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## **LITERATURE: A CHRISTIAN APPROACH**

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**SUMMIT MINISTRIES**  
 Oct. 19-23, 2009

### **Monday**

- Lecture 1: The Place of Study in the Christian Life  
 Lecture 2: Repairing the Ruins: Thoughts on Christian Higher Education  
 Lecture 3: The Necessity of Narrative: A Theology of Literature

### **Tuesday**

- Lecture 1: Worldviews in Literature  
 Lecture 2: Poetry  
 Lecture 3: The Expression of Emotion in Poetry

### **Wednesday**

- Lecture 1: The Praise of Christ in English Poetry  
 Lecture 2: C. S. Lewis as a Literary Scholar  
 Lecture 3: A Tryst with the Transcendentals: C. S. Lewis on Goodness, Truth, and Beauty

### **Thursday**

- Lecture 1: A Christian Role Model: Edmund Spenser  
 Lecture 2: Milton's Satan and the Post-Modern Dilemma  
 Lecture 3: Deconstructing Deconstruction

### **Friday**

- Lecture 1: Ludicrous, Lacking, or Logical? The Validity of Lewis's Trilemma  
 Lecture 2: Why Evangelicals Can't Write  
 Lecture 3: In the World but Not of It; Speaking the Truth in Love

**Bonus Evening Session I (Thursday):** "Revenge of the DWEMS: A Socratic Tetralog / One-Act Play"

**Bonus Evening Session II (Friday):** Poetry Reading / Open Forum

## THE PLACE OF STUDY IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

### Monday, Lecture 1

*"Go ye into all the world and make disciples of every creature, . . . teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you. . . ." (Mat. 28:19-20)*

Christians hold a set of beliefs about the mind and its uses that has often been hard for them to sort out. On the one hand, it would seem that there could be no greater gift than the mind, and that nothing could be more important. God is a God of truth who cannot lie, and he has made us in his own image (Gen. 1:26). He holds discourse with us and even reasons with us (Is. 1:18). We are, as far as we know, the only physical creature of whom this is true. So we would seem to be expected to act, not out of instinct like the other creatures, but out of understanding. And because our minds were made in the image of that Mind which designed the rest of the physical creation, they should be able to deal with it perceptively, constructively, and responsibly—on their own level, to see and embrace the truth of things; on their own level, faithfully to think their Maker's thoughts after him.

On the other hand, it would seem that nothing could be more dangerous to Christian faith than the mind. The human mind as it now exists is fallen, twisted and corrupted. Bullied by passion and enslaved by the will's rebellion against its Creator, it is possessed by a sinful indisposition to the truth that makes it incapable, apart from grace, of receiving or embracing spiritual truth (1 Cor. 2:14). So often has it been used to rationalize its rebellion against its Maker that what is now called "human reason" seems most untrustworthy. It becomes easy to see Reason as inherently opposed to Faith and to be suspicious of anyone who puts much stock in it. So Martin Luther infamously called Reason "the Devil's whore." And history seems to confirm these suspicions. It is not from simple Men and Women of Faith, but from Intellectuals, that Secularism and Liberalism have arisen to infiltrate the Church and seduce it from faithfulness to its message. Enough people have gone to university or (even worse!) seminary and lost their faith—or at least their zeal—that we feel justified in thinking that where there is academic smoke there must be secular fire.

But—oh, my—look what we just did! We perceived evidence of a correlation between education and secularism and drew from this evidence a conclusion: the mind and its pretensions to reason are suspect and should not be trusted. But wait a minute. If we did not trust our minds and their thought processes, how could we use them to arrive at and argue for the conclusion that we should not trust them? This is an irresolvable impasse. It seems we have no choice. We *have* to use our minds, and even trust the processes by which they work. We only have the choice to use and trust them honestly, recognizing the risk that we may get things wrong, or the choice to deceive ourselves by pretending that we do not use and trust them—thus doubling the risk that we will not only make even more of the inevitable mistakes, but have no valid means of recognizing or correcting those mistakes when we do. Even if we try to correct our mistaken ideas by quoting Scripture, we have to use our minds, in obedience to the rules of logic, to understand those Scriptural passages, perceive their relevance to the issue at hand, and apply them to it. Christians who reject the use of the mind as "unspiritual" do not have a position that they can--or do--practice consistently. They have actually been known to use their minds quite rigorously for the purpose of thinking up convincing reasons why we should not be using them! And this irony should be a clue that, in spite of the valid evidence that would seem to lead to their conclusion, they have gotten something wrong.

Once we stop to think about it, it is not hard to see where their error lies. We began by presenting two biblical views of the mind: created in the image of God and therefore able to think his thoughts after him; and corrupt and fallen, incapable of receiving the things of the Spirit. As these views are both biblical, any accurate view of the mind must then be one that somehow encompasses both of them. The suspicious believer acts as if he thought the second of those descriptions could simply overturn or replace the first. But in so doing he forgets both the role and the power of Grace. For Redemption is about beginning the restoration of what was lost in the Fall, and the life of the mind is no exception to this

principle. Why should the mind be the only human faculty that is so fallen that God cannot save it, Christ cannot redeem it, and the Spirit cannot sanctify it or use it?

A fully biblical view of the mind would therefore see the Scriptural view of its fall and corruption as *tempering* the Scriptural view of its grandeur rather than merely *replacing* it. It was corrupted, like every other aspect of our nature—not destroyed. It needs to be redeemed, not discarded. This is proved by the fact that God’s invitation to come and reason together was addressed to people after the Fall (Is. 1:18), and by the fact that the New Testament describes the renewing of our minds as part of redemption (Rom. 12:2). The mind functions spiritually only when it is saved by God’s grace, sanctified by his Spirit, informed by his Word, submissive to his wisdom, and motivated by his love. So we should strive to be sure these things are true of our minds and then *think* with them to the glory of God, not simply reject them and their use out of hand.

Grounded in such a holistic view of biblical teaching on the mind, we would then be able to beware of our propensity to rationalization, but without despising the role of right Reason. We could be suspicious of our own motives and of our conclusions when they seem self serving, but without succumbing to Post-Modernist cynicism. We could be cautious in our reasoning, but without losing faith in the Holy Spirit’s ministry of illumination. And above all we could ask God by his grace to help us obey what our Lord called the greatest commandment: to love the Lord with, among other things, all our minds (Mat. 22:37).

If that is true, then we are ready to look at the role of study in the spiritual life. For those of you who are students, I am not talking about your course work. At this stage in your life, that is simply your job. You should therefore approach it in the light of biblical teaching about any work that we are called to perform. To the studies you undertake for your classes apply verses like Eccl. 9:10--“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might”; 1 Cor. 10:31--“Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”; and Col. 3:23--“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as unto the Lord rather than men.”

Rather, the question I am addressing today is this: What will—what should—be the place of study in your life when you are no longer in the position of being coerced into it by a Professor? What ought the place of study to be in your life, not because you are a student, not because you are an “intellectual,” but simply because you are a Christian? Before I can answer that question I had better explain what this “studying” is that I am talking about. I would define it as follows:

#### **DEFINITION:**

Study, as I will be using the word today, is the deliberate, serious, and sustained application of the mind, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and in submission to Scripture, to any given topic or problem, for the purpose of attaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. That is a long definition, so let me repeat it: study is the deliberate, serious, and sustained application of the mind, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and in submission to Scripture, to any given topic or problem, for the purpose of attaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

This definition is full of loaded terms. Let me see if I can unload some of them for you. It is “deliberate”: something you chose to do and plan to do, not something that just happens haphazardly. It is “serious”: it requires mental effort and exertion, and though for some of us it is inherently enjoyable, it is not a mere game but is done for a serious purpose. It is “sustained”: one devotes time to it and does it on a regular basis. It involves the application of the “mind”: that part of you that learns, analyzes, thinks, reasons, deliberates, and ponders. It is done “in dependence on the Holy Spirit”: it involves an overt decision not to trust in our own wisdom but rather to pray and ask for His illumination. It is done “in submission to Scripture,” which is the grid through which everything is filtered and the plumb line by which everything is evaluated.

It is the application of the mind to “any given topic”: we are not talking about Bible study as such, but about the study of anything and everything in relation to the Bible. Bible study per se would be a part of our topic, but not the whole. And in our study of all these things we are seeking “knowledge,

understanding, and wisdom.” “Knowledge” is the possession of facts, of information. “Understanding” is seeing how those facts relate to each other, grasping their meaning in the big picture of the totality of God’s universe. And “Wisdom” is knowing how to use that knowledge and understanding in creative and constructive ways for the glory of God, the benefit of our fellow creatures, and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. We have not achieved our purpose until we get there.

That, then, is what I mean by “study” in this talk: it is the deliberate, serious, and sustained application of the mind, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and in submission to Scripture, to any given topic or problem, for the purpose of attaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

### **THESIS:**

Now, if that is what “study” is, then perhaps my thesis will not seem as outrageous as it might sound to many people. It is this: *No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.* Study as I have defined it here is not just something for intelligent people; it is not just something for intellectuals. It is a necessary component of our identity as servants of Christ. “God,” said Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt’s wonderful historical drama *The Man for all Seasons*, “made the plants for simplicity and the animals for innocence. But Man he made to serve him wittily, in the tangle of his mind.” No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

So anti-intellectual has the Church become that, even as we have just defined it, many people will have difficulty seeing study as a requirement for all believers, not just when they are in school, but throughout their lives. But at least three considerations make this conclusion inescapable:

### **I. THE CONTENT OF SCRIPTURE COMMANDS IT.**

Scripture has at least three ways of commanding us, in effect, to be lifelong learners. The first is that it gives us, as believers in Christ, the identity of *disciples*. A disciple is by definition a learner, one who learns by imitating his Master. You cannot sign up to follow Jesus without signing up to be his disciple, i.e., his student. The Great Commission (Mat. 28:19) is to make disciples; therefore, to respond to the Great Commission is to become a disciple. And to make a disciple you first have to be one. Therefore, to try to take Christ as your Savior without taking him as your Teacher is as inconsistent and illogical as trying to have him as your Savior without having him as your Lord. The logic is inescapable. No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

In the second place, many passages of Scripture enjoin a careful and thoughtful engagement with the text of Scripture. Now, study as we have defined it means more than this, but it does not mean less; it means at least this much. According to the first Psalm, the person is blessed who delights in the Law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. 2 Tim. 2:15 commands us to study to show ourselves approved as workmen who do not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth. “Study” in the KJV is not a very accurate translation in contemporary English. The word means “be diligent” in “handling accurately” the Word of Truth. But, ironically, one cannot be diligent in this particular task without “study” in the more technical sense. So the KJV manages to get the right idea after all. No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

Finally, our Lord himself goes out of his way to add study to The Great Commandment (Mat. 22:37). The Old Testament verse he is quoting does not have it, but our Lord quite particularly adds it on his own authority: we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our strength, and all our *mind*. No one can ignore this commandment and claim to be obedient to our Lord. No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

## II. THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE NECESSITATES IT.

Paul tells us in 2 Tim. 3:16 that all Scripture is inspired by God, and that this makes it profitable. “Scripture” is the Greek word *graphe*. It means the writings—ink on parchment or papyrus. That is what was “inspired,” or breathed out of the mouth of God. God inspired those writings: those words, in other words, and no others, in that order, in those grammatical constructions written in that language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek) at that particular time in history. This means that when we read the Bible, God says what the words say in the light of their grammar, context, and historical background. These words were written in foreign languages, two to three and a half thousand years ago, in a very different time with a very different culture from our own. It is simply irresponsible to suppose that a casual reading of such a book can give us an accurate understanding of it. We need the help of those who know Greek and archaeology, the help of commentaries, concordances, and of sound methodologies and the interpretive traditions of the church. Not that these things in themselves will give us true spiritual understanding either. But they are tools the Holy Spirit uses. No one who is too lazy to use them need think he will learn anything from the Lord. And how can we study anything else if we are not willing to be serious students even of Scripture? No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

## III. THE COMMISSION OF SCRIPTURE REQUIRES IT.

As we have already seen, the Great Commission requires us to make disciples of all nations. It requires us first to be disciples, that is, learners, and then to help others become disciples, that is, learners. How can we teach others to learn from the Master unless we are doing so ourselves? It is simply not possible.

Scripture uses other pictures of our identity and role as well, and they carry the same implication. We are also called Ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20). An ambassador represents his government to that of another country. As ambassadors of Christ we have the authority to speak for him in offering the treaty (or New Covenant) of the Gospel to others and persuading them in his name to accept it. Now, what would you think of a person who was appointed as an ambassador to a foreign land, and who presumed to undertake his assignment without studying its language, its culture, its customs, its history? He would not make a very effective representative unless he knew these things as well as the terms he was authorized to offer to these people, would he? Well, if we are ambassadors of Christ, then that is precisely our position between Christ and the world we were sent to reach.

A third picture Scripture gives us is that we are the Stewards of Creation (Gen. 1). Our Father made the world, designed it, and is redeeming it. He placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to dress it and keep it—to take care of it for him. We are still responsible to God for the care of his creation, though now we exercise our stewardship in rebellion and hence often rather badly. Nevertheless, stewards of creation is still our identity and our role under God, and part of redemption is being restored to awareness of that role and to responsible action in it.

This knocks down all the walls. To have God, the Creator, as our Father makes the whole universe our back yard and our field of operation. History, art, literature, science, politics, medicine—whatever the field, whatever the endeavor, Christ has a claim on it and has something to say about it—through us as his representatives. To serve him thus we must know something about these fields of human endeavor and we must think critically, constructively, and creatively about them in the light of the teaching of his Word. No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life.

**APPLICATION:**

The conclusion is inescapable. Every disciple of Jesus, because he is a disciple of Jesus, is called to be a life-long learner. There is no other way for us to fulfill the roles we have been given. Let me therefore suggest some practical steps as we pursue this calling, as we try to make study and the life of the mind an ongoing part of life even after the framework of formal schooling is removed.

**A. SCHEDULE TIME FOR IT.** Serious study is not going to happen otherwise. Life will crowd it out. But if you spend just thirty minutes or an hour a day reading something you don't have to read for work, something that can deepen your understanding of the biblical worldview and of the world we were sent to reach with it and in which we are called to apply it, the long term cumulative effects will be significant.

**B. COMPILE A LIFETIME READING PLAN.** Not that you will ever finish it—that's not the point. Mine grows faster than I can read the things on it. But if you proceed according to a plan rather than haphazardly, you will get more done, and more significant things done, in the long run. It should include the great classics of the Faith—Augustine's Confessions, Calvin's Institutes, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Milton's Paradise Lost, the works of G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Francis Schaeffer. It should also include some works that support the Enemy. How shall we counter his strategies effectively if we do not know what he is up to? And it should be read critically.

**C. ASK QUESTIONS OF EVERYTHING YOU READ.** The better the questions you ask, the better the answers you will get. Important and essential ones include the following: How does this fit in with what God teaches us in Scripture? How does it relate to my identity as a person created in the image of God? How does it relate to my identity as a Disciple of Christ, an Ambassador of Christ, as a Steward of Creation? How does it relate to my particular calling as an individual believer? How does it glorify the God of all truth? And what does He want me to do about it?

**CONCLUSION:**

Every disciple of Jesus, because he is a disciple of Jesus, is called to be a life-long learner. "God has room for people with very little sense," said C. S. Lewis, "But he expects them to use all the sense they have." Matthew Arnold said that the purpose of study was "to see the object as in itself it really is," and on the basis of that vision "to discern and propagate the best that has been thought and said in the world." Unfortunately, without faith in Christ, Arnold gave us no basis on which such lofty goals could be pursued. But the Christian has a greater motive for pursuing them and a greater hope for attaining them. John Milton said that "The end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, and to be like him." And since Christ is Lord of all and His Word is relevant to all, the Christian who is thus learned will be "fit to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both public and private, of peace and war."

What is the place of study in the Christian life? No one can be a serious and obedient disciple of Jesus Christ without giving a significant place to study in his life. Every disciple of Jesus, because he is a disciple of Jesus, is called to be a life-long learner. Why? Because this by God's grace may enable us better to obey the Great Commission: to be and make disciples. And by God's Grace it may enable us to obey better a part of the Great Commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our minds. The God of all truth deserves no less.

## REPAIRING THE RUINS

### Thoughts on Christian Higher Education

#### Monday, Lecture 2

*In the evening I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off the clothes I have worn all day, mud-spotted and dirty, and put on regal and courtly garments. Thus appropriately clothed, I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received, I feed on that food which alone is mine, and which I was born for; for I am not ashamed to speak with them and to ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me.*

Niccolo Machiavelli<sup>1</sup>

*There has never been a great revelation of the word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists.*

Martin Luther<sup>2</sup>

*The end, then, of learning, is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love Him, to imitate Him, to be like Him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which, being united to the heavenly grace of faith, makes up true perfection.*

John Milton<sup>3</sup>

*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.*

Jesus of Nazareth<sup>4</sup>

On these four pillars set as cornerstones--the Renaissance Scholar, the Protestant Reformer, the Christian Poet, and, supremely, the Lord of Glory--we may build as on a firm foundation our Christian philosophy of education.

The classical concept of education which inspired men of the Renaissance like Machiavelli involved growing out of the provincialism of one's own time and place to become a citizen of the ages. They heard around them the echoes of a great Conversation as old as the race, in which the great Minds wrestled with the great Questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What is ultimately real? What is the Good, the True, the Beautiful? How do we know? They strove to acquire the intellectual equipment--languages, logic, rhetoric, hermeneutics, etc.--which would enable them to enter into that Conversation themselves, to benefit from the wisdom of the ancients, and perhaps even to make a small contribution of their own for the use of future generations. It was in books that the Conversation took place, and in their own books it would continue when they themselves had faded into dust.

The Christian vision of education is both broader and deeper than that of the ancients. It is more, but not less; it includes the classical ideal while going beyond it. We too seek to join a great Conversation already going on around us. It contains many of the same voices and deals with all of the

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<sup>1</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, Letter to Francesco Vittori, 10 December 1513, trans. Alan H. Gilbert. Qtd. From Maynard Mack, et. Al., eds., The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces, 5<sup>th</sup> Continental ed., (NY: Norton, 1987), p. 1061.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, Letter to Eoban Hess, 29 March 1523; qtd. From Wallace K. Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> John Milton, "Of Education," 1644, in Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke, eds., Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry, 2n ed. (NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> John 8:32.

same questions. But our Conversation is guided by the Voice of Scripture more surely toward the Truth, and it has as its goal not just our own personal enrichment and fulfillment but the glory of God in practical service. Therefore, the greatest service a Christian college can perform is to introduce its students to the Participants in the Conversation so that their lives can be enriched and their service informed by it. It is, in other words, to make them lovers of books<sup>5</sup>: the Bible supremely, the classics of course, and a host of heroes of the Faith who have blazed the trail before us as well.

