to Feinendegen's 'first teacher of philosophy,' the late Dr. Friedrich Hoh, 'who taught me to take C. S. Lewis seriously as a thinker'. As I began reading that dissertation, it was uncomfortable to reflect that such a book on Lewis should have existed for several years without my noticing it at all. Having read it, I find it

almost distressing to realize that this milestone in Lewis scholarship is likely to remain forever unnoticed 'in the wider world' where it belongs.

Another bonus contained in the Paderborn volume is what may for many non-German readers be their first introduction to Josef Pieper. He was a Catholic professor of philosophy at the university of Münster from 1950 until his retirement and, in one way or another, remained academically active there almost until the end of his long life. A ten-volume edition of his collected works appeared around the turn of the century (*Werkausgabe*, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg). Although some of his writings were translated into English, Dutch, and presumably a few more languages, I confess that Pieper's name used to be little more for me than a mere name. Pieper seemed simply one of those countless forgotten authors whose works fill most of the shelves of second-hand-bookshops.

However, his brief 1984 talk, as printed here, seems calculated to endear him to anyone who holds Lewis dear. Pieper tells us about a moment in the early 1950s when he had translated Lewis's *The Problem of Pain* and submitted an afterword to the publisher. Pieper had decided not to use this afterword for any additional thoughts on the subject of the book, nor even to provide any details about Lewis, who in fact was still quite unknown in Germany. Instead, he wrote a piece *über die Schlichtheit der Sprache in der Philosophie*, 'On Plainness of Language in Philosophy'. His publisher thought this not very relevant and asked him to write something else. Pieper stood firm, however, because

that plainness of language which is so seldom found in philosophical-theological writing needs to be pointed out as highly characteristic of this author, distinguishing him from others. (16)

– surely a kind of praise for Lewis which in itself deserves praise. One wonders whether Pieper had been inspired, in addition to Lewis, by Brand Blanshard's 1953 lecture 'On Philosophical Style'.

However, more is involved in Pieper's plea for plain language than immediately meets the eye. He was in fact writing, not about plain language as such, but about its relation to *Philosophie*; and Pieper is quick to explain that he,

like Lewis himself, regard[s] philosophy as a discipline which, while distinct from theology, is certainly not to be detached from it. (16)

Soon after reading these words, I found this view elaborated in Pieper's little book *Was heißt philosophieren?* (1948); and the deep affinity of Pieper's thought to Lewis's became all the more evident. It seems no exaggeration to say that the two men were intellectual comrades-in-arms, fighting the same intellectual battles. In a

word, they were Platonists: Pieper explicitly so, Lewis usually in more implicit ways if only because he was not a philosopher by profession. And in the philosophical climate of the time, they were voices crying in the wilderness.

The point to note, however, is that Pieper's Platonism was intimately linked with his passion for plain language. While precision of language remains a fine thing, it is, in Pieper's view, the peculiar way in which precision is *lacking* from plain language which makes it the indispensable vehicle of 'pre-philosophic' tradition. Now a reverence for that tradition is integral to Plato's philosophy; and Plato's philosophy is, for Pieper, simply Christian philosophy *avant la lettre*. Or to put it differently, Christian philosophy is Platonic philosophy after Christ. Hence any defender of this school must be a defender of plain language not in spite of, but because of its lack of precision.

Certainly such a view seemed quite as hopelessly obsolete in the middle decades of the 20th century as it does today. But then, surely, the appearance and activities of this highly learned, intelligent and eloquent Platonist is all the more interesting in these adverse circumstances; and the same is true of his obvious affinity to C. S. Lewis. In fact, when Pieper's little book of 1948 was translated into English and published along with another short book in one volume called *Leisure: the Basis of Culture* (1952),<sup>2</sup> its meaning in the context of the time was effectively brought out in a preface by T. S. Eliot.

The first piece in the volume, by Norbert Feinendegen (Bonn), is about Lewis's 'critique of the modern paradigm of scientific enlightenment' and takes its title from the lapidary final sentence of *The Abolition of Man* – 'To "see through" all things is the same as not to see.' Both here and in parallel sections of his dissertation, Feinendegen notes a couple of interesting cases of implicit or explicit philosophical recognition for Lewis, more especially for that great little book of 1943. Perhaps especially noteworthy is *The Abolition's* resemblance to the famous critique of 'instrumental rationality' by the 'Frankfurt' philosophers Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

Next comes a contribution not presented at the Paderborn symposium. Uwe Meixner (Augsburg) discusses Lewis's 'argument from Reason', a linchpin of his attack on naturalism. Since Meixner is a professor of philosophy, his verdict deserves attention:

The philosophical intuition of Lewis, an amateur in philosophy, is indeed remarkably accurate. However, it is not unusual for Lewis's rhetoric – i.e. the very quality that wins him such a wide audience – to overdo, not to say overrun it. (70)

