



Love, Reason and Imagination:

Samuel Schirra Interviews Joseph Pearce

About the Interviewer

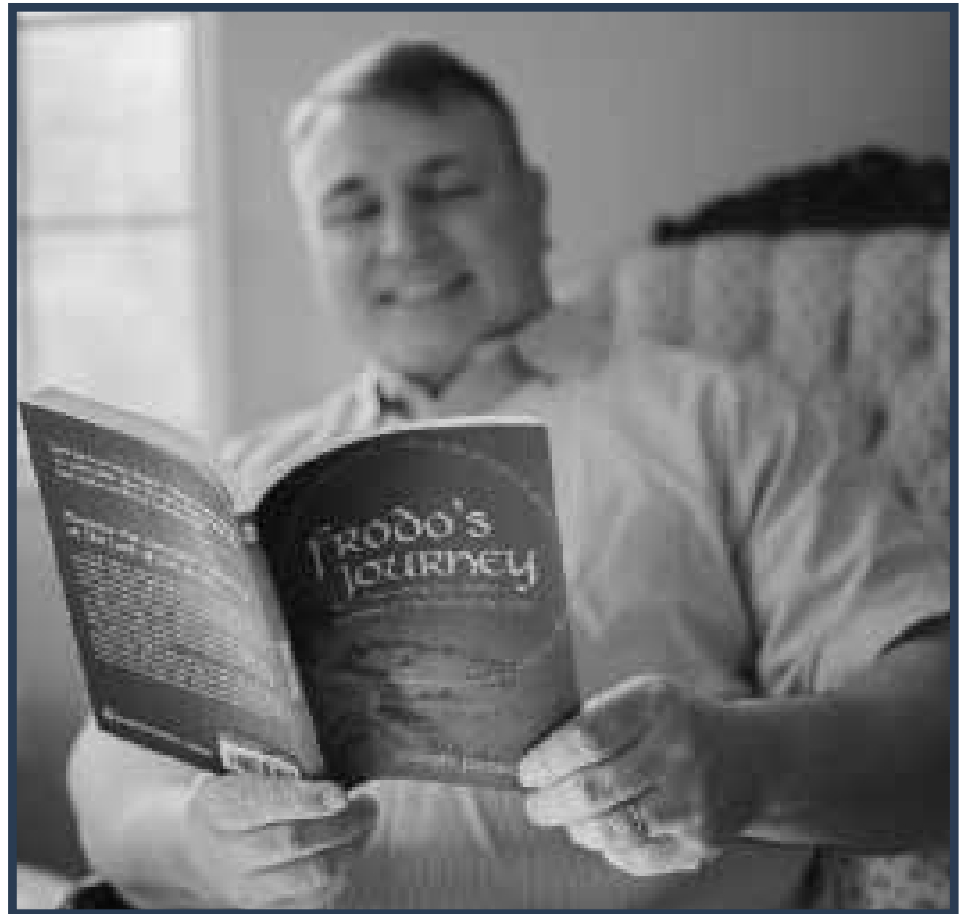
A senior at Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, Samuel (Sam) Schirra is majoring in English Literature and Language. Inspired by Joseph Pearce's evangelization of the culture through the beautiful, Sam recently founded *In Corde*, a yearly publication of Christendom undergraduates' works. Like St. Teresa of Calcutta, *In Corde* aims to be God's "little pencil", so that through its contributors' artwork, poetry, and short stories, He may redeem and elevate the human experience.

In addition to overseeing *In Corde*, Sam is the editor-in-chief and administrative director of Christendom's student opinion journal, *Metanoia Magazine*. In his spare time, Sam enjoys reading literary classics and writing contemplative poetry. After graduation, Sam plans to obtain a master's degree in theology before following in Mr. Pearce's footsteps as a Catholic writer, critic, and professor.