Both Calvin and Luther recognized the debt that the Reformation--the recovery of the Gospel in its purity--owed to learning. For it was Renaissance Humanist scholars like John Colet, Lorenzo Valla, and Erasmus of Rotterdam with their battle cry of *ad fontes*, "back to the sources," who had not only recovered the original text of Scripture but pioneered the grammatico-historical exegesis that allowed its Voice to be heard clearly once again.<sup>6</sup> A providential confluence of dates captures the relationship: in 1516, Erasmus the Humanist scholar published the first printed edition of the Greek New Testament, and in 1517, Martin Luther the Protestant Reformer nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Church Door. As a contemporary proverb said, "Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it."

If we wish to preserve, defend, transmit, and intelligently apply the Gospel the Reformation recovered, we would do well then to recapture the educational emphases that made that recovery possible. For, as Luther knew, to acquire as much skill as possible in the languages and literature not only of the New Testament itself but also of the Greco-Roman world from which it sprang is to attune our ears to the message of those John the Baptists who can help to point us to Christ. The proliferation of technical competencies required for entry to the modern marketplace makes it impossible to reproduce literally the classical education of the past. But Evangelical Christians should recognize that their descent from both the Apostles and the Reformers gives them a special motivation for keeping all those classical voices as part of the Conversation heard by the next generation.

Listening to those voices, then, we seek to train whole people for whole lives that give glory to God in every arena of life. We must understand, as Milton reminds us, that they were made in His image, have fallen from it, and are being restored to it by His Grace. As children of the King of Heaven, the whole universe is their back yard. Therefore, they alone have the right to make truthfully the claim of the pagan Terence: "*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*" ("I am a man; nothing human do I consider alien to me"). Hence, before we educate ministers, missionaries, workers for business, or teachers, we educate men and women. Professional competence to pursue their calling they must have, but much more: As Milton also reminds us, "I call, therefore, a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both public and private, of peace and war."<sup>7</sup> The Bible, the Liberal Arts, and Professional Skill thus form for Christian educators, in a way that is impossible in the secular academy, a unified and coherent whole which they should understand and articulate as such.

The content of education for Christians is a whole based on the unity of the Truth which flows from the one God, whether revealed in Scripture, in Nature, or in History. With Scripture as the authoritative key and guide, Christian education introduces students to the ongoing quest for that Truth in its fullness, wherever it is found. As Milton explained again.

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when He ascended, and His Apostles after Him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers, who . . . took the virgin Truth and

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<sup>5</sup> For, as Milton said, "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whole progeny they are; nay, they do preserve, as in a vial, the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them." In "Areopagetica," 1644, in Witherspoon & Warnke, op. cit., p. 397.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller treatment of these issues, see Donald T. Williams, [Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters](#) (Toccoa Falls, Ga.: Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), esp. chp. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Milton, "On Education," op. cit., p. 390.



hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, . . . nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming; he shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mold them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.<sup>8</sup>

Even the limited, partial, and fragmentary glimpses we have now through a glass darkly can inform, inspire, transform, and liberate, helping us serve the Lord of Truth with the intelligent zeal He deserves.

As servants of the Lord of Truth and Light, Christian educators will strive to model and teach wholesome values and ideas. But they do not do this by burying their heads in the sand, nor by encouraging their students to do the same. As servants of the Lord of Truth, they are afraid of nothing.<sup>9</sup> They also agree with Milton that they "cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."<sup>10</sup> The primary reason their students should want to attend a Christian college is not negative but positive; not to escape the evil influence of the secular academy but because the Christian college is the West Point for Christian soldiers, preparing them to make an impact on the front lines of the spiritual and cultural wars that rage around us. There they should learn to say, "Apollyon, beware what you do; for I am in the King's highway, the way of holiness; therefore take heed to yourself."<sup>11</sup>

When Jesus said that the Truth would make us free, His primary reference was no doubt soteriological. But if God's purpose in salvation is to restore us to the fullness of our intended status as sub-regents of creation made in His image, then our Lord's dictum has pedagogical relevance as well. Truth seen as a Christ-centered whole frees us to become what we were created to be. Learn to "see God in everything," said John Donne, "and thou needst not then take off thine eye from . . . anything."<sup>12</sup> It is just that theocentric vision that Christian educators have the privilege of imparting as the basis of a life that can test the limits of our potential to glorify our Father in the marketplace of commerce, the marketplace of ideas, indeed truly in all the arenas of life.

This essay appeared as "Repairing the Ruins: Thoughts on Christian Higher Education," Christian Educators Journal 41:4 (April 2002): 19-21.

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<sup>8</sup> John Milton, "Areopagetica," op. cit., p. 411.

<sup>9</sup> "Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously . . . to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?" Milton, "Areopagetica," p. 415.

<sup>10</sup> "Areopagetica," p. 402.

<sup>11</sup> John Bunyan, The Pilgrim's Progress, in Witherspoon & Warnke, op. cit., p. 515.

<sup>12</sup> John Donne, "Sermon XXIII," 1640, in Witherspoon & Warnke, op. cit., p. 79.

**THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVE:  
A THEOLOGY OF LITERATURE**

**Monday, Lecture 3:**

(No written text of this lecture exists to date.)

**WORLDVIEWS IN LITERATURE**

**Tuesday, Lecture 1**

(See Power Point File by this title under HUM 103 under “courses” on *Aletheia*,  
<http://www.doulomen.tripod.com>.)

## POETRY

### Tuesday, Lecture 2

Every human society we have ever known has had a mode of speech that is more rhythmical, more formal, more suggestive, more intense, more structured, and more potent than the normal ones it uses for everyday discourse. It can be more serious or more playful than regular language, or both at the same time. Though it can often be described after the fact by complex and even rigid sets of rules, it is almost never produced by them, but rather by a strange kind of intuition we have been tempted to call inspiration and ascribe to the influence of the gods. Human beings and human communities have used this special speech to tell their stories, to mark their solemn and festive occasions, to preserve their memories, to transmit their lore, to record (and sometimes to discover) their insights, to teach their young, to pass their time, and to celebrate their lives. Everybody recognizes it when they hear (or read) it, but it is almost impossible to define.

We are speaking, of course, of that special verbal magic known as *Poetry*. The impulse to its creation and enjoyment being a common human trait, it is impossible to imagine life in many cultures without it. There is only one society on record in which it is considered unmanly, in which its more artistic forms are practiced only by an isolated elite who write, only for each other, texts which would be utterly incomprehensible to the general public. And that is our own, though only in the last century or so. We have already come to accept this situation as normal. But in the history of human culture it is a fearful aberration indeed. For it cuts us off, not only from our own contemporary poets, but increasingly from the rich heritage of verse handed down to us by our ancestors, whose voices could still enrich our lives had we not become prejudiced against them by the excessively obscure, inaccessible, and private musings of our own tuneless Singers.

As a professor of literature, I have had the privilege of trying to overcome the almost universal groan that emerges from freshman mouths in Introduction to Literature classes when the section on poetry is announced. With some students I succeed; with some I fail. The task gets harder with every passing semester. Because I view this battle as a struggle for the very heart of our humanity, I want to rally and encourage the surviving lovers of poetry and give what ammunition I can to its defenders. And, besides, we all take any excuse we can get to talk about what we love. That's one of the reasons why poetry exists in the first place.

"So, what is it that this fellow loves so much about this stupid stuff, and why, for God's sake, and is there any reason beyond his own swollen ego that he wants us so badly to love it too? And if it's so all-fired great, then why do so many people find it so utterly useless and boring? And why does he have to work so hard to convince us?" So mumbles one part of the room. On the other side, a rather smaller group mutters, "What can this fool possibly think he has to add to what Ransom, Tate, Brooks and Warren, Ciardi, and Perrine have already said?" Fair questions. The following pages attempt to provide at least some hints toward some answers, perhaps, as one of our better poets promised, some momentary stays against confusion. I'm only going out to clean the Hyperian Spring. I shan't be gone long; you come, too.

### WHY PEOPLE HATE POETRY

Average Americans, as represented by average college students, think they hate poetry. Many of them are wrong. They express this feeling of hatred by never, ever buying a book of poetry to read, unless they are coerced into it by that glorious conspiracy of professors with college bookstores. But they contradict the feeling by listening with rapt attention to a Bob Dylan or a Tupac Shakur. They express it by groaning like the damned when poetry is mentioned in class. But they contradict it by showing up in droves at local coffee houses on open mike nights to read, with profuse caveats and apologies, what they themselves have written.

Where has this strange, self-contradictory, and conflicted attitude come from? The causes are no doubt complex. Part of it can be accounted for by the inevitable confrontation between the anti-intellectual, commercial/materialist bent of American society and the natural, ineradicable human drive for linguistic self-expression. There are no doubt other factors as well. But one that I am sure of is the evil influence of English Teachers.

“English Teachers? Aren’t you a member of that disreputable crew? Shouldn’t they be the heroes of this saga?” Well, some of them are. But too many are part of what sometimes seems like a vast conspiracy to obliterate any conceivable reason why anyone should value their profession. And thereby hangs a cautionary tale, the story of how I was rescued from their baleful machinations by Robert Frost.

### **THE GOOD INFLUENCE OF ROBERT FROST**

I was in about the tenth grade. My family had taken advantage of a long weekend to go camping in the North Georgia mountains. But I had caught one of those intense twenty-four-hour stomach bugs, and so lay moaning and groaning in the camper (or making frantic dashes to the outhouse) while my sisters enjoyed building dams out of rocks across the mountain stream, grilling hot dogs, and roasting marshmallows. Fortunately, on the last day my sickness departed just a few hours before we were scheduled to. My Dad worked second shift in those days, so we had a very rigid departure deadline to make sure we got back home in time for him to get to work. But I had had such a miserable trip that my Mom took pity on me. “We’ll break camp and clean up. Go have a good time and don’t worry about it. Just make sure you’re back in time to leave.”

I chose to use my reprieve by exploring the trail that followed the Tallulah River up into the hills north of the Tate Branch campground. It was simple. If I didn’t take any by-paths, I could divide the time I had in half, which would provide the precise moment I would have to turn around in order to make it back on time. In the meantime, I wanted to find—oh, I don’t know what: the source of the stream, the heart of the mountains, the root of existence. It was one of those perfect days we often get in Georgia autumns, with the yellow leaves sifting through the air like snow, the sun bright, and the air just cool enough to make exertion pleasant. With each step the terrain grew steeper, the river wilder, the journey more interesting. But there was a problem: the finitude of Time, which insisted on running out way before I had reached anything remotely resembling a satisfactory stopping point.

With ten minutes left the passage of time presented a definite dilemma; with five minutes left it had become a real difficulty. Then it became zero. But there was no way one could turn around without seeing what was over that next hill! So I cheated, stretching it by five minutes, promising myself I would walk faster on the way back. But then one had to see what was around that next bend. So I pushed it to ten minutes, in spite of the fact that I knew full well that running down hill in the mountains is a good way to break your neck. It was the first time I had become aware of this dilemma, but not the last. Years later I would describe it thus:

#### **DAYHIKER’S DILEMMA**

##### Sonnet XLVIII

Free from the load of tent and sleeping bag,  
 You pay by being more a slave to time.  
 Measure it by watch or sun, the snag  
 Is there, though slopes are easier to climb.  
 It is the time you have to turn around  
 To make it back to camp or car by night.  
 It is a law inexorable, profound,  
 And it will win (though not without a fight!).

It's best to set a time that has some play;  
 You cannot go but what you feel the spell.  
 The hidden barrier that bars your way  
 Asks to be pushed a bit e're it can quell  
 The voice that calls you on. It has no end,  
 The lure of what lies just around the bend.

There finally came that moment when this strategy had lost its credibility even with me. It was a moment of mysterious equilibrium between the curiosity and lust for adventure drawing me on and the promise made and sense of responsibility pulling me back. I turned around and, by some miracle, just made it back, on time and even in one piece. But I was not the same person as the one who had set out.

I had seen something about the human condition: how the passage of time forces choices upon us and makes them matter; how it makes our experiences of Nature's beauty ephemeral and doubly poignant in that they are fleeting and hard to grasp or preserve, and for that very reason the more to be valued; how these two effects of living in time are somehow related. I chewed on it during the ride back home, but could not then put it even into such words as I have just used.

As fate would have it, there was an English assignment awaiting me when I got back. If you know Robert Frost at all, you've probably already guessed what it was.

Like any dutiful high-school student, I was hurriedly finishing my homework in home -room before the first period bell. And this is what I saw:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.  
 And, wishing I could travel both  
 And be one traveler, long I stood  
 And looked down one as far as I could  
 Until it bent in the undergrowth.

To say I was stunned would be inadequate. How did he know? Someone else had stood in the same forest, looking down the same trail, facing the same dilemma; only he, unlike me, could say so. I knew nothing about this man, not even that his incarnation of the Wood was in New England, not even that he had recently died. But I knew that if we ever met and got to talking about hiking in the woods, we would understand each other. His trail made a "Y" where mine was forward or back, but that made no essential difference. We both knew what it meant to make that wistful, peering gaze and what it meant to take then the other path:

Then took the other, just as fair,  
 Though having perhaps the better claim  
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
 Though, as for that, the passing there  
 Had worn them really about the same.

Yes. I knew what he meant about the better claim. So far as I could tell, the only difference between my two choices that day was only one set of footprints: mine. And the preferred path (though not, unfortunately, the one I had to take) was preferred precisely because of that one missing set of prints.

And both that day equally lay  
 In leaves no step had trodden black.  
 Oh, I kept the first for another day,  
 But, knowing how way leads on to way,  
 I doubted if I should ever come back.

Well, yes again. I had already formed a resolution to go back someday and finish what I had started, and already wondered whether it would ever really happen. (It did: The path weaves its way into North Carolina and eventually joins the Appalachian Trail where it crosses the bowl between Big Scaly and Standing Indian.)

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I?  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

And here I am, telling the story over three decades later, not without a sigh, as I have done many times when teaching the poem. At the time, I was not yet capable of imagining such a future. But I was struck by the fact that this experience had already made a difference in how I saw the world, a difference intensified and augmented by reading Frost's account of what I presumed was his experience. I also pondered the fact that I had chosen the slightly more traveled path. This was initially disappointing. But I could also see that there was another way to take it. I had already encountered the fact that to be honest as this world goes is to be one man picked out of ten thousand. To choose keeping a promise over what I wanted for myself was, in a sense, to take a less-traveled path. And that was a choice that could indeed make "all the difference" in one's life.

If that were not enough, what I had glimpsed in that poem was confirmed in the next one.

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though.  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

It was a different season, a different mode of transportation, maybe the same wood or maybe a different one, but clearly the same set of issues:

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep;  
And miles to go before I sleep.

So there it was again. Frost's snowy wood and my leaf-blown one were in the same moral landscape. One had to choose between the beauty and allure or the adventure of Nature and keeping a promise. And one kept the promise, but not without a certain regret, a sigh. In that sigh was a recognition of what one was sacrificing, of its value. And somehow that recognition enhanced the value both of the promise-keeping and of the beauty being left behind.

What I had experienced was poetry as an act of communication, as a way of creating shared experience. Someone had stood in a place like the one where I had stood and had seen the same thing. The difference between us was that he could capture that vision and the understanding it gave in words, words so crafted as to create by their sound and structure as well as their meaning a receptacle in which that pondered and at least partially understood experience could be preserved and stored to be enjoyed and pondered by others. Even this I could not yet have articulated, but it was present as a kind of unassailable intuition. It was a good thing it was there before I got to class.

## THE EVIL INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

In fairness to my English Teacher, she taught us our grammar, in both theory and practice, well, something I cannot say that her successors have done for most of my students. Fragments, comma splices, faulty parallelism, and agreement errors had already been relegated to our past history. When it came to poetry, she wanted us to see past the surface. She wanted us not to think of Robert Frost merely as a simple nature poet. In this too she did well. But, as I think back on the experience, I think that for all her good intentions she committed a fatal error, one that is typical of her profession.

We started with “Stopping by a Wood.” She asked us what we thought it was about. Foolish people that we were, we thought it was about some guy watching the snow fall in the woods. “This looks like a simple poem about nature,” she intoned, “but that’s not really what it’s about at all. It’s *really* about . . . [dramatic pause] . . . a Death Wish.”

We looked skeptical. She continued. The woods were lovely, *dark*, and *deep*. And the speaker had miles to go before he *slept*. Therefore, he was really wishing he could escape all the hassles and troubles of life and be absorbed into the eternal peacefulness of death. We were unconvinced. But we had to pretend otherwise because, after all, she was The Teacher.

Now, my objection is not to the lady’s interpretation, which, in spite of our sophomoric skepticism, was not without merit. My problem is with the way in which she presented it. She said the poem *looked* like it was about nature, but it was *really* about something else. It is that word *really* that bothers me. It implies that the thing we could all see for ourselves was somehow an illusion, or, worse, a trick. It implies that the process of reading a poem is not like that of listening to a story or sharing with a friend, but rather like that of solving a puzzle. The poet has hidden the “real” meaning somewhere under the surface where normal human beings cannot find it. Only The Teacher could find it, and, to our sophomoric minds, the only means she appeared to have for doing so was divination. Yet, in order to get a Good Grade, we had to pretend to be able to see such things in poems too. But we were making it up, and we knew it—which means we also knew we were involved in a crap shoot where success was based on equal parts ability to snow The Teacher and luck.

No. The poem really was about some guy watching the snow fall in the woods. Whatever else it may also have been about, it was first about that. And if there is any other meaning legitimately there to be found, it is not there in spite of the woods and the snow but because of them. If it is legitimately to be seen at all, it is not seen by looking under them or around them or past them or through them but *at* them. If you only see the woods and the snow, you have seen something real and important. If you sit there long enough with the speaker, soaking in the precise quality of that wood and that snow as he has described them, you might see other things too. But the poem is not “really” about those other things, except in so far as they are really in the very surface imagery our Teacher wanted us to get past. In her laudable zeal to show us more than woods and snow, she unfortunately made most of us see less.