An essay by Juan F. Franck (Montevideo, Uruguay) on ‘the Platonic Inspiration of Pieper’s Philosophy’<sup>3</sup> discusses, among other things, the timeless element in Plato’s continual debate with the Sophists. This is the last piece in the first section, ‘Wahrheit’. As may be guessed from the book’s title, the second section is about ‘Selbstüberschreitung’. The first piece here is one by Berthold Wald (Paderborn), editor of Pieper’s collected works, writing about ‘Self-transcendence as the meaning of philosophizing according to Josef Pieper’. It is here that the clearest light is thrown on the deep affinity between Pieper and Lewis as thinkers. The professional philosopher and the amateur appear, in effect, to have been complementing each other’s work. We also learn here that for Pieper the great figures of Western philosophy, besides Plato, were Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

The last section, ‘Über den Menschen hinaus’ (‘Beyond Man’) is opened by Judith Wolfe, editor of the present Journal and the only real Lewis scholar at the symposium besides Feinendegen. Her paper on ‘The Eschatological Anthropology of C. S. Lewis’ makes no reference to Pieper, but, in highlighting a problem about Lewis’s relation to Plato, it nevertheless provides a critique which both men would almost certainly have been happy to take to heart. At any rate is it elucidating for their readers now.

Next comes a fine example of joint Lewis and Pieper scholarship – implicitly suggesting, perhaps, that any really new and interesting light on Lewis may be more and more likely to come from outside the English-speaking world rather than from within. Till Kinzel (Braunschweig) writes about ‘Human Pain in the World’, taking his cue from what he calls an ‘unfinished dialogue’ between Ernst Jünger, C. S. Lewis and Josef Pieper. It may seem odd to construe whatever connection, or even antithesis, between Lewis and Ernst Jünger (1895-1998); however, the fact is that some sort of comparability was clearly suggested by Pieper as he chose a title for his translation of *The Problem of Pain* in 1954: *Über den Schmerz* (‘On Pain’). Ernst Jünger had published a book under the same title in 1934. It is thus as if Pieper, through this translation, hoped to give a reply to Jünger’s one-sided and in fact baseless advocacy of ‘courage’ (*Tapferkeit*). As Pieper wrote in a 1942 pamphlet called *Ritterlichkeit als soldatische Tugend* (‘Chivalry as a Military Virtue’), the virtue called courage is not detachable from the other cardinal virtues. Human ‘readiness for suffering’ (*Schmerzbereitschaft*), he said, is ‘directly related to an endorsement of the supreme value and supreme reality’ (123). Readers of the present volume may want to add that this *Schmerzbereitschaft* is thus obviously related to *Selbstüberschreitung*. Readers of Lewis may further add the question whether it is coincidence that only two years earlier, in August 1940, when their respective

countries were locked in a battle for life or death, Lewis had written about ‘The Necessity of Chivalry’.

Thomas Möllenbeck (Paderborn, co-editor of this volume with Berthold Wald), contributed another piece devoted to *The Abolition of Man* under the title ‘Virtue and Taboo – without God?’ The essay explores the way Lewis was promoting a Christian view of man while avoiding any Christian exclusiveness and indeed explicitly denying its specific Christian character; this is compared to Pieper’s different approach. There are interesting episodes about Nietzsche (who called Christianity ‘Platonism for ordinary people’), Alasdair MacIntyre, and Erik Wielenberg. It should be added that this piece is one of the few in the volume which Pieper might have criticized for its lack of *Schlichtheit* and its free use of what Blanshard called the ‘Teutonic’ sentence structure.

The final piece in the volume is one by Jörg Splett, a retired philosophy professor from Frankfurt and Münster, on ‘Man as an Image of the Trinity’. This comparatively brief text is so dense that it seems to be a collection of barely developed notes rather than an essay. That brings me, finally, to a minor point of criticism. The book appears to have been produced with a surprising lack of that fabled feature of German scholarship – *Gründlichkeit*, thoroughness. On the very first page, an obscure passage in Lewis’ 1954 letter to Pieper (as printed) is due to a transcription error (‘as’ for ‘and’), as appears from the facsimile that follows. In Kinzel’s essay, page 123, line 14, read ‘Jünger’ for ‘Pieper’. The last few page numbers in the table of contents are wrong. One author’s details are lacking from the list of contributors. No dates of birth and death for either Lewis or Pieper are given anywhere in the book. And the two men’s portraits on the front cover, while each is alright by itself, are so different in size and style that they make an ugly pair. All this is a shame; but of course it hardly detracts from the value of this book, which is not only valuable in itself but an impressive and important reminder that there is more to Lewis than can be said in English.

Arend Smilde

## Notes

[1] The title’s first word translates somewhat awkwardly into English; instead of ‘Thought-Road to Christ’ it might best be rendered as ‘Thinking as a Road to Christ’. The subtitle means ‘C. S. Lewis as a Critical Thinker of Modernity’.

[2] Republished in a new translation and with a preface by Roger Scruton in 1998

[3] Published in English in *A Cosmopolitan Hermit. Modernity and Tradition in the Philosophy of Josef Pieper*, ed. Bernard N. Schumacher, CUA Press, Washington D.C. 2009, pp. 251-278.