About Joseph Pearce

A native of England and a longtime friend of Christendom College, Joseph Pearce is a renowned Catholic literary scholar and the author of numerous bestsellers, including *Tolkien: Man and Myth*, *C. S. Lewis and The Catholic Church*, and *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton*. Mr. Pearce has also collaborated with EWTN on multiple projects, hosting several television series about Shakespeare and presenting his own documentaries on the Catholicism of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Furthermore, Mr. Pearce is the editor of the *St. Austin Review*, series editor of the Ignatius Critical Editions, senior instructor with Homeschool Connections, and senior contributor at the *Imaginative Conservative* and *Crisis Magazine*.

When neither writing nor teaching, Mr. Pearce participates in and lectures at various literary events at major colleges and



universities around the world. Mr. Pearce has also received international acclaim for his work, most recently in 2022 when he was awarded the St. John Henry Newman Visiting Chair of Catholic Studies at Thomas More College in New Hampshire. To learn more about Mr. Pearce, please visit his website at jpearce.co.

The following is from two interviews between Mr. Schirra and Mr. Pearce about Mr. Pearce's philosophy of reading, writing, and analyzing literature, as well as his own experiences as a writer. An abridged version of this interview was first published in Christendom College's Spring 2023 edition of In Corde.

PART I: ON READING

SS: Mr. Pearce, what is the purpose of reading literature?

JP: The humanities show us our humanity. Literature shows us who we are in our relations with our neighbours, including our closest neighbour, God Himself. Literature reflects the three facets of the essence of humanity: we are *homo viator*, the pilgrim on the quest for heaven; we are *homo superbus*, the proud man who refuses the quest; and we are *anthropos*, the man who looks up in wonder at the beauty of the cosmos. We are on a journey, or we refuse the journey, which makes our lives a story of

a journey taken or a journey forsaken. Our lives are a life-story. We are also called to see the goodness, truth and beauty of Creation, looking in wonder at God's Presence in His creation. The journey is reflected in narrative literature; the wonder in lyrical literature, generally speaking. And, of course, narrative literature has been sanctified by God Himself in salvation history, which is His story of salvation, and in the fictional narratives that Jesus tells us in the form of parables.

In addition, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas both insist, as does the magisterium of the Church, that the Bible must not be read merely literally but literarily also. Saint Thomas shows us that the Bible has four levels of meaning, one of which is literal and the other three allegorical, that is, literary.

In short and in sum, the purpose of reading literature is to read reality as it is.

SS: Can a work of literature ever be understood in its objective fullness?

JP: Only God can understand anything in its objective fullness. As finite creatures, lacking omniscience, we must approach reality with the bifocal perspective of faith and reason. Faith without reason leads to heretical nonsense; reason without faith is myopically materialistic, seeing only what it thinks it sees, mistaking near-sightedness for perfect vision.

We need to perceive a work of literature in the same way that we perceive the rest of reality. We need to see it truthfully, that is, objectively, as far as this is possible with our finite perception. This requires, first and foremost, seeing it through the eyes of those who, objectively speaking, understand it better than we do. Only God understands a work of literature in its objective fullness. This is beyond our ken. But the author understands the work better than anyone, apart from God Himself. Since this is so, reading a literary work objectively requires the humility to see it through the eyes of the most authoritative non-divine other, who is the author of the work. Once we are able to perceive the work through the author's eyes, we have the right to voice a relatively authoritative critical opinion based upon our objective reading, via the eyes of the author; until then we are only offering subjective opinions.

SS: In his *Philosophy Behind Tolkien*, Peter Kreeft describes the metaphysically

Catholic backdrop of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Can we read a work well without recognizing the influence of the author's historical conditions, worldview, and intentions? Can we ever understand the work itself simply "on its merits", as C. S. Lewis argues in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*?

JP: Kreeft is right and Lewis is wrong! Although Lewis is usually right, and although Kreeft is a disciple of Lewis, it needs to be understood that some of Lewis' literary criticism is reactionary in the sense that he is reacting, or over-reacting, to the sort of criticism which stressed context to the detriment of text, such as Marxist criticism

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and the criticism of E. M. W. Tillyard, with whom he crossed rhetorical swords.