You see, nobody likes having to perform a task he knows he cannot perform well, and having his fate depend on it. So reading poetry was an exercise in puzzle-solving that nobody was in a position to enjoy. In fact, forcing people to do something they know they cannot do while making their grade dependent on how well they can fake it is a scientific recipe for making them hate that thing. And so, as would naturally be expected, almost all the students in that class were turned into lifelong haters of poetry.

But not me.

## CONCLUSION

Robert Frost had gotten to me first, and with the aid of a North Georgia forest and some really fortunate timing had hung the herb moly around my neck. I knew in my bones that there was something fundamentally wrong with what we were doing, something false to the whole spirit of Poetry. I had been shown how words when used just right could give you a lens that brought your own experiences into sharper focus and made them communicable. I had been shown, in addition, how Poetry could allow you to relive those experiences, or even others you had never had. I had been shown, in other words, how Poetry could help you to live an examined life and share it with other people. And that was a great gift. Nothing my Teacher could do could keep me from coming back for more.

The next year I would discover Lewis and his friend Tolkien and realize that their poetry and their prose were the most powerful lenses I had yet found to bring into focus the visions I wanted to see. I would also come to realize that their ideas about poetry, outside the mainstream of modern criticism, were the best explanations I had ever seen of the grounding of the insights about poetry which I've tried to convey here. But that's another story (Donald T. Williams, "A Larger World: C. S. Lewis on Christianity and Literature," *Mythlore*, Summer 2004). This story ends with me on a road less traveled that has brought me to Snow Wolf Lodge. I'm only going out to clean the Hyperian spring. I shan't be gone long. You come, too.



## EXPRESSING EMOTION IN POETRY: Grief and Recovery in Psalm 6

### Tuesday, Lecture 3

According to Wordsworth in his "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, poetry by definition is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Noyes 365). Well, Pope might have quibbled about the spontaneity, noting that "True ease in Writing comes from Art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learned to dance" (155). And he might also have wondered at the focus on emotion at the expense of "What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well exprest, / Something, whose Truth convinced at Sight we find, / That gives us back the image of the mind" (153). So gargantuan a task it is to categorize a phenomenon so protean as Poetry, that those who attempt to do so run the risk of being contradicted by all the other blind men who happen to be holding onto another part of this indescribably vast Elephant. There is a real Elephant, with a truly elephantine nature, for all that; and it really is like a wall, as long as we do not forget the tree, the spear, the rope, and the snake.

One of Poetry's many functions then is to lend itself to the expression of emotion in ways that are more intense than is typical of prose. And one at least of the ways that it does so is suggested by Archibald MacLeish (50-51).

#### ARS POETICA

A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit,

Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown--

A poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.

\*

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases  
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,  
Memory by memory the mind--

A poem should be motionless in time  
As the moon climbs

\*

A poem should be equal to:  
Not true.

For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love  
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea--

A poem should not mean  
But be.

What is MacLeish saying? He presents us with a series of statements about poetry that seem at first simply to be nonsense. A poem that was mute, dumb, or silent would be no poem at all, for poetry is an oral art form. In every century before the Twentieth it demanded to be intoned, chanted, or sung--or at least recited. And a poem that was wordless would also be no poem at all, for poetry is a verbal art form. An object that made use of neither surface, line, color, nor texture might be interesting, but one could hardly call it a painting. Nor can a poem be motionless in time. To be heard (or even read) it must progress from one phoneme, one word, to another, from the opening line to the last syllable of recorded sound. And as for meaning versus being . . . well; the prosaic might be excused if they simply shrug their shoulders and walk away.

Nevertheless, there is a method to MacLeish's rhetorical madness. *How*, the persistent reader is led to ask, should a poem be mute, silent, dumb, wordless, or motionless? And then we notice the parallel structure in which each assertion is stated in the form of a paradoxical simile. Each simile, moreover, has as its vehicle a concrete sensory image. The poem is mute the way a globed fruit is palpable; the way, that is, in which its shape, weight, and texture nestle into one's hand. The combination of visual with tactile imagery continues as the poem is dumb the way an old medallion feels to the thumb. Complex emotional associations are added next through romantically-tinged connotations, accruing as silently as moss on casement ledges. And then auditory imagery jumps in, making our hearts leap as wordlessly as the whirl of wings from a suddenly spooked flock of quail.

MacLeish is saying by doing what Robert Frost had stated more prosaically: Poetry is "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another" (24). Thus, MacLeish presents the two emotions that appear in his poem, grief and love, in terms of concretely realized pictures. Grief is conveyed by an empty doorway and a maple leaf, love by leaning grass and lights above the sea. And he explains how grief and love are related to these pictures with his cryptic statement that a poem should be "equal to, not true." Equal to what? Presumably to grief or love or globed fruit or flying birds. Well, this is another paradox: a poem about grief is not the same thing as sorrow, nor one about love the same thing as devotion. A poem cannot be literally "equal to" any more than it can be wordless.

But there was a truth in the lie that a poem could be wordless, and that same kind of truth appears again here. A poem cannot literally "be" grief or love, nor equivalent to them; it perforce must be a statement that "means" something "true." In what sense then is a poem true? One hopes it is a true statement *about* something. We need to supply that preposition *about* to match its sister preposition *to*: true *about* versus equal *to*. A poem can't be literally wordless, but it should, if it is to be true about the flight of birds, use words that convey the rush of those wings so vividly that we are not conscious of reading words but only of the object: the unavoidable words are virtually lost in the whirl of wings. In the same way, a poem cannot be literally equal to grief or love, but it should be true about them in such a way that we are not conscious so much of reading words as only of the object: the unavoidable words are lost in the tears of loss or the heart throb of affection. The poem cannot really avoid being true about (except

by being false, and hence not a true poem)--but it should *seem* equal to if it is to be effective at being affective poetically.

The way the poem achieves this seeming is through metaphor and concrete imagery. MacLeish suggests a plausible scenario. Perhaps the empty doorway is the one out of which the lover went, never to return. And perhaps she did so in autumn. And then one pauses years later before that doorway with the leaf blowing across it and the full poignancy of the original grief comes back in force. So we do not tell the reader that "the man was sad because he thought of his lost love." We park the reader in front of that doorway and let him get the impact of that blowing leaf, carried by its associations, even as the character in the poem would if it were really happening. Perhaps the waving grasses are in the dunes by the beach on which the two lovers walked with the beams of the lighthouses stabbing through the darkness.

Perhaps you can provide another scenario. It does not matter. What matters is that we use concrete words in such a way that they convey the same emotional associations that the concrete things they image do in life: globed fruit, casement ledges, old medallions. And it matters not whether the imagery is visual, tactile, auditory, or even olfactory. Have you never been transported back to your mother's kitchen in your childhood by the smell of bacon frying? Poetry conveys emotion by tapping into the mind's propensity to form associations between emotions, memories, and concrete experiences. And so we come to understand the last dyad of "*Ars Poetica*": "A poem should not mean / But be." "Mean" is parallel to "true about," "be" to "equal to." The poem cannot avoid meaning, but by the use of concrete imagery it means in such a way as to seem to do more: to be. Rather than simply making a statement about emotion, it recreates it by means of the magic of concrete imagery and metaphor.

How well does this analysis of modern English poetry apply to Hebrew poetry in the biblical text? Let's take a look at Psalm 6.

### Psalm 6

*To the Choirmaster:*

*With Stringed Instruments: According to the Sheminith*

*A Psalm of David*

- 1 O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger  
Nor discipline me in your wrath.
- 2 Be gracious unto me, O LORD, for I am languishing;  
Heal me O LORD, for my bones are troubled.
- 3 My soul also is greatly troubled.  
But you, O LORD--how long?
- 4 Turn O LORD, deliver my life;  
Save me for the sake of your steadfast love,
- 5 For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
In Sheol who will give you praise?
- 6 I am weary with my moaning;  
Every night I flood my bed with my tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.
- 7 My eye wastes away because of my grief;  
It grows weak because of all my foes.
- 8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,  
For the LORD has heard the sound of my weeping.
- 9 The LORD has heard my plea;  
The LORD accepts my prayer.
- 10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled;  
They shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment. (ESV)

Hebrew poetry (like English) of course does much more than simply express emotion. And Hebrew poetry is providentially the most translatable poetry on the planet. It depends on the rhyming of ideas rather than sounds, the repetition of thoughts rather than meters, to create its prose-transcending structures. Thus the translator avoids the horrible dilemma of preserving either sound or sense, as they rarely can both be reproduced at the same time in a different tongue.

But this "Hebrew Poetic Parallelism" does more than that. By its very nature it creates a rhythm of contemplation. By hearing every statement twice, in different terms--one statement "in terms of another"--we are invited to pause and reflect on the potentialities of meaning and nuance, and we are simultaneously given space in which to do so. Often there are two key terms per statement, one pair of which is a simple set of synonyms so that attention is focused on the other pair, which interact in a more thought-provoking way. So anger is a synonym of wrath (v. 1), languishing of trouble (v. 2), death of Sheol (v. 5). These near equivalences invite us to meditate on the less obvious insights that rebuke disciplines (v. 1), grace heals (v. 2), and remembrance engenders praise (v. 5).

These insightful pairs in Psalm 6 are embedded in the larger binary structure that compares grief and recovery from that grief across the whole poem. The psalmist's prayer carries him through the period of apparent abandonment, his petition for relief buttressed by descriptions of his distress and the argument that if he dies he will no longer be able to praise his Lord in Sheol (v. 5). Then, when his prayer is "heard," i.e., "accepted," the mood shifts suddenly and dramatically to one of exultation in triumph over his enemies.

Now, these ideas in themselves are spiritually edifying; the way they are structured is intellectually satisfying. The role of emotion is to make them existentially compelling. To be effective as a poem as well as a prayer, the psalm must give the reader an opportunity to identify personally with the situation David is facing. He accomplishes this identification by means of images that convey the physical symptoms of emotional suffering. It is not the seemingly imminent triumph of his enemies but his apparent abandonment to them by the Lord that has him in such agony that his very "bones" are "troubled." His distress is unrelenting; he cannot let it go. It keeps him up at night. The central emotional image is that of the bed soaked with tears. Thus the reader is enabled to draw an analogy to his own experience, to compare David's grief with those griefs that have deprived the reader of his own sleep. And he knows that the crisis has passed when that imagery simply disappears. The shift in emotion from despair to confidence is signaled by the shift in focus from David's own inward feelings described in physiological terms to an outward view of his enemies as defeated ("Depart from me!") and of the Lord as having finally responded to his prayer. No explanation for the shift in mood is given; rather, the poem simply portrays the shift, which can only be attributed to the mystery of faith.

Just like MacLeish, David has used concrete words in such a way that they convey the same emotional associations that the concrete things they image do in life. For all the history of grief: blurred eyes and a tear-soaked mattress. For relief from that grief, in the form of recovered confidence that God cares: scattered enemies that are turned back and put to shame in a moment. The fact that this scattering is *anticipated* rather than observed makes a point about the emotional dynamics of doubt and faith that is not quite expressible in cold prose. In the context of the insightful parallels created by the structure of Hebrew poetry, this emotional identification through concrete imagery allows us not just to understand, but also vicariously to experience, the fact that during our own darkest moments we can hope for a like reversal. So David's prayer has not just "meant" grief and recovery through faith, but "been" that for us. And that, indeed, is what a poem should be.

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## THE PRAISE OF CHRIST IN ENGLISH DEVOTIONAL POETRY

### Wednesday, Lecture 1

He who would try to cover English devotional poetry in praise of Christ in a paper that can be read and discussed in a short hour at a learned conference undertakes a task no less absurd than the attempt to pour the ocean into a teacup. This is especially so when he is taking “devotional poetry” to mean poetry that can be used for devotional purposes, not just that which was written as such. To avoid the accusation of *hubris*, I confess my failure at the outset. Nevertheless, I do hold out my teacup to you with trembling hands, hoping that it may be found to have a drop or two of salt water in it after all.

### THE OLD ENGLISH PERIOD

English poetry as a written tradition begins with a hymn of praise. In about the year of our Lord 670, as the Venerable Bede tells it, the monks at the famous monastery of Whitby were still practicing the ancient Germanic oral improvised art form of Alliterative Meter (a more dignified kind of rap; see Lewis for an explanation of how it works) for recreation at banquets. They would pass the harp around the table, and each brother was expected to “sing” something when his turn came. But one Caedmon, an illiterate lay herdsman attached to the community, was utterly unable to rap. So when the harp got close to him he would sneak out to the stables to avoid embarrassment.

On one such occasion Caedmon fell asleep there only to see a man appear to him in a dream saying, “*Caedmon, sing me hwaethwugu*,” “Caedmon, sing me something.” And Caedmon replied, “*Ne con ic noht singan*,” “I cannot sing at all.” But his heavenly visitor replied, “*Hwaethere, thu me meaht singan*,” “Nevertheless, you may sing to me.” And Caedmon asked, “*Hwaet sceal ic singan?*” “What shall I sing?” And the angel replied, “*Sing me frumsceaft*,” “Sing to me about creation.” And to his eternal surprise, Caedmon heard these words coming out of his own mouth in perfect Anglo-Saxon Alliterative Meter:

*Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard,  
Meotodes meahte ond his modgethanc,  
Weorc wuldorfaeder, swa he wundra gehwaes,  
Ece Dryhten, or onstealde.  
He aere sceop eorþan bearnum  
Heofon to hrofe, halig Scyppend;  
Tha middangeard, monncynnes Weard,  
Ece Dryhten, aefter teode,  
Firum foldan, Frea aelmihtig. (Cassidy & Ringler 129)*

Now let us praise the heaven-kingdom’s Keeper,  
The Measurer’s might and his moving counsel,  
The work of the glory-Father, how he each of wonders,  
The eternal Lord, established in the beginning.  
He first carved out for the sons of earth  
Heaven as a roof, the holy Shaper;  
Then middle earth, the Guardian of mankind,  
The eternal Lord, after created,  
A sheep-fold for humans, the Lord almighty. (Trans. D.T.W.)

Caedmon arose in excitement the next morning, still remembered his hymn, and recited it to the monks, who were so impressed with it that they wrote it down. And from that day forth, Caedmon was the best rapper of them all. Until that day English poetry had been a purely oral art form. So Caedmon’s

hymn was the first English poem to be written and preserved, and it is still the oldest surviving poem in the English language. While it technically references the Father more than the Son, we can call on our theological sophistication to remember the Son's involvement in creation and say without too much of a stretch that the praise of Christ is the very spring from which the whole mighty river of English poetry takes its origin. English-speaking Christians should know this: English verse is properly our inheritance; we started it.

Two other major examples from the Old English period are the long meditation "Christ" from the Exeter Book, and the dream vision "Dream of the Rood" from the Vercelli Book. "Christ" is organized around the eleven antiphons used in Advent, elaborating them with biblical and theological reflection. For example, "O King and Desire of All Nations and chief Corner-Stone, who makest two to be one: come and save mankind whom thou didst form of clay" (Kennedy 77) becomes

*Thu eart se weallstan the tha wyrhtan iu  
Withwurpon to weorce. Wel the geriseth  
Thaet thu heafod sie healle maerre,  
Ond gesomnige side weallas  
Faeste geforge, flint unbraecne,  
Thaet geond earthe eall eagna gesihthe  
Wundrien to worolde wuldres ealdor.* (Krapp & Dobbie 3:3)

Thou art the wall stone the workers rejected  
Of old from the work. It befits thee well  
That Thou shouldst be Head of the glorious hall  
Locking together the lengthy walls,  
The flint unbroken, in a firm embrace,  
That ever on earth the eyes of all  
May look with wonder on the Lord of Glory. (Kennedy 85)

The antiphon's abstract and unspecified "two into one" are imagined concretely as two long walls of the Saxon mead hall, that place of fellowship and celebration after battle. This imagery overlays Paul's use of the metaphor in Ephesians three with both martial and communal emotion even as it recalls it: by Christ's work Jew and Gentile have now become, not just the church militant, but the church joined triumphant in rejoicing. This emphasis naturally leads to explicit praise which echoes both the Old Testament reference and its New Testament use. The Psalmist's comment on the prophecy is "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes" (Psalm 118:23), and Paul ends his discussion with glory to Christ in the church (Eph. 3:21). The absence of that element in the antiphon itself implies a thoughtful knowledge of Scripture on the part of the poet who restored it in his poem.

In "The Dream of the Rood," we get the story of the Crucifixion from the point of view of the personified Cross. Christ is exalted indirectly through the way he is portrayed: not as a passive victim but as the conquering Hero, the one truly in charge of the situation.

*. . . Geseah ic tha frean mancynnes  
Efstan elne mycle thaet he wolde on me gestigan . . .  
Ongyrede hine tha geong haeleth (thaet waes God aelmihtig),  
Strang and stithmod. Gestah he on gealgan heanne,  
Modig on manigra gesyhthe, tha he wolde mancyn lysan.*  
(Krapp & Dobbie 2:62)

Then I saw the king of all mankind  
In brave mood hasting to mount upon me . . .  
Then the young warrior, God the All-Wielder,

Put off his raiment, steadfast and strong;  
 With lordly mood in the sight of many  
 He mounted the Cross to redeem mankind. (Kennedy 94)

The Cross wants to bow to earth and break under the weight of what is happening; it is Christ's strength, in a wonderful irony, that holds the Cross up and enables it to endure the horrible trial of bearing the Lord of glory.

### THE MIDDLE ENGLISH PERIOD

In the Middle English period, Christ is eclipsed by his mother in popular English piety. In *The Mirroure of Man's Saluacioun*, for example,

The virgine fulle of splendour and thorghout lumynouse  
 Is bright as someres dawening and als the sonne radyouse.  
 Hire bemes ouer alle the sternes ere incomparabli bright;  
 Of this worldis nyght the mone is sho, and aungels light. (Henry 81)

Christ himself seldom gets language this exalted; indeed, he is merely a candle offered up to God by his splendiferous mother. This anonymous work is typical of the period. Mary gets twice the space and evokes twice the emotion of her Son. *The Mirroure* does rise to a truly glorious insight at one point, though:

For alle the joye of the heven and spirituel reioying  
 Is of the gracious visage of Jhesu the contempling.  
 For bettre ware a sawle in helle Crist's visage seyng to be  
 Than in heven for to dwelle and his face noght to se. (Henry 209)

When Christ is the focus, the typical mode is not one of praise so much as elegy, the mood not exaltation or joy so much as pity and pathos, and the emotional response sought not so much praise as love. Jesus is often portrayed as addressing the reader from the cross, pleading that his suffering not be ignored. Typical is the *York Crucifixion Play*:

Al men that walkis by waye or street,  
 Takes tente, ye schall no travail tine!  
 Beholdes min heede, hine hands, and my feete,  
 And fully feele nowe, or ye fine,  
 If any mourning may be meete  
 Or mischeve measured unto mine. (Bevington 577)

The same note is struck in the lyrics:

O man unkynde,  
 Have thou in mynde  
 My passioun smerte!  
 Thou shalt me finde  
 To thee ful kynde:  
 Lo, heer myn herte. (Stevick 161.)

Mary is often joined even to these meditations.

Now goth sonne under wode—  
 Me reweth, Marie, thy faire rode.  
 Now goth sunne under tree—  
 Me reweth, Marie, thy sone and thee. (Stevick 5)

It is Mary's intercession that secures her Son's atonement for us, and hence she is the main focus of devotion.

On a lady myn hope is,  
 Moder and virgine;  
 We shullen into hevenes blisse  
 Thurgh hir medicine. (Stevick 49)

What may be the finest of all the religious lyrics of the period marvels not at the Son but at the Lady who was worthy to be his mother.

I synge of a mayden  
 That is makeles:  
 Kyng of alle kynges  
 To her sone she ches. . . .

Moder and mayden  
 Was nevere non but she:  
 Well may swich a lady  
 Goddes moder be.

## THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

After the Reformation with its emphasis on *Solus Christus* came to England, devotional poetry became more Christocentric again, if not (for a while) more skillful. The first order of business was to versify the Psalms for congregational singing. The metrical Psalms of Sternhold and Hopkins was one of the most popular books of what Lewis calls the "drab" age of Sixteenth-Century English literature (64).

My soul, praise thou the Lord always!  
 My God I will confess!  
 While breath and life prolong my days,  
 My mouth shall no time cease. (Rollins & Baker 162)

Though lacking in literary excellence or interest, these doggerel lines of common meter should not be despised, for they did what they were designed to do: restore something of genuine biblical piety to the masses. A more literary and artistic metrical Psalter that deserves more notice was done later in the period by Sir Philip Sidney and his sister the Countess of Pembroke.

By the end of the century, both English poetic skill and Protestant piety were coming to a new maturity, and were joined in the person of Edmund Spenser. His long allegorical epic *The Faerie Queene* is perhaps best understood as an exercise in spiritual formation as he attempts to portray the consummate Christian gentleman in pursuit of all the relevant virtues and dependent on grace for success. Spenser was also the first person to write love sonnets not to a mistress but to a woman he married. In them he praises her Christian virtue equally with her physical beauty and in a wonderful Easter hymn invokes their "Most glorious Lord of Life, that on this day / Didst make thy triumph over death and sin," praying that they may learn to love one another by weighing his love worthily:



Let us loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought;  
Loue is the lesson that the Lord us taught.” (Rollins & Baker 366)

But perhaps Spenser’s most significant work for our purposes is the profoundly beautiful and meditative “Foure Hymnes.” There is one “hymn” each in honor of earthly and heavenly love and beauty. There has been much discussion of the relation of the earthly to the heavenly in Spenser’s vision. Do the heavenly love and beauty reject and replace the earthly, or complete and fulfill it? What is certain is that there has seldom been a more supernal evocation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ than the hymn to heavenly love:

O blessed well of loue, O floure of grace,  
O glorious Morning starre, O lampe of light,  
Most lively image of thy Father’s face,  
Eternall king of glorie, Lord of might,  
Meeke lambe of God before all worlds behight,  
How can we thee requite for all this good?  
Or what can prize that thy most precious blood?

In the only possible answer to this question, the reader is exhorted to

Giue thyself vnto him full and free  
That full and freely gave himselfe for thee,

With the result that

Then shalt thy rausht soule inspired bee  
With heauenly thoughts, farre aboue humane skill,  
And thy bright radiant eyes shall plainly see  
The idée of his pure glorie, present still  
Before thy face, that all thy spirits shall fill  
With sweet enragement of celestiaall loue,  
Kindled through sight of those faire things above. (Rollins & Baker 379)

## THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

One is tempted to give Spenser the last note in this symphony; but the great age of English devotional poetry is still to come. Deepening fissures in the Church of England that would eventually lead to the disillusionment of civil war and the first signs of secularism in thinkers like Hobbes made the profound simplicity of Spenser’s adoration, never a simple achievement, seem even more difficult. So the characteristic note of Seventeenth-Century religious poetry is struggle, a wrestling with God and self *toward* a faith in which the believer can finally rest. Christ is not so much praised directly as exalted in effect by the fact that He emerges victorious in these struggles, having graciously forborne in his patience to destroy his faithless followers in the process. Donne thus calls on the Three-Personed God to batter his heart, reaching assurance of salvation only on what he thought was his deathbed in “A Hymn to God the Father”:

But swear by Thyself that at my death Thy Son  
Shall shine as He shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, Thou hast done.  
I fear no more. (Witherspoon & Warnke 759).

George Herbert also wrestles, not so much for faith as for submission; and Christ shines out of that wrestling, often in a sudden glint from a line or two, as the One infinitely worthy of that submission. Some of Herbert's most interesting poems show his speaker in a rebellion that seems successful until it falls apart in the very last line. In "The Thanksgiving" he rebels against *sola gratia*, insisting on a synergism by which he could match Christ's love with his own, until "Then for Thy passion—I will do for that / Alas, my God, I know not what" (Witherspoon & Warnke 847). In "The Collar" he rebels against God's calling for thirty-two lines until

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Methought I heard one calling, "Child!"  
And I replied, "My Lord!" (Witherspoon & Warnke 857)

Herbert also wrestles profitably with what it means to be a Christian and a poet (Williams, "Thou Art Still my God"). His best insights center on Christ and the marvel of His atonement. "Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine, / Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine" (847). Henry Vaughan in England and Edward Taylor in America are also noted contributors to this "metaphysical" vein.

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

After the Restoration, the praise of Christ retreated almost completely from the public arena of *belles lettres* to the church and its hymnody. Devotion did not disappear completely from the lives of the poets, for Dr. Johnson would as lief have prayed with Kit Smart as any other man; but henceforth only minor eccentrics like Smart with his *Jubilate Agno* would try to address the public outside of church on the topic. But even from the asylum, Smart's voice—and that of his cat, Geoffrey—could not be silenced (Tillotson 1166-8).

Fortunately, the First Great Awakening ushered in the classic age of English hymnody. Christ's love as expressed in the atonement and applied to the individual soul in redemption is the characteristic inspiration for its praise. Isaac Watts meditates on the profound love and sorrow that meet in Christ's sacrifice of his life on the Cross, and responds to it with the affirmation,

Were the whole Realm of Nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my Soul, my Life, my All. (Tillotson 824)

Charles Wesley likewise marvels at Christ's "amazing love" and wonders "How can it be / That thou, my God, shouldst die for me." Christ for him is "all I want; / More than all in Thee I find" ("Jesus Lover of my Soul," Tillotson 1536). Wesley's hymn "Wrestling Jacob" is unfortunately too long and too linear in its development to have made it into modern hymns, but it is for that very reason a superb expression of the characteristic notes of the period. The sinner and Christ take the place of Jacob and the angel as the sinner wrestles with the nature of the One who confronts him until he realizes,

'Tis Love, 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me;  
I hear Thy whisper in my heart.  
The morning breaks, the shadows flee." (Tillotson 1536)

And the poem continues, ringing the changes on the joyous revelation that "Thy Nature and Thy Name is LOVE."

## THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Despite a radical shift from the secular sensibility of Neoclassical literature toward a renewed interest in spiritual values as the Romantic period dawns, the praise of Christ makes no return to mainstream canonical poetry, while the church's hymnody turns increasingly to more sentimental themes. The great Romantics either were not Christians (Keats, Shelley, Byron) or were eccentric ones (Coleridge) or did not swing toward orthodoxy until after the period of their major poetic output (Wordsworth). So the best we get is a vague Presence that "disturbs" us with "elevated thoughts" (Noyes 260), thoughts that never quite coalesce even into theism, much less Christology. Some of the Victorians try to stumble back toward Christian faith. Tennyson's "Infant crying in the night; / An infant crying for the light, / And with no language but a cry" (Hill 147), admirable in its profound humility, can teach us rightly that "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds" (Hill 171) and can cry defiantly into the face of the Godless deep, "I have felt!" (188). But while we may believe that what it feels is the Christian God, the object of the cry never becomes much more explicit than Wordsworth's Presence; and a cry, while a valuable movement of the human heart for literature to record, is not praise.

It remains for eccentrics like the Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins to keep praise of Christ that has real literary as well as devotional merit alive in English poetry. The mastery of the elements of the Windhover, that crown prince of the kingdom of daylight, reminds him of Christ, his "chevalier," his knight in shining armor (Gardner 69). In the resurrection we shall be what Christ is because he was what we are—which makes us "immortal diamond" (106). For Christ, in his exuberant dance of justice and grace,

Plays in ten thousand places  
Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces. (90)

In strong lines that ring with sprung rhythm, alliteration, and assonance, conveying rich and suggestive metaphor with irrepressible energy, Hopkins shows that even in the spiritual wasteland of modern poetry God has not left himself without a witness.

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

In the modern and post-modern periods, faith and praise continue to be mainly absent or muted in mainstream poetry. But it was still possible for a T. S. Eliot to find his way from the hollow men of the wasteland to the still point of the turning world (Eliot 56, 37f, 119). His "Ash Wednesday" and "Four Quartets" combine the best of the English devotional tradition with the mysticism of Dante, finding no cheap rest for the wounded modern soul in Christ the Still Point.

My final response to the apparent divorce between devotion and serious literature is found in the words of Hazel Motes: "They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it" (O'Connor 122; cf. Williams, *Inklings, Mere Humanity*, "Poetry," etc.). At the risk of re-inviting the charge of *hubris*, I close with the following:

### TO CHRIST OUR LORD Sonnet XXII

Thrice holy, three times spoken, meant, and heard  
By one Voice speaking once, once only hearing,  
One only multifold, all-meaning Word  
From out of time in time and flesh appearing;

Separate, though inseparably one,  
 Thou who art not the Father, yet art God,  
     Thou who art Son of Man, yet no man's son;  
     Root of Jesse, Rock of Ages, Rod  
 Of Aaron blossoming in barren soil  
     Whose petals blades are of a burning sword  
     That strikes its deep wounds full of healing oil;  
     Servant of all and universal Lord:  
 With literal metaphors we stumbling seek  
     To praise thee, strong Firstborn of all who speak. (D.T.W.)

## CONCLUSION

This then is my teacup. May it whet your thirst for the ocean.

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## ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: C. S. LEWIS AS A LITERARY HISTORIAN

### Wednesday, Lecture 2

#### ABSTRACT

C. S. Lewis's most substantial work of literary scholarship, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* has been praised as brilliant and criticized as unsound. Valued for its learning, its enthusiasm, its insight, and its engaging style, it has been criticized (often by the same scholars) for a misleading set of period labels and an unbalanced portrait of Renaissance Humanism. A reexamination of Lewis's book will show that the praise it has received is fully justified and the criticism partially so. When all its merits and weaknesses are fully weighed, it remains a testimony to a more humane approach to literary study we would do well to recapture.

#### INTRODUCTION

"You can't get a cup of tea large enough or a book long enough to suit me," said C. S. Lewis to Walter Hooper.<sup>1</sup> In that case, Lewis should have been pleased with *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*.<sup>2</sup> A 696 page tome with a thirty-three page chronological table and ninety pages of bibliography, it taught him that a long book might be a joy to read, but it could be a burden to write. The capstone of his career at Oxford, it is his most substantial, and one of his most controversial, contributions to literary scholarship. Not many volumes of academic literary history over fifty years old still demand to be read and discussed. But Lewis's do, and searching for the reasons for that fact in this book could be instructive indeed.

#### HISTORY OF COMPOSITION

Lewis was approached about writing the volume of *The Oxford History of English Literature* on the Sixteenth Century in June of 1935,<sup>3</sup> and apparently started doing some reading for it almost immediately. He wrote to Arthur Greeves in December of that year that he was reading the English works of Sir Thomas More because they were "necessary to a job I'm doing."<sup>4</sup> It turned out to be a bigger job than Lewis could have imagined. An intermediate stage was the Clark Lectures Lewis delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1944, out of which the book we know grew. It took almost all of his time from then until the first draft was finished, in probably 1952. Revisions and preparing the bibliography took another year, and the book was finally published in the autumn of 1954.<sup>5</sup>

The years intervening were devoted to what Sayer calls the "immense amount of reading" that Lewis did because (unlike many reviewers) he "refused to give an opinion on a book he had not read."<sup>6</sup> Gene Edward Veith reports that when Charles Huttar was working in the Magdalen College library he saw the register of books Lewis had checked out during the late 1940's and early 1950's. It appears that Lewis had "essentially checked out the entire sixteenth-century collection."<sup>7</sup> What was too obscure for either Magdalen or his own personal library to have, he read in the Bodleian's magnificent Duke Humphrey library—basically what an American library would call its rare book room. Some of it must have been dull going, but he plowed ahead until he had mastered the entire preserved literary output of the century. At the end of some of the books from his own library he marked the date on which he had finished them, and in a few, the added annotation "Never again."<sup>8</sup>

The sheer volume of work had to have been onerous, but one of the characteristics universally praised about the finished product is its ability to convey Lewis's unabashed enjoyment of those works he found good. Sayer also notes that the task could not all have been a chore, for Lewis "enjoyed debunking current or fashionable concepts and presenting new insights,"<sup>9</sup> something he found ample scope for in this

work. Neville Coghill describes Lewis as one who “spoke gladly, learnedly, and often paradoxically, throwing out powerful assertions that challenged discussion.” He reports an encounter along those lines that has become legendary:

I remember on one occasion as I went round Addison’s Walk, I saw [Lewis] coming slowly towards me, his round, rubicund face beaming with pleasure to itself. When we came within speaking distance, I said, “Hullo, Jack! You look pleased with yourself; what is it?”

“I believe,” he answered, with a modest smile of triumph, “I *believe* I have proved that the Renaissance never happened. Alternatively,”—he held up his hand to prevent my astonished exclamation—“that if it did, *it had no importance!*”<sup>10</sup>

Still, the labor must have been wearing on Lewis by the end. Toward the close of the project he told his friend Roger Lancelyn Green that he was “Longing for the day when he would be able to turn away from ‘this critical nonsense and write something really worthwhile—theology and fantasy.’”<sup>11</sup> Hardly anyone will want to deny that the fantasy in question, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was “really worthwhile.” But most even of those who find fault with it would allow that *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* deserves the same appellation. Along with books like *The Allegory of Love*, *The Discarded Image*, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, and *Experiment in Criticism*,<sup>12</sup> it keeps one from hearing of Lewis the complaint that dogged his friend Tolkien, that he sacrificed his scholarly labors on the altar of his fiction. Few readers of *The Lord of the Rings* now doubt that the sacrifice was worth it; but it is a testament to Lewis’s legacy that he was able to give us not only Narnia, Glome, and The Field of Arbol but also a very substantial body of criticism that has retained its value amazingly well.<sup>13</sup> To the most substantial volume of that corpus we now turn.

## SUMMARY

After a general introduction entitled “New Learning and New Ignorance,” Lewis divides his volume into three books covering the “Late Medieval,” “Drab,” and “Golden” periods of the Sixteenth Century. The introduction focuses on some of the intellectual crosscurrents that form the background to the century’s literature. Magic was not, as in the Middle Ages, conceived of as something out of Faerie, but as a technique of domination of nature more akin to science. The new astronomy not only changed our way of imagining the universe but, by the methodological revolution that verified it, our way of conceptualizing the world, setting us on the road that led from a “genial” or “animistic” to a “mechanical” understanding. But these inevitable consequences were not yet apparent. “Davies’ *Orchestra* gives us the right picture of the Elizabethan or Henrician universe; tingling with anthropomorphic life, dancing, ceremonial, a festival not a machine.”<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s massive gifts as an intellectual historian are on display here, but he does not forget his literary purpose.

Historians of science or philosophy, and especially if they hold some theory of progress, are naturally interested in seizing those elements of sixteenth-century thought which were later to alter Man’s whole picture of reality. Those other elements which were destined to disappear they tend to treat as mere “survivals” from some earlier and darker age. The literary historian, on the other hand, is concerned not with those ideas in his period which have since proved fruitful, but with those which seemed important at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Two sets of ideas which both seemed important at the time and have since proved so get the bulk of the attention in the remainder of the introduction: Puritanism and Humanism. We think of these movements as contrasting, but as they existed in the Sixteenth Century, puritans and humanists were often the same people. A puritan was a person who wished to “purify” the Church of England, which puritans

considered only half reformed, with Calvin's Geneva as the model. (Essentially, they wanted to move the English church further down the road to Protestantism by getting rid of ecclesiastical vestments, putting more emphasis on the sermon, and replacing episcopal church government with a presbyterian or congregational scheme.) Modern caricatures tell us very little about what the real puritans were actually like. All serious Christians of the period would have seemed "puritanical" to us. Yet the puritan mentality was not one of repression or scrupulosity but of "relief and buoyancy."<sup>16</sup> Their theology and their outlook flowed from a common experience of "catastrophic conversion."

Like an accepted lover, he feels that he has done nothing, and never could have done anything, to deserve such happiness. . . . All the initiative has been on God's side; all has been free, unbounded grace. And all will continue to be free, unbounded grace. His own puny and ridiculous efforts would be as helpless to retain the joy as they would have been to achieve it in the first place. Fortunately, they need not. Bliss is not for sale, cannot be earned. "Works" have no merit. . . . He is not saved because he does works of love; he does works of love because he is saved. . . . From this buoyant humility, this farewell to the self with all its good resolutions, anxiety, scruples, and motive-scratchings, all the Protestant doctrines originally sprang.<sup>17</sup>

Humanists were those who believed in the importance of Greek and classical Latin. (Humanism was not originally an ideology but an educational reform movement.) "Humanists" in the modern sense hardly existed."<sup>18</sup> The Renaissance humanists recovered, edited, and published countless ancient texts in the classical languages, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. In doing so they made significant advances in philology and textual criticism. For this, Lewis says, we are "their endless debtors."<sup>19</sup>

But the humanists, with their emphasis on rules and "correct" (i.e., classical) Latin, were also the ancestors of the neoclassical temper, and here Lewis sees their influence as baneful and as less important for understanding the great English literature of the period than we might suppose. They only failed to prevent the exuberant energy of the great literature of the 1580's and 1590's from happening "because the high tide of native talent was too strong" for them.<sup>20</sup>

Like humanism, the very word *Renaissance* is much misunderstood and is often used to mean nothing more than whatever the speaker likes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lewis reminds us that "The ancients were not ancient, nor the men of the Middle Ages middle, from their own point of view. . . . But the humanists were very conscious of living in a *renascentia*." Thus, "Our legend of the Renaissance is a Renaissance legend."<sup>21</sup> And of this legend he thinks we ought to be more suspicious than we often are.