Although it is true, as Lewis maintained, that an author might achieve an authentic detachment from his work or project an alter-ego onto it, distancing it from himself, it is nonetheless true that text is always informed by context. It is especially true that the most potent and important "context" is the author's own beliefs which almost always inform his works, to one degree or another. Tolkien could not and would not have written *The Lord of the Flies* any more than William Golding could have or would have written *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien wrote that "*The Lord of the Rings* is a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" because he had made it so "unconsciously at first, consciously in the revision". If we read the work from a perspective of ignorance of Tolkien's perspective and intention, we might not see the "fundamentally religious and Catholic" dimension and, insofar as this is the case, we will be misreading the work.

SS: Still, how can we distinguish between the meaning actually present in a work of literature and the aspects of our own experiences that influence our

reading of the work? In his commentary on *Paradise Lost*, A. J. A. Waldock criticizes the approach of reading a work too liberally, "attempting to inject sense into those parts of it that do not make sense".

JP: There is a line in a song by the rock band U2 which goes a long way to answering this question: "If you want to kiss the sky, better learn how to kneel." All perception of reality is rooted in humility. And we don't have to take Bono of U2's word for it. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the path of true perception begins with humility. In what I have termed the five metaphysical senses, Aquinas teaches that humility leads to gratitude and that gratitude opens the eyes in wonder; it is only when our eyes are open in wonder that we are moved to the contemplation that opens the eyes of the mind (*dilatatio*) to the fullness of the real. These five metaphysical senses—humility, gratitude, wonder, contemplation, dilation—are necessary to seeing all reality, especially literary reality.

If we allow our own subjectivity to influence our reading of a work, as distinct from bringing our empathetic and sympathetic experiences to it, we are succumbing to the blindness of prejudice, a necessary and unavoidable consequence of the absence of humility, which theologians call pride. This is why Jane Austen, a truly great theologian and philosopher, insisted on the connection between pride and prejudice.

SS: Usually, when reading poetry and stories, we consider the literary devices each author uses. However, what if a work includes devices its author was unaware of, such that the work displays contradictions? Additionally, when surveying literary criticism, how may we determine which conflicting interpretations of a literary work are more accurate?

JP: It is perilous to conflate the two questions you ask. The author's intention is connected to the writing (subcreation) of the work; the literary criticism is related to the reading of the work.

If an author uses tropes in such a way that the work loses its integrity as a cohesive and coherent whole, he is *ipso facto* failing literarily. The same rules apply to writing literature as to understanding reality. A work of literature must make sense in terms of reality. It must be realistic in the deeper sense of its conformity to metaphys-

ical reality, which precedes and ultimately supersedes physical reality. Goodness, truth and beauty precede and transcend physical reality. Metaphysics precedes physics. A work of literature must conform to the rules of reality. If it fails to do so it is a failure literarily.

As for the conflicting interpretations of literary criticism, this is a relatively trivial thing because it is a largely relativist thing. There are many critical views of a work that are the consequence of the critic's blindness. He can read it through the prejudiced prism of multifarious ideological distortions: Marxist theory, queer theory, feminist theory, deconstructionist theory, critical race theory. There are none so blind as those who only see what they want to see.

SS: What criteria should Catholics use to determine what we read? Can we read works that do not reflect or support our Catholic philosophy, as long as they possess some merit? For example, despite its backdrop of sorcery, J. K. Rowling claims that the plot of her *Harry Potter* series is inspired by Christianity. Is a series like *Harry Potter*, which has less apparent positive moral qualities than those in *Lord of the Rings*, acceptable for Catholics to read?

JP: This is a question of prudence and temperance. Let me explain.

There are four types of books. In terms of truth and beauty, there are good-good books, good-bad books, bad-good books, and bad-bad books. Good-good books are good in terms of truth and beauty, that is, in terms of reason and morality and in terms of literary merit. Good-bad books are good in terms of truth but bad in terms of literary merit. Bad-good books are bad in terms of truth but good in terms of literary merit. Bad-bad books are bad in terms of truth and in terms of literary merit. Since there are so many good-good books, more than we can reasonably expect to be able to read in a single mortal lifetime, why would we waste our time with the rest?