The Renaissance—if it be allowed to have happened—came relatively late to England, and so Book I, "Late Medieval," deals with the remnants of the Medieval in the period. Chapter I treats "The Close of the Middle Ages in Scotland." This tour of the works mainly of Gavin Douglas and William Dunbar is a testament to Lewis's thoroughness, and he writes it with an infectious enthusiasm that will sadly be probably unable to overcome the language barrier for most modern readers.

Chapter II deals with "The Close of the Middle Ages in England." Alexander Barclay and Stephen Hawes are just bad; with Barclay "we touch rock bottom."<sup>22</sup> One reason is their meter, whether because they were incompetent or because it has been misunderstood. Lewis doubts the reigning theory that they were trying to write Chaucerian iambic pentameter and failed because they did not understand the loss of final -e,<sup>23</sup> but no other theory has become accepted. The only poet of that age who is still read with pleasure is John Skelton, though it is hard to say why. His short, interminably rhyming lines (called "Skeltonics") ought to be intolerable, but in "Philip Sparrow" and "The Tunning of Elinor Ruming" they strangely work.

Book II is entitled "Drab." Lewis does not intend "drab" and "golden" as value judgments, but as purely descriptive (a claim, as we shall see, that has caused his critics to ask, why not then "plain" and "ornate?"). Chapter I of Book II deals with "Drab Age Prose—Religious Controversy and Translation." Of the controversialists, Lewis briefly treats John Colet and John Fisher and then spends the bulk of his



time on “the opposed martyrs”<sup>24</sup> Thomas More and William Tyndale as the greatest representatives of the Catholic and Protestant positions who were writing in English at the time. If we read the *Utopia* as its contemporaries did we will conclude that its “real place is not in the history of political thought so much as in that of fiction and satire,” i.e., that it is “a satiric glass to reveal our own avarice by contrast and is not meant to give us directly practical advice.”<sup>25</sup>

More was not at his best as a religious controversialist. His defense of Purgatory in *The Supplication of Souls* (1529), for example, completes the process Fisher had begun of degrading Dante’s joyous mountain to “a department of Hell”<sup>26</sup> and helps to show what Protestants thought they were leaving behind. More’s method of attacking a book is to “go through it page by page like a schoolmaster correcting an exercise.”<sup>27</sup> But his devotional works show the spiritual greatness of the man. *The Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (1534) is “the noblest of all his vernacular writings.”<sup>28</sup>

William Tyndale is most known for his claim to a critic of his translation work that “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the scriptures than thou dost.” Lewis comments, “The fulfillment of that vaunt is the history of his life.”<sup>29</sup> His work is repetitive because “He never envisaged the modern critic sitting down to his Works in three volumes: he is like a man sending messages in war, and sending the same message often because it is a chance if any one runner will get through.”<sup>30</sup> Lewis notes “how tragically narrow is the boundary between Tyndale and his opponents, how nearly he means by faith what they mean by charity.”<sup>31</sup> So a modern reader might think. But that modern reader, thinking Protestants pedantic in their insistence that works cannot earn salvation, would be missing “the gigantic effort Tyndale’s theology is making to leave room for disinterestedness.”<sup>32</sup> For the Treasury of Merit had seemed to Protestants to turn the Christian life into a crass market. But More and Tyndale “should not be set up as rivals” because “any sensible man will want both.”<sup>33</sup>

We finish the controversialists by looking at Hugh Latimer the preacher, John Knox the Scottish reformer, and Thomas Cranmer the archbishop and liturgist. Cranmer’s prose always sounds like it has been “threshed out in committee.”<sup>34</sup> While this tendency makes his other works flat, his genius for consensus and feel for language made him the perfect architect of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which Lewis calls “the one glory of the Drab Age.” Meanwhile, Tyndale and Coverdale were laying the foundations that would eventually lead to the Authorized Version of the English Bible.

Chapter II of Book II treats “Drab Age Verse.” Thomas Wyatt suggested new possibilities, including the English sonnet, which were taken up with greater smoothness by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. Collections like Tottel’s *Miscellany* and *The Mirrour for Magistrates* allow the new courtly makers to flex their muscles. “The grand function of the Drab Age poets was to build a firm metrical highway out of the late medieval swamp.”<sup>35</sup> But only so does it prepare for the Golden; real anticipations, like Thomas Sackville’s “Induction,” are rare. Sternhold and Hopkins’ metrical psalms are universally panned, but “we do these artless verses a kind of outrage in wrenching them from their natural context and dragging them before the bar of criticism.”<sup>36</sup> Those who used them for devotion took no literary harm. And so the early part of the century went, with very little to indicate the explosion of poetic creativity that was to follow. “It is not a period during which the genial spirit of a ‘Renaissance’ gradually ripens toward its ‘Golden’ summer,”<sup>37</sup> and the attention given in this chapter to poetasters in plodding poulter’s measure is worthwhile if it disabuses us of that notion.

The third chapter of Book II deals with “Drab and Transitional Prose.” Works covered here include Thomas Elyot’s *Book of the Governor* and Roger Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster*. These humanist educational reformers laid the foundation of what we now call a “classical education.” Ascham was the first Englishman to protest cruelty in teaching, but along with that and his love of the classics comes his attack on romance and Mallory, which Lewis cannot resist reminding us was “a humanist commonplace.”<sup>38</sup>

Other works covered in this chapter include Williams Roper’s biography of his father in law Thomas More (“a masterpiece . . . He shares with Boswell the power of giving to reported conversation that appearance of reality which we demand of conversations in fiction”<sup>39</sup>), John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, better known as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (in his opposition to cruelty Foxe was “impartial to

a degree hardly paralleled in that age"<sup>40</sup>), Sir Thomas Hoby's translation of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* ("though all is serious, all is graceful, spontaneous, unconstrained"<sup>41</sup>), and John Lyly's *Euphues* (he did not invent the infamous euphuistic style, but has "the credit—or discredit—of having first kept the thing up for pages or decades of pages at a stretch"<sup>42</sup>). This chapter strangely ends without a summary of the significance of "Drab Age" prose.

By far the longest section, as one would expect, is Book III, "Golden." Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser get a whole chapter by themselves, followed by a chapter each on other Golden prose and verse. Lewis reminds us again that he does not intend Golden as a eulogistic adjective. Drab poetry can be good and Golden poetry bad—but in fact most of the Drab poets were bad, and among the Golden were writers of true genius, none greater than Sidney and Spenser.

"Even at this distance, Sidney is dazzling. He is that rare thing, the aristocrat in whom the aristocratic ideal is really embodied."<sup>43</sup> In poetry he wrote mainly the lyrics imbedded in the *Arcadia* and the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*. The Arcadian lyrics establish him as the pioneer of Golden poetry, and *Astrophel and Stella* "towers above everything that had been done in poetry, south of the Tweed, since Chaucer died."<sup>44</sup> The prose Romance *Arcadia* has a complicated history. Sidney wrote a simpler work in the late 1570's, then revised the first three books on a more serious scale, published in 1590. The revision was completed in 1593 when Ponsonby published a folio which added to the revised fragment books III-V "out of the Author's own writings and conceits,"<sup>45</sup> perhaps edited by Sidney's sister the Countess of Pembroke. This last composite work is the form in which the book was known to posterity—"Shakespeare's book, Charles I's book, Milton's book, Lamb's book."<sup>46</sup> It exists to express "nobility of sentiment."<sup>47</sup> Thus it serves as a "touchstone." What a reader thinks of the *Arcadia*, "far more than what he thinks of Shakespeare or Spenser or Donne, tests the depth of his sympathy with the sixteenth century."<sup>48</sup> Finally, the *Defence of Poesie* is "the best critical essay in English before Dryden."<sup>49</sup>

Spenser's great work is *The Fairie Queene*, a long allegorical poem in which the ideal Christian knight is portrayed through a series of characters in quest of various virtues such as Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. Almost everything else Spenser wrote was a digression from it; with the exception of the *Amoretti* and *Epithalamium* his other works are only read because they are by the author of *The Fairie Queene*. His great allegorical epic is not, as is often said, a dream, "but a vast invented structure which other men could walk around in and out of for centuries."<sup>50</sup> Formally it fuses the medieval allegory with the Italian romantic epic. The many complex interwoven stories and characters are given unity by the milieu of Fairyland itself, by the presence in each book of an "allegorical core," such as the House of Holiness in Book I, where the symbolic themes are revealed in unity and clarity, and by Arthur's quest for Gloriana. Through his images Spenser teaches not a particular ideology but "the common wisdom."<sup>51</sup> His greatness is undeniable, though his fame may diminish as the culture he embodied passes away. But "those who still in any degree belong to the old culture still find in the ordered exuberance of the *Faerie Queene* an invigorating refreshment which no other book can supply."<sup>52</sup>

Chapter II of Book III, "Prose in the 'Golden' Period," is hardly capable of summary. It covers with admirable thoroughness a seemingly endless series of minor writers, most of whom, unlike the poets of the period, are no longer read by non specialists. Highlights include the discussion of Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. Chapter III, "Verse in the 'Golden' Period," is similar, though it does have discussions of Marlowe, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, and Shakespeare's non-dramatic poetry to give it interest. Lewis shows again his supreme ability to encapsulate with lucidity the difference between our own literary expectations and those of earlier ages: "The sonneteers wrote not to tell their own love stories, not to express whatever in their own loves was local and peculiar, but to give us others, the inarticulate lovers, a voice. The reader was to seek in a sonnet not what the poet felt but what he himself felt, what all men felt."<sup>53</sup> Still, it is puzzling that he did not save the chapter on Sidney and Spenser for last, for dealing with them first in the Golden period inevitably set him up for an anticlimax.

Lewis concludes his exposition with an epilogue entitled “New Tendencies,” followed only by the chronological table, bibliography, and index. Here he notes anticipations of what was yet to come, primarily metaphysical poetry and the Augustan mode. The discussion of the metaphysicals is the most interesting. Lewis sees the roots of the metaphysical mode in *discors concordia*. “Metaphysical poetry is ‘twice born.’ No literature could begin with it. It uses discords on the assumption that your taste is sufficiently educated to recognize them.”<sup>54</sup>

Finally, Lewis tries to look back on the sixteenth century as a whole. It is itself a great mystery, for out of what seemed severe cultural poverty “somehow the ‘upstart’ Tudor aristocracy produced a Sidney and became fit to patronize a Spenser. . . . Somehow such an apparent makeshift as the Elizabethan church became the church of Hooker, Donne, Andrewes, Taylor, and Herbert.” How did this happen? By some kind of grace, “We stole most of the honey which the humanists were carrying without suffering much from their stings.”<sup>55</sup> Thus we come full circle to the argument of “New Learning and New Ignorance.”

## CRITICAL RESPONSE

When *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* first appeared, reviews in popular papers were positive, while those in academic journals were more measured,<sup>56</sup> finding much to praise but focusing on two major points of criticism: that the Drab versus Golden schema was oversimplified and the attack on humanism unjustified. Sayer noted as late as 1988 that Oxford tutors still warn students that the book is “unsound, but brilliantly written,” and wondered whether that warning might be part of the reason that Lewis’s volume is still the best seller in the series.<sup>57</sup> No one doubts the brilliance; how far the verdict of “unsound” is justified is still a topic of discussion.

The early reviewer with the most stature was Dame Helen Gardner, whose 1954 review hit most of the notes both of praise and of censure that would continue to sound through the years. The reader’s “overwhelming impression” is of “the range of the author’s learning,” his “conscientiousness,” and “the strength of his capacity for enjoyment,” which give him an “astonishing freshness.” Unfortunately, there are certain “bees” in Lewis’s bonnet. “There is considerable entertainment to be got out of his struggles with that tiresome word ‘Renaissance.’” He tires valiantly to avoid it, but “the wretched word defeats him” by refusing to go away. The terms Golden and Drab are “quite unsuitable,” for Lewis is unable to keep his promise not to use them as terms of value. He is prone to “over-correction” of what he considers false views (such as the role of humanism) which causes some aspects of his treatment to be “a little off the centre.” Nevertheless, despite the need for more on Elizabethan (i.e., humanist) education, “On the whole, the justice of the treatment is striking.” Its strength is its concern with authors and their works. And the book “abounds” with “brilliant generalizations, asides, and jests” which “spring naturally and spontaneously” out of the discussion.<sup>58</sup>

Another early reviewer calls Lewis’s volume of the *Oxford History of English Literature* the “most provocative, the most opinionated, and . . . the best written” of the series. Its faults are that the terms Golden and Drab do not succeed in being merely descriptive and that the attempted “corrective” to the conventional view that the Reformation and Renaissance Humanism had “energized” medieval literature to produce the glories of Elizabethan literature gives us a “shapely history” achieved at the expense of “faulty emphases and serious omissions”: humanism is undervalued and the recusants deserve more attention. Still, it is a “brilliant piece of work.”<sup>59</sup>

No one to my knowledge has defended Lewis’s terms for early and late sixteenth-century literature, “Drab” and “Golden.” Kay Stephenson calls Lewis “unhappy in his labels,”<sup>60</sup> and William Calin notes that most scholars today would prefer the designations “plain style” and “high style.”<sup>61</sup> These scholars and the host who echo them are certainly right. Yet I cannot help feeling that there is a bit more to be said.

One of Lewis’s strengths as a writer is that he was still in touch with an older tradition of rhetoric in which writing was meant to be *heard*. Part of his advice to an American schoolgirl who wrote to ask for help on writing was “Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You shd. hear every sentence

you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken. If it does not sound nice, try again.”<sup>62</sup> This advice he practiced in his own scholarly work no less than his popular, utterly innocent of the quaint recent notion that ancient texts can somehow be elucidated by having indigestible wads of jargon thrown at them. He was one of those writers whose living voice readers can easily imagine hearing in the text, if they are fortunate enough to have heard one of the surviving recordings of it. He wrote, in other words, like he talked, and the voice one hears is quite specifically therefore the professor’s voice and the lecturer’s voice.

Drab and Golden, in other words, are effective lecture-room terms, which might give us some insight on why Lewis was one of the most popular lecturers at Oxford in his day. What these terms lose of precision they gain in poetic resonance; they are memorable. Low versus high, plain versus ornate, or Senecan versus Ciceronian are certainly less controversial, more dignified, and more accurate, but they are also, well, drab. Drab versus Golden is golden. The wryness inherent in the very ironic necessity of having to deny that they are evaluative terms makes the student remember them. The other terms have their prophets and, like Moses, are rightly preached in the synagogues every Sabbath. But Lewis, that sly devil, has us still talking about the matter fifty years later.

What is at issue between Lewis and his critics then may not be simply the propriety of the terms, but rather two rival conceptions of the nature and purpose of scholarly writing. We have tended since Lewis’s day to create a greater divide between the functions of teaching and scholarship than he would have recognized as healthy or valid. What now appears in scholarly journals and monographs is usually intended only for specialists. The benefits that flow from this level of specialization are not to be denied, but there is a price that is paid for it. I know people whose academic writing has been criticized or even rejected as being too “teacherly”—as if it were present death if a lucid sentence or a memorable phrase should somehow find its way into a learned journal. Lewis represents an older set of more humane values we would do well not to lose.

The other major criticism of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* has been over Lewis’s tendency to downplay the influence of Renaissance humanism, indeed to portray it as a negative rather than a positive influence on the great literature of the end of the century. Calin speculates that a “greater knowledge of French and Italian humanism” would have caused Lewis to “nuance” his book differently.<sup>63</sup> It takes an intrepid scholar to accuse Lewis of ignorance, and it may be that Calin’s courage outruns his insight here. Father Peter Milward is much more on target when he sees humanist education as at least one of the keys to the great flowering of literature which Lewis claims not to be able to explain. The great Golden poets all had a humanist education in common, and this was an education that majored on reading and analyzing the classics from the standpoint of grammatico-historical exegesis and *rhetoric*.<sup>64</sup> “What the humanists with all their pedantry had to teach them were the methods and skills of literary composition, based on the examples of the classical authors.”<sup>65</sup> It is indeed curious that Lewis, that great defender of the rhetorical tradition in books like *A Preface to Paradise Lost*,<sup>66</sup> should have been blind to this.

Here again, Lewis’s critics have a point. His treatment of humanism was indeed imbalanced and tendentious, and Milward especially is simply right in the corrective he supplies to it. Nevertheless, the pendulum has swung in the years since the publication of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* toward a more balanced appreciation of the point Lewis was trying to make, with a realization that there are important truths to be gleaned from his valiant, if not completely successful, effort to swim against the current.

The accepted treatments of Renaissance humanism in Lewis’s day still had a tendency to romanticize the movement and to accept uncritically its own view of the “dark” ages it aspired to replace.<sup>67</sup> Calin is incorrect to credit Lewis as “perhaps the first major voice to denounce the Burckhardtian orthodoxy,”<sup>68</sup> for Wallace K. Ferguson documents a long line of corrections beginning much earlier,<sup>69</sup> but he nicely captures the effect: Lewis “demystifies” humanist scholars.<sup>70</sup> J. A. W. Bennett spells out the nature of this demystification: “Here at last was an Attendant Spirit to liberate us from the spells of Burckhardt or Addington Symonds and challenge the easy antithesis of fantastic and fideistic Middle Ages versus logical and free-thinking Renaissance.”<sup>71</sup>

Thus there is a consensus emerging that Lewis was “partially right; his extreme is a corrective to another extreme.”<sup>72</sup> Gene Edward Veith notes that some of Lewis’s controversial judgments have been upheld: his emphasis on a greater “continuum” between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is “now widely accepted.”<sup>73</sup>

Lewis’s ability to participate in this correction is related to some of the deeply held beliefs that guided his thinking in general. Green and Hooper helpfully relate Lewis’s attack on humanism to his famous opposition to “chronological snobbery,”<sup>74</sup> the peculiarly modern notion that newer, modern ideas or beliefs are automatically better or more true than older ones. A number of scholars echo this connection. “Lewis overstated his case [against humanism] . . . because he was the kind of person who reacted strongly to the idea of throwing out the old.”<sup>75</sup> Lewis refused to look at the Renaissance as a “glorious ‘rebirth’ . . . as if the Christian culture of the Middle Ages needed to be overcome.”<sup>76</sup> Lewis could not tolerate the humanists’ attitude that their restoration of good learning, which he appreciated, “meant that they regarded the Middle Ages, beloved by Lewis, as ‘barbarism’ from which the world should be liberated.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, Walsh interestingly relates the “revisionist history” of Lewis’s volume to the argument of his inaugural lecture at Cambridge, “*De Descriptione Temporum*,”<sup>78</sup> where Lewis argues that the “Great Divide” in history belongs not between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.<sup>79</sup> These scholars are certainly right, and they point us to the fact that Lewis’s writings, like his thought, are all interconnected. Following the connections between Lewis’s view of the Renaissance in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and related ideas in his other books can open up a whole world of useful inquiry.

On a critical note more seldom hit, Milward thinks that as a Protestant Lewis was “out of sympathy” with Catholic texts. Milward is grateful for the rehabilitation of the Puritans, but “for the sake of balance [Lewis] might have devoted at least equal space to the feelings of Catholics like Sir Thomas More.”<sup>80</sup> He concludes that “As a Protestant, Lewis was unable to enter into the minds of the English Catholics of that age, while as an Irishman he was unable to enter into the minds of those Catholic Englishmen.”<sup>81</sup> But what can Milward mean by this? More and Tyndale, the two “opposed martyrs,”<sup>82</sup> are both presented as saints, as great men and great Christians as well as great writers. As for balance and equal space, More, the Roman Catholic writer, is allotted seventeen pages (165-81) to the Protestant Tyndale’s eleven (182-92). Milward at this point seems to manifest a personal defensiveness about past mistreatment of Catholics which even Lewis’s friend J. R. R. Tolkien, who was known to be sensitive to that issue in their friendship, was able to put aside, for Tolkien called *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* “a great book, the only one of his that gives me unalloyed pleasure.”<sup>83</sup> Most readers, like Tolkien, see nothing in this work inconsistent with Lewis’s characteristic practice of “mere Christianity.”

## EVALUATION

How then does *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* affect our view of Lewis’s legacy as a literary scholar? Bruce L. Edwards, Jr., notes that “Lewis’s status as a serious critic and theorist is undermined by his public image as a lightweight science fiction and children’s writer and Christian apologist,” with the result that he is seldom listed among the first rank of critics who were his contemporaries, such as T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, or F. R. Leavis.<sup>84</sup> This is no doubt true in some circles, but it is also true that all of Lewis’s major writings on literature continue to be read and referenced in discussions to which they are relevant, something which is true of very few scholarly writings more than half a century old. This is especially the case with *The Allegory of Love*, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. Sayer says that “on the strength of *The Allegory of Love* and of his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, there can be no doubt of [Lewis’s] greatness as a literary historian.”<sup>85</sup> And, as we have seen, J. R. R. Tolkien described *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* as “a great book, the only one of his that gives me unalloyed pleasure.”<sup>86</sup> What are some of the strengths Lewis manifests in this book that justify such a judgment?

First, Lewis had a facility in the languages and mastery of the literatures of the classical and medieval periods which was rare in his own day and perhaps, given current trends in education, not

reproducible in ours. This background gave him a perspective on the literature of the Renaissance perhaps unmatched by any modern scholar. Bennett thus describes the continuity of the literatures of these periods as something Lewis “not only asserted but embodied.” Nevertheless, he adds, “What was chiefly novel in his equipment was the philosophical mind, sharpened in the fires of ‘Greats.’”<sup>87</sup> That is, Lewis had a philosophically sharp mind nourished in the philosophical tradition actually shared by Renaissance writers, as opposed to the philosophically minded critic of our day who is more likely in his Post-Modern provincialism to mistake literary criticism for a form of skeptical if not nihilist epistemology.

A second quality Lewis brings to the table is his sheer capacity not only for enjoyment, but for the communication of his enjoyment of the literature of his period. Calin, it is true, criticizes Lewis for his “penchant for value judgments,”<sup>88</sup> thinking him ironically like the evaluative critics Lewis condemns in *An Experiment in Criticism*.<sup>89</sup> But the critics Lewis condemns there are mainly *negative* critics. His own practice may be more in line with what he calls the “emotive critics” who “did me very good service by infecting me with their own enthusiasms.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, many more writers see this tendency as a plus in Lewis because his tastes are cosmopolitan and his judgments are so often positive and generous. Kay Stevenson notes that whenever Lewis’s “affection” for the authors he treats shines through, the results are “almost always appealing.”<sup>91</sup> Walsh justly says, “Lewis is singularly free from packaged judgments and is able to respond to a book as though he were reading it for the first time. He is happier to find a few lines to praise than to cast a whole work into outer darkness.”<sup>92</sup> And, he adds, Lewis “is that type of scholar least in fashion—the appreciative critic, whose great gift is to whet a reader’s appetite . . . and to give him just enough practical guidance so he can find his way.”<sup>93</sup>

Third, unlike too many contemporary critics, Lewis actually knew how to write. His great learning is ubiquitous but unobtrusive and always worn lightly. He is blessedly free of jargon—given the criticism his terms “Drab” and “Golden” have received, some might think almost *too* free. Both specialists and people who are not professional scholars of literature can read his books with pleasure as well as profit. But his virtues as a writer are not limited to avoiding academic vices. Stevenson is not alone in noting Lewis’s “particular facility for rounding off his portraits gracefully or epigrammatically.”<sup>94</sup> Early reviewer John W. Simons appreciated how Lewis’s graceful style allowed him to “triumph over” even “the formidable scholarly apparatus of this latest volume in the Oxford History of English Literature series.” An example is the witty chiasmus of “The legend of the Renaissance is a Renaissance legend.” Simons comments, “Things like this happen on almost every page,” concluding that the book is “superbly wrong-headed at times, but never dull.”<sup>95</sup>

All of these virtues are related to Lewis’s conception of his role as a scholar. Christopher usefully relates Lewis’s practice in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* to his theory in *An Experiment in Criticism*, where he describes the value of the literary historian. Literary historians tell us what exists and put the works in their setting, “thus showing what demands they were meant to satisfy.” Lewis explains how he has benefited from such scholars. “They have headed me off from false approaches, taught me what to look for, enabled me in some degree to put myself into the frame of mind of those to whom [the old books] were addressed.”<sup>96</sup> In books like *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis practiced what he preached. He puts his learning into the service of the good reading he teaches in *Experiment in Criticism*, and then gets out of the way.

Lewis sees himself as the servant of the reader, and, for the sake of the reader, as the servant of the author. He wants to introduce us to his friends, to bring us together and then let our relationship with those authors grow naturally, unencumbered either by ignorance or by tendentious literary “theory.” That is why Edwards perceptively calls *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* part of Lewis’s great project of “rehabilitation.” Having championed Spenser in *The Allegory of Love* and Milton in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, he now in this book “attempts a grand assimilation of a whole century’s political, social, religious, and literary atmosphere.”<sup>97</sup>

Lewis reminds us why we want to read, and he makes the joy of reading possible again for people who are interested in something besides the politics, sex, gender, race, and skeptical epistemology that dominate too much of current critical discussion. He makes reading something that appeals once again to

the full humanity of a robustly human being. In other words, he makes literary study a humane pursuit again. He does this even when triumphing over a massive scholarly apparatus, and he does it with style, wisdom, and grace, even when he needs balance and correction. For that reason, Bennett's summary of his achievement is right on target. "Perhaps it is no accident that . . . [Lewis] more than once lets fall a phrase that could equally apply to himself. 'To read Spenser,' he says, 'is to grow in mental health.'"<sup>98</sup> Even 696 pages of such growth is not too much.

## NOTES

1. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, edited with a preface by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), v.
2. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, The Oxford History of English Literature, edited by Bonamy Dobree, Norman Davis, and F. P. Wilson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). In 1990, Oxford University Press retitled and renumbered the volumes, so that Lewis's book was changed from volume III to volume IV and was retitled *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century*. See Joe R. Christopher, "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama," in *The C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*, edited by Jeffrey D. Schultz and John G. West, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 151.
3. Christopher, op. cit., 151.
4. C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1935, in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper, 475 (New York: MacMillan, 1979).
5. George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (1988; reprint Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 326.
6. *Ibid.*, 323.
7. Gene Edward Veith, "Renaissance," in *Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis*, ed. Thomas L. Martin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 121, n. 1.
8. Sayer, op. cit., 323.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Neville Coghill, "The Approach to English," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 60-61.
11. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 282.
12. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942).
13. For general analyses and evaluations of Lewis's contributions as a literary critic, see Bruce L. Edwards, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Reading: C. S. Lewis's Defense of Western Literacy* (Provo: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature of Brigham Young University, 1986), and Donald T. Williams, "A Larger World: C. S. Lewis on Christianity and Literature." *Mythlore* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 45-37.

14. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 4.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 34.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Ibid., 18.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 19.
21. Ibid., 55-6.
22. Ibid., 129.
23. Ibid., 123; cf. C. S. Lewis, "The Fifteenth-Century Heroic Line," *Essays and Studies*, 24 (1939), rpt. in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 45-57.
24. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 164.
25. Ibid., 167, 169.
26. Ibid., 173.
27. Ibid., 174.
28. Ibid., 177.
29. Ibid., 182.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 189.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 192.
34. Ibid., 195.
35. Ibid., 237.
36. Ibid., 247.
37. Ibid., 268.



38. Ibid., 281.
39. Ibid., 287.
40. Ibid., 300.
41. Ibid., 307.
42. Ibid., 313.
43. Ibid., 324.
44. Ibid., 329.
45. Ibid., 331.
46. Ibid., 333.
47. Ibid., 338.
48. Ibid., 339.
49. Ibid., 343.
50. Ibid., 352.
51. Ibid., 386.
52. Ibid., 393.
53. Ibid., 490.
54. Ibid., 541.
55. Ibid., 557-8.
56. Sayer, op. cit., 326.
57. Ibid.
58. Helen Gardner, "Learning and Gusto: *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, by C. S. Lewis," *The New Statesman and Nation* 48 (October 30, 1954): 546.
59. Miller MacLure, Review of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, by C. S. Lewis, *The Canadian Forum* 35 (July, 1955): 94.
60. Kay Stephenson, "On 'Religious Controversy and Translation': An Introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 4, no. 6 (April, 1973): 3.

61. William Calin, "C. S. Lewis, Literary Critic: A Reassessment." *Mythlore* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2001); 11-12.
62. C. S. Lewis to a Schoolgirl in America, 1959, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Edited with a Memoir by W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 291.
63. Calin, op. cit., 11.
64. See Paul Oskar Kreisteller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (1955; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 92-119, E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 31-67, and Donald T. Williams, *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls, Georgia: Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), 78-103 for more balanced treatments of humanism that can offer a correction to Lewis and which support Milward's contention.
65. Father Peter Milward, S. J., *A Challenge to C. S. Lewis* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), 47.
66. Lewis, *Preface*, op. cit.
67. See for example Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2 volumes (1929; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1958).
68. Calin, op. cit., 6.
69. Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), chapters X and XI.
70. Calin, op. cit., 7.
71. J. A. W. Bennett, "Grete Clerk," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 46.
72. Chad Walsh, *The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 188.
73. Veith, op. cit., 109.
74. Green and Hooper, op. cit., 284; cf. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1955), 207-8.
75. Austin and Ruth Turney, "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 13, no. 12 (Oct., 1982): 4.
76. Christopher, op. cit., 151.
77. Stephenson, op. cit., 5.
78. C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," 1955; Rpt. in *Selected Literary Essays*, Edited by Walter Hooper, 1-14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

79. Walsh, op. cit., 187.
80. Milward, op. cit., 44.
81. Ibid., 45.
82. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 164.
83. Sayer, op. cit., 326.
84. Edwards, op. cit., 9.
85. Sayer, op. cit., 245.
86. Ibid., 326.
87. Bennett, op. cit., 47.
88. Calin, op. cit., 12.
89. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 121: "Can I say with certainty that any evaluative criticism has ever actually helped me to understand and appreciate any great work of literature? . . . The evaluative critics come at the bottom of the list."
90. Ibid., 122.
91. Kay Stevenson, "On 'Religious Controversy and Translation': An Introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*." *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 4, no. 6 (April, 1973): 4.
92. Walsh, op. cit., 189.
93. Ibid., 247.
94. Stevenson, op. cit., 4.
95. John W. Simons, Review of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, by C. S. Lewis, *The Commonweal* 61 (Feb. 25, 1955): 558.
96. Christopher, op. cit., 151; cf. Lewis, *Experiment*, op. cit., 121-2.
97. Edwards, op. cit., 84.
98. Bennett, op. cit., 49; cf. Lewis, *Allegory*, op. cit., 359.

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## A TRYST WITH THE TRANSCENDENTALS: C. S. Lewis on Goodness, Truth, and Beauty

Wednesday, Lecture 3

### ABSTRACT

C. S. Lewis shared with the English Romantic poets an interest in the Transcendentals—Goodness, Truth, and Beauty—and an emphasis on Nature as received by human imagination as a way of having contact with them. But while he shares the Romantics’ universe of discourse, he comes to radically different conclusions. Wordsworth remembers being troubled by a presence that led to elevated thoughts, but finds himself rationalizing the fact that what he has seen he can see no more and trying to reconcile himself to the passing away of a glory from the earth. Keats conflates truth and beauty and thinks that is all we need to know, but fails to be one with his nightingale, being tolled back to his sole self despite all the wings of poesy can do. Lewis, on the other hand, discovers that by rooting the transcendental in the reality of the Christian God, by seeing beauty (for example) as coming *through* nature rather than being *in* Nature, he can continue to be “surprised by joy.”

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### INTRODUCTION: THE ROMANTICS AND BEAUTY

Something has always bothered me about the English Romantic poets.

I fell in love with them as an adolescent reader because they were such an oasis of beauty in the arid deserts of Neoclassicism that preceded them and of Modernism that followed. (I’ve since realized that I was not being quite fair to the Eighteenth Century, though I remain unreconciled to much of the Twentieth—but those are other stories.) The Romantics did not reduce Nature either to the perfect clockwork operating by universal laws of the preceding century, nor to the grinding, indifferent, impersonal machine of the following one. To them she was a living being larger than they were who enabled them to experience humility, wonder, and adoration—responses that made the Romantics, to my mind then as now, more fully human than people in whom those feelings are atrophied or absent.

Like Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” I aspired to have “an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,” believing that only thus could I “see into the life of things” (ll. 47-49, Noyes 259). And like Wordsworth in the same poem, I thought that I had

felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (ll. 93-102, Noyes 260)

This was a good place to start, the beginning of a Quest to last a lifetime. Wordsworth apparently thought so too: Renwick observes of “Tintern Abbey” that the poet “spent the rest of his life expanding, glossing, commenting upon that poem” (158).

## THE PROBLEMS

So what was the problem? There were two. First, such feelings were inspiring, but they could only take one so far. Was this Presence that disturbed us with elevated thoughts a personal God? Something like the Force of Star Wars? A Platonic Idea? A mere personification of Nature (whatever that meant)? A sheer illusion? Nature gave you a sense that there was *Something* behind her that made you want to think her more than just atoms in motion, but she couldn't tell you much more than that; and this vague Something could fully satisfy neither Religion nor Philosophy. Nature made you feel like she was helping you to ask the right question, but she couldn't give you the answer to it. She gave you some very interesting hunches, but no more—and no sure way to confirm the validity even of the hunches.

Second, even the hunches tended to fade if they remained no more than that. Nature and her beauty could get you started on the Quest, but she couldn't sustain you in it, much less complete it. Wordsworth felt this problem acutely in his "Ode on Intimations of Immortality." The cataracts and mountains used to haunt him like a passion, but while he still loves them and still appreciates their beauty on some level, he has to admit that "The things which I have seen I now can see no more" (l. 9, Noyes 327). His own loss of vision would be bad enough, but it seemed to be more than that: "There hath passed away a glory from the earth" (l. 18). And so he cries out in a desperation like Paul's "O wretched man that I am" (Rom. 7:24), "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" (ll. 56-7, Noyes 328).

The first problem could be put on the back burner, but this one was immediately pressing. The young man still haunted by passion felt quite threatened by the promise of losing it, and he had the nagging dread that Wordsworth knew what he was talking about. Worse, the poet's attempt to cope with his own loss smelled strongly like a blatant orgy of rationalization:

Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind:  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind. ("Immortality" ll. 177-86, Noyes 329)

The problem with these lines is that the poet's more "mature" stoic resignation does not necessarily connect with or logically flow from the stimulus that supposedly gave rise to it. To cut one's losses is the gambit of the Poker Player, not the Nature Mystic. One ought to sympathize with suffering humanity anyway, whether one has ever been passionate about cataracts or not, and whether that former passion is moderating over time or not. And it takes more than some vague, elevating Presence to explain how any thoughts arising from human suffering can be "soothing," or to be the ground of any "faith that looks through death" to find a justified hope of something good, as opposed to oblivion, on the other side. If this is the "philosophic mind" that the years bring, we would be wiser to remain naïve but impassioned adolescents.

Keats, the greatest verbal craftsman of the Romantics, had his own way of arousing and disappointing the same hope. His Grecian Urn had told him that "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty.'—That is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (ll. 49-50, Noyes 1194). Endless attempts have been made to figure out what Keats meant by this assertion. Those scholars are no doubt right who try to limit its scope: Beauty is truth "is the most important thing men need to know *concerning the subject at hand* (the relation of art to life)" (Patterson 180-81; cf. Wasserman 138). That is, some such interpretation

most successfully renders a statement that makes sense. Yet Keats' words, like quicksilver, refuse to be contained by such analysis. His equation is not the "most important" thing we need to know; it is *all*. Surely it expresses at least the Wordsworthian hope that beauty is not just a mere epiphenomenon, a Yeatsian "spume that plays / upon a ghostly paradigm of things," an appearance, or a mere subjective response on our part, but somehow connects us to the deepest Reality—to Truth.

Now this would be a wonderful truth to know, if we could know it. But is Nature capable of telling us that it is so? Or are she and the truth she seems to offer us merely the occasion for our own wishful thinking, an exercise in selectivity that simply turns a blind eye to the fact that her beauty somehow manages to coexist with a certain cruelty and indifference, red in tooth and claw? Nature can raise this question, but by herself she cannot answer it.