Speaking personally, with respect to the *Harry Potter* books, I found them to be less than satisfactory in terms of reason and morality, due to the relativism implicit in the tacit acceptance of the employment of evil means to a good end, and I found them less than satisfactory in terms of literary merit, due to what I perceived as their formulaic nature.

SS: Is it even possible for there to be a work of literature that does not possess any redemptive value? Since God can redeem even evil actions for good, can He also bring out the best in morally depraved works of literature?

JP: There is no redemptive value in the satanic or black Mass. There is no redemptive value in evil, freely chosen and unrepented. God cannot redeem those who freely choose to refuse Him. Those who freely

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choose hell will be free to go there. God's own Love will permit this. And what is true of primal reality is true of literature also. Some literature is so unrepentantly evil that it is beyond redemption. If we are weak through the rejection of grace, it might seduce us; if we are strong through the acceptance of grace, it will revolt us. Either way, it should be shunned and left unread.

PART II: ON WRITING AND ANALYZING

SS: Must all stories have conflict, that is, can writers ever effectively portray life without the taint of our fallen human nature? Since perfection is not attainable in this life, should writers even attempt to capture the ideal in their works?

JP: Stories have conflict because each of us is at war with ourselves. As mentioned above, we are *homo viator*, the good man on the quest for heaven, but also *homo superbus*, the proud man who refuses the quest so that we can do our own thing and

go our own way. This is the conflict between good and evil which, as Solzhenitsyn tells us, takes place in each human heart. This civil or uncivil war in the very heart of man is shown to us in literature. Hence the ubiquitous presence of conflict. On the other hand, the greatest writers can show us a vision of perfection, a vision of heaven, in which there is no conflict. We think of the *Revelation* of St. John the Divine, or of Dante's *Paradiso*, or of the latter parts of Tolkien's *Leaf by Niggle*, or the final pages of Lewis' *The Last Battle*.

SS: In her novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, Flannery O'Connor's protagonist is guilty of arson and murder. Though her characterization is effective for representing the moral degradation possible in a human person, do you believe writers should ever draw a line when dealing with evil and its manifestations? Are some topics, like sexual intercourse or gratuitous violence, intrinsically off-limits for Catholics to portray in writing? If so, how should Catholic writers instead deal with these issues?

JP: Since some of the protagonists of reality are also guilty of arson, murder and gratuitous violence, and since most people have sexual intercourse, sooner or later, whether licitly in marriage or illicitly outside of marriage, literature cannot hold up a mirror to reality unless it includes these things. The question is not whether they should be included but how they are depicted. If a work of literature depicts evil as being good or at least permissible it is *ipso facto* evil in itself, however good it might be literarily. As for sexual intercourse, it is a private act which should not be observed, mainly because such voyeurism is harmful to the viewer. It can be depicted well without being observed. An example would be the beginning of the adulterous relationship between Charles and Julia in Evelyn Waugh's wonderful novel, *Brideshead Revisited*. When Julia invites Charles into her cabin on the ocean liner, we are left outside. We are not invited in. We know what's happening without being the proverbial fly on the wall.

SS: What about immoral depictions of sexuality? For example, certain characters in Shakespeare's works make sexual innuendos in jest, such as Juliet's nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. Isn't the value of a work of literature diminished by the

comments or actions of characters like these?

JP: Sexual relations are a necessary, crucial and, if properly ordered, a beautiful part of life. Sex should be part of literature because it is part of life. It is, however, very powerful. It can either be life-giving or life-destroying. It is perilous. It can't be ignored but it must be treated with great care and respect. It is possible, however, to take it so seriously or so frivolously that we forget its beauty. Puritans spurn the beauty of sex, seeing the erotic as inherently sinful, but so do the prurient who see it only as a means to gratifying desire. Good literature walks the perilous *via media* between these erroneous perspectives, showing sex as beautiful but dangerous.

Since, however, literature is also holding up a mirror to reality, it must show characters who treat it puritanically and prudishly, as well as flippantly and pruriently. Juliet's nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* is a representation of the latter perspective. Were the Nurse to be depicted in a positive light, it would make *Romeo and Juliet* an immoral work; since, however, she is shown to be a shallow and facile character who stoops so low as to suggest that Juliet commit bigamy, her view of sex is shown to be harmful.