One way of testing our beliefs is to try to live by them, and Keats makes a noble attempt to live by his. In doing so he illustrates C. S. Lewis's observation:

We do not merely want to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. (*Weight of Glory* 12)

The poetic depiction of this attempt is the "Ode to a Nightingale." The bird is the personification of a beauty that seems to transcend "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" (l. 23) of human life. Eschewing the intoxication proffered by Bacchus's beverages as a way of getting there that can produce only illusion at best, Keats strains to fly to the bird "on the viewless wings of poesy" (l.33). But all his efforts serve only to highlight the contrast between the ethereal immortality of the bird's song and the clod-like dullness and darkness of his own state. His attempt to be one with beauty through poetic imagination is inspiring and admirable, but it is also an admitted failure:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf. (ll. 71-4)

He ends up, like the knight at arms in his "Belle Dame sans Merci," on the cold hillside, called out of himself by the song of the bird, but unable to answer the call and not even certain of what has happened: "Do I wake or sleep?" (l. 80, Noyes 1193).

The English Romantics then show us that the beauty of Nature raises questions it cannot answer and inspires hopes it cannot fulfill. They start us on our Quest but cannot see us to the end of it. We must be grateful for what they give us, but we must also ultimately go beyond them or else fall back into cynicism, naturalism, and despair. So the pressing question becomes whether there is anyone who can supply the missing pieces to the puzzle. C. S. Lewis offers some pieces that are at least worthy of our consideration.

## LEWIS AND BEAUTY

Lewis invites us to read his own quest in Wordsworthian terms by choosing as the title of his autobiography a phrase from one of Wordsworth's sonnets: "surprised by joy." Lewis used *joy* (along with the German word *sehnsucht*) as a technical term for the stab of romantic longing generated by beauty. More cosmopolitan in his tastes than Wordsworth, Lewis could receive it not just from Nature (the Castlereagh Hills) but also from literature (Norse mythology), music (Wagner), or art (a toy garden made by his brother on the lid of a biscuit tin and brought into the nursery). Indeed, he records, Warnie's toy garden "was the first beauty I ever knew," not important at the moment but "important in memory" (*Surprised* 7). For a few years later, "There suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, that memory of the earlier morning at the Old House when my brother



had brought his toy garden into the nursery” (16). The memory filled him with an acute longing. What did he want? Not the biscuit lid nor his own past, but *something* not yet nameable that was represented by the remembered beauty. He could only describe the experience as an “unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction” (18). And this experience of Wordsworthian haunting became nothing less than “the central story of my life” (17).

Like Wordsworth, Lewis was haunted by beauty. Like Keats, he wanted the truth; but, unlike Keats, his hardnosed logical thinking, learned from “the Old Knock,” his tutor William T. Kirkpatrick, was not making any facile identification of truth with beauty possible. By his adolescence he had reached the point where he cared only about Balder and the great myths but believed only in atoms in motion. Thus he found like Wordsworth that the glory was passing away, only he did not have the comfort of Wordsworth’s rationalizations of that passing to console him. And so by early manhood he could say, “As for Joy, I labeled it ‘aesthetic experience’ and talked much about it under that name and said it was very ‘valuable.’ But it came very seldom and when it came it didn’t amount to much” (*Surprised* 205). Had the story ended there, Lewis would have had little to add to what we had already learned from Wordsworth and Keats.

But of course the story does not end there. Lewis was running into Christian writers like George MacDonald and Christian friends like Neville Coghill, Hugo Dyson, and J. R. R. Tolkien, who were forcing him to reconsider whether atoms in motion were a sufficient explanation for the world as he experienced it. His journey from Atheism to Idealism to Theism to Christianity is fully narrated, literally in *Surprised by Joy* and allegorically in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, and it is outside the scope of this paper to repeat it here. Our question is rather, given that Lewis became convinced that God exists and has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, what effect did this conversion have on his relationship to beauty, or, as he put it, to “joy”?

It had the effect, interestingly, of reversing the disappearance of the glory from the earth. Let Lewis tell the story in his own words:

I cannot indeed complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bitter-sweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, “Look!” The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority who set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. “We would be at Jerusalem.” (*Surprised* 238)

## BEAUTY AS A SECOND THING

What is happening here? On the surface, it seems paradoxical that a demotion of beauty in importance should lead to a renewed and greater appreciation of it. Yet Lewis came to understand this paradox as the exemplification of a pattern basic to all of life. It was in fact “a universal law”: “Every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or partial good for which the sacrifice was made. . . . You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first” (“First and Second Things” 280).

This law is certainly widely true. If you try to hit home runs, you just strike out and pop up a lot. If you swing the bat with good form and keep your eye on the ball, you hit line drives, some of which may go over the fence. If you try too hard to make friends you may just push people away. If you care about others more than yourself, you may end up with some very good friends. If you put all your hopes for meaning into subjective experiences of beauty, they may leave you empty. If you pursue the truth and

find it, you just might get beauty thrown in. That, in any case, is how Lewis interpreted his own experience.

Now, another way of confirming our beliefs is by their fruitfulness. By fruitfulness, philosophers of science do not mean utilitarianism, but rather the way in which a belief that leads you to other true beliefs tends to be confirmed by that fact (Polanyi 147). So it is significant that Lewis's conversion to Christianity helped him to see the very principle that illumined his experience. Corbin Scott Carnell explains that

Many writers became disillusioned with Romanticism in the twentieth century precisely because they expected too much of it. Lewis retained his faith in the basic validity of Romantic literature because he believed it was compatible with a Christian ontology. The sense of nostalgia cannot be valued for itself, at least not for long. *Sehnsucht* has genuine meaning only in an ontology which has a place for it. (158-9).

Christian faith, in other words, provides a basis for distinguishing first and second things. If God exists and created the world, then there is an objective hierarchy of goodness that begins with and proceeds from the basic distinction between the Creator and the creation (Williams, "The Mind is its own Place"). This distinction gives us a basis for avoiding what Meilander calls "the sweet poison of the false infinite." He sees it as one of Lewis's most central themes that "To be fully human involves a certain stance toward the things of creation: delighting in things without seeking our security in them" (8). If, on the other hand, the world just exists on its own or evolved by chance, then there is no basis for such a distinction, for everything just is, and all hierarchical rankings are arbitrary.

We are back to living out our beliefs as a way of testing them. Can we really live as if there is no valid distinction to be made between first and second things? Lewis's conclusion was "no." And that "no" seemed to explain the difference between his experience of beauty and Wordsworth's.

Lewis wrote a lot about this insight as related specifically to the experience of beauty, not only in his autobiography but also in expository works like *The Four Loves*, where he makes the first and second things even more explicit in Christian terms. "We can't get through; not that way. We must make a detour—leave the hills and the woods and go back to our studies, to the church, to our Bibles, to our knees. Otherwise the love of nature is beginning to turn into a nature religion" (38). The reason why turning Nature into a religion is a mistake is that "Nature cannot satisfy the desires she arouses nor answer theological questions nor sanctify us. . . . But the love of her has been a valuable and, for some people, an indispensable initiation" (39). If God is God and Nature his creature, this is just what we should expect.

In fact, those who allow no more than this to the love of nature seem to be those who retain it. . . . Nature 'dies' on those who try to live for a love of nature. Coleridge ended by being insensible to her; Wordsworth, by lamenting that the glory had passed away. Say your prayers in a garden early, steadfastly ignoring the dew, the birds, and the flowers, and you will come away overwhelmed by its freshness and joy; go there to be overwhelmed and, after a certain age, nothing will happen to you. (39).

We also have this, from *The Weight of Glory*:

Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. . . . [But] the books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. (4-5)

All right, then. Treating Nature and her beauty as a Second Thing, as a creature of God rather than as an end in itself, allows Lewis to have both God *and* beauty. At least, that is his experience as he reports it. If we grant this truth, then, what else follows from it?

### THE OBJECTIVITY OF BEAUTY

One further conclusion is the objectivity of beauty. The very existence of first and second things flows from the existence of a good creator God who expressed His character in His creation. If this is the case, then the very consideration that keeps beauty from being a first thing also makes it a real thing. If a personal God values His creation, then the values He has placed in it are really there, waiting for our response and not merely caused by it. Lewis is very much aware of the contradictions that ensue from denying this idea, as he explains in *Abolition of Man*:

Gaius and Titius comment as follows: “when the man said *That is sublime*, he appeared to be making a remark about the waterfall. . . . Actually . . . he was not making a remark about the waterfall, but a remark about his own feelings. What he was saying was really *I have feelings associated in my mind with the word ‘Sublime,’* or shortly, *I have sublime feelings.*” (14; cf. Williams, *Mere Humanity* 26-39)

But of course that is not what the man is intending to say at all. And if we pretend it is, we will soon be subjectivizing his statements about the moral law and even the laws of logic as well—with the result that we will then not be able to think about anything at all (cf. the argument from reason in *Miracles*; “The Poison of Subjectivism”; etc). The alternative is to believe “the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it . . . that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt” (*Abolition* 25). The doctrine of objective value holds that “certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are.” This means that “to call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment, but to recognize a quality which *demand*s a certain response from us whether we make it or not” (29). It follows then, to return to the topic of beauty, that

There is no reason why our reaction to a beautiful landscape should not be the response, however humanly blurred and partial, to something that is really there. The idea of a wholly mindless and valueless universe has to be abandoned at one point—i.e., as regards logic: after that, there is no telling at how many other points it will be defeated nor how great the reversal of our nineteenth century philosophy must finally be. (“*De Futilitate*” 71)

Lewis’s analysis of the psychology of love and desire in *The Four Loves* is consistent with this perspective. Some pleasures—like a drink of cold water—are dependent on our subjective state or our need. We only really appreciate the water if we are thirsty. But then there are also what Lewis calls “Pleasures of Appreciation,” which are not dependent on our subjective condition but “make us feel that something has not merely gratified our senses in fact but claimed our appreciation by right.” A person passing a garden planted with sweet peas “does not simply enjoy, he feels that this fragrance somehow deserves to be enjoyed. He would blame himself if he went past inattentive and undelighted. It would be blockish, insensitive” (29). He continues,

In the Appreciative pleasures, even at their lowest, and even more as they grow up into the full appreciation of all beauty, we get something we can hardly help calling love and hardly help calling disinterested, towards the object itself. It is the feeling which would make a man unwilling to deface a great picture even if he were the last man left alive and himself about to die; which makes us glad of unspoiled forests that we shall never see; which makes us anxious that

the garden or bean-field should continue to exist. We do not merely like the things; we pronounce them, in a momentarily God-like sense, “very good.” (32)

In doing so, Lewis thinks we are recognizing a real truth and seconding, as it were, God’s pronouncement of Nature’s goodness in Genesis.

## THE FUNCTION OF BEAUTY

Also flowing from Lewis’s basic insight is a perspective on the function of beauty. In his autobiography he called it a signpost pointing us to God. This also follows inevitably from the doctrine of creation. What God has made reflects the nature of its Maker. It does so imperfectly after the Fall, but the reflection, while dimmed and distorted in certain ways, has not been erased. So truth when we find it in the world is a reflection of God’s mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of his glory, impressed into the very fabric of what He has made (see Kreeft 23-5). This Christian ontology allows beauty to function as the signpost Lewis discovered it to be, and the response unleashed by it not only prevents Wordsworth’s loss of vision but even heightens the vision and the longing. “Gratitude exclaims, very properly, ‘How good of God to give me this.’ Adoration says, ‘What must be the quality of that Being whose far-off and momentary coruscations are like this!’ One’s mind runs back up the sunbeam to the sun” (*Letters to Malcolm* 90).

Beauty pursued for its own sake dulls and disappoints eventually. Beauty received as a pointer to the God of creation leads to worship. “Need-love cries to God from our poverty; Gift-love longs to serve, or even suffer for, God; Appreciative love says, ‘We give thee thanks for thy great glory’” (*Four Loves* 33). In other words, if beauty does not lead us back to its source in the creator God, it fails of its purpose. We may admire the intricacy of the Message, but we have not *read* it. Consequently, we eventually lose interest. Beauty read as a sign stimulates us to praise, not just of the beautiful object, but also of its Maker. “Of every created thing I praise, I should say, ‘In some way, in its unique way, like Him who made it.’ Thus up from the garden to the Gardener, from the sword to the Smith. To the life-giving Life and the Beauty that makes beautiful” (*A Grief Observed* 50).

## CONCLUSION:

This paper does not claim to have proved from the phenomenon of beauty that God exists or that Jesus is His Son. Many more factors go into the decision whether or not to believe those propositions than we were able to address here. What it does try to do is to elucidate one aspect of C. S. Lewis’s testimony, his personal witness to the existence of that God. One way of testing our beliefs is to see if they hold up when we try to live by them. Another way is by their fruitfulness, i.e., the fact that they lead to further insights that are also confirmed by life. Lewis found that his conversion to Christianity solved for him certain problems of aesthetics that the Romantic poets were unable to solve, and that what Carnell aptly calls the “Christian ontology” was the key to that solution. Lewis’s experience was that at these points his life tended to confirm his Christian faith, and his writings give his testimony to that confirmation.

The Romantics cared about beauty but lacked a sufficient grounding for it to make it fully meaningful. Wordsworth found that it slipped through his fingers, and Keats ultimately failed to make its relationship to truth anything more than wishful thinking. Lewis discovered that his conversion to Christian faith had the effect of making beauty a Second Thing. “Lewis cautioned that beauty was the sign and not the signifier and that to make it a ‘first thing’ was to crush and lose it” (Prothero 94). Making beauty secondary to God ironically exalts beauty rather than erasing it because it enables us not only to believe in God but also in the ultimate goodness of “a world which God has inseminated with all sorts of realities that carry their hidden winsome reminders of Himself” (Kilby, *World* 41).

Lewis also realized that this move of making beauty a Second Thing ironically not only led to the preservation of his experience of beauty but also to an understanding of it that makes Keats’ affirmation

of its relation to truth meaningful. We want Keats to be right; we want beauty to be more than just a subjective appearance. As Kilby says, we do not want “truth and beauty, or truth decorated with beauty, or truth illustrated by the beautiful phrase, or truth in a ‘beautiful setting’” (*Aesthetics* 20). We want something more whole than that. But how can we find it?

Lewis’s stress on the objectivity of beauty hints at its relation to truth, and his defense of its objectivity in *The Abolition of Man* is explicitly related to the objectivity of goodness and truth as well. The unity of beauty, truth, and goodness cannot be found within the horizon of temporal experience, i.e., in Nature, but only in God. Finite Nature is a prism that breaks up the light of the infinite God into the distinguished Transcendentals. Only when we see that can we see Von Balthasar’s wonderful vision in which “Beauty . . . dances as an uncontained splendour around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another” (18). If truth is the reflection of God’s mind, goodness of His character, and beauty of His glory in the world He has made, then any of them can lead us back to the Source. Lewis learned, and can teach us, to follow all three paths.

This then is Lewis’s testimony: Accepting the Christian ontology was unexpectedly fruitful in that it led to a view of beauty that enhanced and enabled a life of appreciation for beauty by supplying the missing pieces in the attempts of the Romantics to lead such a life. Beauty understood thus makes every experience of beauty one more bit of support for that world view. “This probative energy silently shouts out from its radiant form: ‘This is so; this is real, authentic, good, and true’” (Dubay 23).

We are surrounded by Signposts, if Lewis was right. Was he? Can he help us learn to read them? For what it’s worth, not only my exposition here but also my own experience of such things causes me to answer, “Yes.”

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## A CHRISTIAN ROLE-MODEL: EDMUND SPENSER

Thursday, Lecture 1

### *Faerie Queene* - Book I A Reader's Guide

**MINOR CHARACTERS:** Note that not all characters function on all four levels of the allegory at all times. Some flexibility in reading is required.

<u>Character:</u>	<u>Meaning/Function:</u>
Sansfoy	Without faith, unbelief; eldest of three brothers.
Sansloy	Without law, lawlessness; younger brother of Sansfoy.
Sansioy	Without joy, depression; youngest brother, he follows Sansfoy and Sansloy.
Cælia	Heaven., the heavenly
Fidelia	Faith (contrast <i>Fidessa</i> , false faith, an alias of Duessa).
Speranza	Hope.
Charissa	Charity, i.e. <i>agape</i> . Sister of Fidelia and Speranza, the three daughters of Cælia.
Ignaro	Ignorance, esp. Willful ignorance of spiritual things.
Humilta	Humility, the doorkeeper of the House of Faith.
Una's Donkey	The Protestant clergy.
Orgoglio	Pride.
Satyrane	The "righteous pagan," ready to hear the Gospel.
Lucifera	Pride (cf. Orgoglio, another manifestation of pride).
The 7 Beadsmen	The Seven Works of Mercy: to house the homeless, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned, to heal the sick, to bury the dead, to support widows & orphans.

Cleopolis London. Literally, “City of History” (Cleo was the Muse of history; implication: that the heavenly vision must be worked out or incarnated in history.)

The Dragon Satan

**THE GREAT HOUSES** (or castles): In each book, there are usually two contrasting allegorical buildings, representing opposing values, whose architecture and inhabitants are keys to the allegory. In Book I they are the House of Pride and the House of Holiness; in Book II they are the Cave of Mammon and the Castle of Alma (= the soul; her castle would be the body), or the Castle of Alma and the Bower of Bliss (Book II is unusual in having three Houses).

**THINGS TO LOOK FOR:** *Biblical allusions.* The text is impregnated with Scripture, both passages and principles. Knowledge of the Bible and Christian doctrine is indispensable for full understanding of the allegory. *Classical allusions.* Greek and Roman deities or mythological figures are often used as natural symbols of spiritual values. *Interaction between characters.* The way characters are related to each other (families, friendships, alliances, animosities) and the ways they interact (who defeats whom, why, and how) picture relationships between spiritual and intellectual concepts. The wonder of the poem is how all these levels continue to form one incredibly rich whole.