SS: Since good stories mirror reality, are stories thus justified in having unreliable narrators, unresolved plot lines, or moral ambiguity?

JP: According to Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy-Stories", fairy stories judge the earth. They hold up a magical mirror: they show us who we are, who we should be, and who we shouldn't be. We can use this criterion to judge fiction in general, not just fairy stories.

Like in life, we have to make judgments about characters based upon what we see them do and what we hear them say. Generally speaking, a story-teller projects, in some sense, his own take on reality. A work should be judged on its correspondence to reality and on its literary merit. By merit, I mean: "What is the work as art, as literature?" God gives each writer five talents . . . but these can all be distorted and perverted by pride. There can be books that reflect reality and are good art, but there can also be books that do not reflect reality despite being good art. As discerning readers, we need to know this difference.

SS: Can a work's merits ever surpass its author's intentions?

JP: If a work is an authentic literary work, that is, if it partakes in creativity, it will always transcend the author's intentions, but it will not blatantly contradict them.

All art is the relationship between the giver of the gift (the Muse, or rather, God's grace) and the user of the gift. As per Christ's parable of the talents, the gifted artist has five talents given him at birth. Then, inspiration is poured into him by God. The work is the child of that fruitful relationship between the giver of the gift and its gifted recipient. The purity of the

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PART III: PERSONAL QUESTIONS:

SS: Mr. Pearce, who are some of the literary figures who have shaped the philosophy behind your literary criticism?

JP: There's a journey there. Before I became Catholic, I read Chesterton. Chesterton led me to Belloc; then I came to know Lewis, then Tolkien. Specifically, my thought has been shaped by Chesterton's "philosophy of myth" (in the fourth chapter of *Orthodoxy*); Tolkien's "Mythopoeia," "Leaf by Niggle", and the opening chapter of *The Silmarillion*; St. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*, which taught me that we have to think and see literarily in order to think and see at all; St. Thomas Aquinas, who taught me about the five senses necessary to see all reality (humility, gratitude, wonder, contemplation, and dilation); and the Gospel, for Christ reveals Himself to us through the story that is His Life—by entering history (which is *His Story*) . . . a story that continues through the centuries in the life of Christ's Mystical Body, the Church.

SS: How did you first get into writing, publishing, and editing?

JP: I've been a writer the whole of my life; writing has always been in my blood. When I was nine years old, a poem I wrote, "The Hedgehog", was nominated for a national poetry award. When I was twenty years old, I was the editor of two separate magazines (though this was when I was not Catholic—you can read about my conversion story in my book *Race with the Devil*).

When I became Catholic, I first published my book on G. K. Chesterton. Then, to support myself financially, I wrote two books per year on average. When I met my future wife, I realized I could not support a family as a writer alone, so I began teaching at Ave Maria University and giving lectures to the public, as well as doing editing work for Ignatius Press.

SS: If I may ask, are you currently working on anything?

JP: I am not working on any new books right now, as I have been travelling incessantly. However, I did just finish a new work, *Fifty Great Books in a Nutshell*, and I have three recent books: *Twelve Great Books: Going Deeper into Classic Literature*, released last year; *Poems Every Child Should Know*, released in March by Tan Books; and *The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful: History in Three Dimensions*, just published by Ignatius Press.

SS: Mr. Pearce, thank you so much for the time and wisdom you have given us during these interviews! As we finish, do you have any closing advice for how aspiring writers can best glorify God through our own literary works?

JP: Chesterton quipped paradoxically that a thing worth doing is worth doing badly. Writing stories and poetry are things worth doing. We should write even if we don't do it well. If, however, we've been given the five talents of which the Gospel speaks, we have a calling and therefore a duty to write well. We must use our talents to bring ourselves and others closer to the goodness, truth and beauty who is God Himself. I pray every morning that my labours might bring my soul and the souls of others closer to Him, and I pray that my words are His words. All creativity, like all of life itself, should be giving back to the giver of the gift the fruits of the gifts given.