### MAJOR IMAGES

LEVEL	Redcrosse	Una	Duessa	Arthur	Gloriana	Archimago	Dwarf
<b>Literal</b> (the story)	St. George of Merry England.	Redcrosse Knight's Lady.	Sansfoy's Lady.	Prince Arthur before he was King.	The Queene of Færie.	An evil Wizard.	Servant of Una.
<b>Allegorical</b> (history)	England, the English nation, the English People.	The true (Protestant) Church.	The false (Roman Catholic) Church. Bloody Mary.	The Grace of God.	Elizabeth.	The Pope.	The Renaissance
<b>Tropological</b> or Moral (practical living)	The individual Christian Soldier in search of Sanctification.	Truth, Trueness, Faithfulness, Unity.	Falsehood, Falsity, Duplicity.	The Grace of God.	Glory, Majesty.	Clericalism, Ritualism.	Human Reason.
<b>Anagogical</b> or Spiritual (eternal life)	The individual Man in quest of Salvation or a Right Relationship with God.	The Truth, Spiritual Truth, the True Faith.	Spiritual error, the Harlot of Revelation.	The Grace of God.	The Glory of God.	Power of Satan.	Reason as servant of Truth.



**“THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE”:  
SATAN’S PHILOSOPHY AND THE MODERN DILEMMA**

**Thursday, Lecture 2**

*We must read [Milton] as we read the ancients or Dante or Shakespeare, with imaginative sympathy for beliefs and assumptions that are not ours—and we may find that some of these are more valuable than our own, that we need readjustment more than the work in hand.* (Bush, *John Milton* 145)

Satan began his career by rebelling against his Maker and proceeded by trying to enlist others in his rebellion. Many readers have thought that Milton’s Satan began by rebelling against his author and has proceeded by trying to enlist others in that rebellion. A sufficient number of critics seem to have joined up in any case. Whatever we make of his cause or his case, Satan continues to demand our attention, and Milton’s characterization of his arch villain remains one of the most fascinating aspects of his great spiritual epic. To the extent that Milton’s portrait of the real Enemy of our souls is accurate, it gives us insight not only into Milton’s poetry but also into the spiritual battles in which we are still engaged.

Discussion of whether Satan is—intentionally or not—Milton’s “real hero” in *Paradise Lost* has tended to center on Satan’s personality. After the defiant freedom fighter of Books I and II—Satan as Che Guevara—the slightly pompous and definitely defensive Theology Professor which is Milton’s portrayal of God in Book III can seem a bit of a let down, even to those who have not missed the fact that this picture of Satan is created by accepting at face value his own view of himself. Did Milton fail to anticipate how much less obvious the contrast between the self-serving image created by Satan’s propaganda machine and the plain unvarnished truth of Heaven (well analyzed by Stein and others) would be to a generation jaded by constant exposure to spin doctors? No doubt. In this paper we will examine another set of clues Milton gave us as to how we should take his great Antagonist, a set that has perhaps not received the attention it deserves.

Let us focus then not on Satan’s personality but on his philosophy. By this I do not mean his political philosophy, for he has none, though this lack is mightily obscured by the ubiquity of his political rhetoric. Loewenstein has usefully shown how Satan’s rhetoric parodies that of what Milton would have considered the “righteous” Puritan revolutionary who wanted to abolish kingship in favor of democracy, while his actual rebellion parallels Aristotle’s treatment in *The Politics* of tyrants, i.e., rebels who desire to keep the same form of government (monarchy) but simply “wish it to be in their own control” (307). We will look much deeper than politics, to Satan’s view of life, specifically, his metaphysics and his ethics as they are generated by his epistemology.

Forsy rightly notes that “It is evident that Milton did not assign Satan arbitrary behaviour” (313). She sees his actions as unified by his role as the “antithesis of Christ,” specifically of Christ as the incarnation of the Old Testament Wisdom (316). Her theological insight is strengthened by the realization that Satan’s career hangs together on a philosophical level as well. It is as if Milton had asked himself, “What would the philosophy have to be that could underlie and explain the precise series of actions and statements that Scripture and Christian tradition attribute to this character? How would a person have to think who could do the kinds of things Satan has done? What view of the world could get a person to follow just this career?” Whether Milton thought in precisely these terms of course we do not know. But if he had asked himself just these questions and set out to answer them, he could hardly have portrayed the answer in the philosophy of Satan more profoundly and consistently than he did in the character that we have. Contrary to Tillyard, Satan is not “unreasoning energy” (193); he is rather one who reasons consistently and well, but (in Milton’s mind) perversely.

I would therefore like to examine, and analyze the implications of, three diabolical statements which form a chain of inexorable logic that explains Satan’s course of action and would justify it to anyone who accepts their initial premise as true, or condemn it for anyone who rejects it as false. They

still sit on a watershed that cuts through the landscape of our thinking today. I think that they will indicate which side of it Milton wanted us to take our stand on, and I believe that deciding whether or not we agree with him can still be a usefully clarifying exercise for us today.

**“THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE”:  
THE SOURCE OF VALUE**

The very first words we hear from Satan record his shock at the contrast between the place where he finds himself and the place from which he has been expelled: the contrast between Hell and Heaven (I.242ff). Before he recovers himself enough to start putting his spin on the situation, he acknowledges that the change of scenery is not a very favorable one. “Mournful gloom” contrasts with “celestial light,” “happy Fields / Where Joy forever dwells” with “horrors” most profound (244-5, 250-1). But, not to be deterred by anything so mundane as reality, Satan quickly turns to his rhetorical skills to salvage the situation, dramatically exhorting Hell to receive its new Possessor (252).

*Possessor?* To get the full effect, one must imagine a new inmate just tossed into the Tower of London making this audacious speech while the Beefeaters roll their eyes and make significant gestures toward their heads as they pocket the keys. One must likewise hear the equally futile “Here at least / We shall be free” echoing forlornly in the hollow chambers of the Tower or Newgate. As Charles Williams once said with classic British understatement, “Hell is always inaccurate” (258; see Bush, *English Literature* 404, for an excellent rhetorical analysis of the opening speech.).

Satan realizes that he needs to justify this apparent defiance of the reality being conveyed to his entire host by their senses, so he cuts quickly to the very foundation of the entire diabolical doctrine. His mind, he boasts, is not subject to change by so paltry a thing as place: “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (254-5).

This claim is as philosophically audacious as the inmate’s claim to be the Tower’s new “owner” is legally daring, and, Milton implies by its rhetorical context in Satan’s spin-doctoring, as likely to be grounded in reality. Even Satan has already grudgingly admitted that God has proved himself sovereign, and that this sovereignty includes the authority to “dispose and bid / What shall be *right*” (246-7, emphasis added). His propaganda would have it that this situation only “now” obtains, that it was doubtful before it was asserted by “thunder.” But for readers who agree with Milton that the Judeo-Christian God exists, this can hardly be the case. Milton would surely have expected his readers to recognize those words as more evidence for the centrifugal force of Satan’s spin cycle.

In Genesis, God in the beginning created the heavens and the earth. Whether he did so *ex nihilo* as in traditional orthodoxy or out of himself as Milton would have it makes no difference to the main point, which is that the universe’s dependence on God is total. Matter, indeed the space-time continuum (to update the discussion), have no *independent* pre-existence, as they do in pagan creation myths; they are not co-eternal in that sense. There is therefore nothing in the nature or the history of the physical universe which could give it or any of its inhabitants, spiritual or animal, any grounds for a claim to independence, or autonomy, from God. Milton’s physicalism, giving the angels more “refined” bodies, merely makes more simple and direct a claim that is also inherent in orthodoxy: that the angels in general and Satan in particular have no basis on which they can claim to be exceptions to this principle.

In Genesis, God through his Word not only gave the universe its existence; he also gave it its value. He said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And then God saw that the light was *good*. In other words, he approved his own handiwork. Creation is just as absolutely dependent on God for its goodness as it is for its existence. In Christian tradition, God is good and the source of all goodness. Good is defined as that which corresponds, not to God’s bare will, but to his will as the expression of his character, which is inherently good. Even Calvin, who is sometimes accused of teaching a bare voluntarism, held that God’s purpose in creation was “to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe” (1:51), and “if it be asked what cause induced him to create all things at first, and now inclines him to preserve them, we shall find that there could be no other cause than his own goodness” (1:56).

Good then is that which corresponds to God's will as the expression of his character, "the proper order of the universe in relation to a universal law, the law of self-abnegation in love" (C. Williams 256). Evil is that which deviates from this standard. If God exists and is the creator portrayed in Genesis, then it simply makes no sense to speak of good or evil except in relation to him. Fish puts Milton's point well: "What is true about the world is that God created it, and to enjoy its fruits as if they created or sustained themselves is to join Satan in chewing 'bitter Ashes'" (*How Milton Works* 13).

Milton assumed that we would know, indeed, assume, all of this. We may disagree with him, but first we must grant him the courtesy of hearing him. Therefore, Ryken is right to "insist that the background assumption of perfection is one that the reader should be willing to grant as an *a priori* axiom." Writing in the Seventeenth Century, Milton was "using as his material an established story and theological system. He did not have to prove that God is good and that Satan is evil" (60). If we wish to enter imaginatively into his world, we must accept, or at least suspend our disbelief in, the same premises.

We see then that Satan's counter-claim has laid its finger right on the crux of the claim that God is God. For if we accept the proposition that God exists and created the world, then it follows that the mind is not its own place; it, like every other place, is God's place. If God exists and created, then there is a hierarchy of value, of goodness, objectively present in the world because he put it there, and the path to human fulfillment is for the mind to discover those values and submit itself to them, or, to the extent that it is fallen, to allow itself to be conformed to them anew by grace. God has already determined what is good, and for the mind to strike off in a different direction is both a perverse and a doomed enterprise. But if God does not exist and did not create the world, then the account of those values proffered by those claiming to speak for him is no longer privileged, and each individual must simply make up his own mind.

Satan is rejecting what C. S. Lewis called "the doctrine of objective value" (*Abolition* 29). Lewis explains,

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence, or our contempt. . . . To call children delightful or old men venerable is not simply to record a psychological fact about our own parental or filial emotions at the moment but to recognize a quality that demands a certain response from us whether we make it or not. (25, 29; cf. D. Williams, "Objectivity"; cf. *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition*, chp. 2.)

One does not have to be a Christian to accept this view. Lewis documents an impressive consensus on it across the world in pre-modern times. But, as Milton realized, to be a Christian who takes seriously the doctrine of creation is to be logically committed to the objectivity of value because of the radical way in which the doctrine of creation grounds the existence of objective value. And therefore his Satan correctly realizes that in order to claim the right to choose—or, indeed, create—his *own* alternative values, he must eliminate that grounding. To establish one's own values without reference to or in opposition to the ones that God has decreed is precisely to dethrone God and put oneself in his place. Therefore, Satan's claim that the mind is its own place is not merely a justification for his rebellion; it *is* his rebellion in its very essence.

### **"OUR OWN GOOD FROM OURSELVES": THE SEARCH FOR THE GOOD**

We are now in a position to see why I said earlier that Satan's metaphysics and his ethics are generated by his epistemology. He does not say, "This is the nature of reality; therefore, this is what we can know about it and this is how we know it." Rather, he says, "This is how I choose to know the world; therefore, this is what that world is like." In other words, he has decided that one does not *discover* truth,

or meaning, or value, as is proper for a creature; one *creates* them for oneself, as is proper for one who aspires to be God. He has, in other words, rejected Fox Mulder's belief that "The truth is out there." Whatever truth he embraces is rather "in here," in the mind which is its own place. From this subjectivist epistemology flows an antirealist metaphysic. This place where the demons now find themselves is not Hell because of nasty objective realities like flames that give off darkness visible in the absence of celestial light. No, it is Heaven because Satan says it is Heaven. What then do these commitments do to Satan's ethic, his conception of the good?

The answer to that question is given, not by Satan himself, but by one of his minions. But Mammon shows by his answer that he has been a faithful disciple of his diabolical Master. Rejecting the thought of returning to Heaven to worship One whom they hate, he urges the demons rather to "seek / Our own good from ourselves, and from our own / Live to ourselves" (II.252-4), even if they must do so in Hell.

Mammon's advice simply lays out the next logical step down the path that Satan has chosen. If the good is that which corresponds to God's will as the expression of his character, then the search for the good must lead us *out of* ourselves, proximately to the grateful reception as his gift of that which God has made, good because it reflects his perfections, and ultimately to communion with that Other which is the ultimate goodness, God himself. But if the mind is its own place and the good is that which corresponds to its independent assertion of its own will, then the search for the good must lead us *into* ourselves, for only there, in the mind's own place, exist the Heavens we have tried to make out of our own Hells.

If God exists and is the source of all goodness, then he forms an ultimate reference point through which all other beings are related, to him and to each other. That common pursuit of a common good leading back to the same reference point is the source of *community*, a common unity in the enjoyment of a common and shared good which is the basis of love. This is the life of Heaven that the faithful angels enjoy and into which Adam and Eve and their descendants are invited. But if that community of shared good is only a myth, or if it exists but has been refused, if each individual is left to try to form his own reference point—if the mind is its own place—then what is there left for the mind to do but seek its own good from itself? Having claimed the right to create its own values rather than submit to the ones that are simply "out there" by creation, the mind must look to itself to validate for itself any "good" that it chooses. And it must do so alone. For every other individual is in the same position, and even if two of them agree on the same good and agree to seek it together, their community has no basis other than their own essentially self-referential and arbitrary choices. And how far can one trust another ego as committed to its own sovereignty, its own divinity, as one's own? That is why the demons have no understanding of love and grace, the motives of Heaven. Devil may with devil damned firm concord hold, but it is ultimately out of fear that they do so, as Satan ironically admits (II.32-5).

Only two orientations then are ultimately possible, flowing from the two rival conceptions of the nature of things: theocentric or egocentric. Is the mind God's place or its own place? If the mind is God's place, unity and integration with itself and other minds are theoretically possible based on God himself as the ultimate final reference point. The mind as its own place, egocentric by definition and design, leads naturally to isolation and fragmentation. The unity imposed on that natural isolation and fragmentation by Satan's strength of will is precisely the normal definition of Hell, though Satan may call it Heaven if he will.

### **"EVIL BE THOU MY GOOD": THE IDENTITY OF THE GOOD**

Very well, then: if the mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven, then it can only seek its own good from itself. What kind of good can it then expect to find? Satan realizes the answer to that question, and finally accepts it, in Book IV. Like Marlowe's Faust, Satan is at first tempted (privately) to repent, only to harden his heart and recommit himself to evil. And, like Marlowe's Mephistophelis ("How comes it then that thou art out of Hell?" "Why, this *is* Hell, nor am I out of it!"), he finds that escaping the Hell he has chosen is not a simple matter of redefining it in the

mind's own place. Milton's narrator deflates all of Satan's big talk about making a Heaven of Hell by telling us that

. . . horror and doubt distract  
 His troubl'd thoughts, and from the bottom stir  
 The Hell within him, for within him Hell  
 He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell  
 One step no more than from himself can fly  
 By change of place. (IV.19-23)

The ironic reprise of the word *place* can hardly be insignificant. Satan confirms the narrator's interpretation by reproaching himself for his ingratitude to God in a soliloquy he would never have allowed his fellow demons to overhear. This forfeiture of all that is truly good weighs heavily on him, so that "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (IV.75), a condition which threatens only to worsen eternally. Nevertheless, repentance is rejected because it entails submission (81). Satan still thinks it better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.

But where does this leave him? Satan accepts the fact that "all Good to me is lost" (109). He at least is under no illusions about who the ultimate Source of Good in the universe is, however many illusions he may generate for his followers and for mankind. And so we reach the place to which Satan's path has inexorably brought him: "Evil be thou my Good" (110).

Milton has left no doubt about where he stands. Satan's promise that the mind's secession from God's rule to become its own place will allow it to make a Heaven of Hell has utterly failed in his own experience, and it can be maintained henceforth only as the most cynical of lies. Such is the official philosophy and public policy of Hell. Adam and Eve will discover bitterly when they subscribe to it that an inescapable logic of damnation flows from Satan's original premise. If the mind is its own place, then it must seek its own good from itself; and then all it can find, having severed itself from the only source of real goodness, is evil. "Evil be thou my Good" is the inevitable result of the mind's secession from the Kingdom of Heaven. And though he stubbornly clings to his philosophy as the only alternative to "submission," even Satan can no longer pretend—except to others—that what it has brought him is good.

## CONCLUSIONS

Where does this discussion leave us? It would seem to leave us with the following conclusions.

First, Milton was not of the devil's party, intentionally or otherwise. He worked too hard to embed Satan's rhetoric in contexts that highlight its duplicity to have been of his party intentionally. Whether or not one agrees with the use Fish made of it—I think his notion of "implication" is a possible but not a necessary reader response—one must certainly appreciate his exposition of the pervasiveness of that embedding (*Surprised by Sin*). And, as we have shown, Milton understood Satan's position too well and had analyzed it too thoroughly to have been of his party without knowing it

Shelley and his school are therefore guilty of wishful thinking about Milton because they *are* of the devil's party and do know it. It was not until the Romantics had pushed Kant's epistemology in an even more subjective direction than he would have countenanced that anyone seriously thought that Satan was right about the mind being its own place. They were the first generation to believe that a healthy mind functioning properly creates its own reality rather than perceiving, with greater or lesser accuracy and clarity, the reality that is there. The only Seventeenth-Century voice that comes close is Hamlet's: "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II.ii.255). But this is significantly the voice of a person who is trying to convince us that he is mad. There was no public philosophy in his time that would have said any such thing; "'Fact' and 'value' had not yet been sundered by the mechanical 'philosophy'" (Willey 52). Even Berkeley had not gone so far, for the table and chair in his notorious room continued to exist even when we were not perceiving them because God still saw them, and his vision trumped ours. Object permanence depended not on our minds but on God's. Dr. Johnson

famously kicked a certain stone even at Berkeley. How he might have responded to Coleridge or Shelley we can only imagine (Willey 293-305; D. Williams, "Reflections").

We may also reach a new level of admiration for Milton's accomplishment in his portrait of Satan's character. That Milton's Satan is an impressive personality and a skilled rhetorician who was able to sway the minds of a third of the angels and has seduced even many of the critics is well known. He is also an original and seminal thinker whose philosophical justification of his own rebellion is both radical and brilliant. I think he is tragically and perversely wrong; but he is wrong in a most instructive way. For he is the perfect foil for the Christian view of the world that Milton believed in. He understood more clearly than any freethinker of Milton's century or the next the root of God's epistemological and metaphysical claims on humanity's allegiance and worship, and laid his philosophical axe to that root more accurately and powerfully than anyone else would until the Twentieth Century.

Thomas L. Martin has given us an insightful analysis of the moment when the opponents of the traditional view finally caught up with their Master:

Satan's rhetoric does indeed make many of the same moves as Derrida's deconstruction. Satan opens up the play of language by decentering it. He sets the difference of signifiers adrift from the moorings of presence. . . . Differences are multiplied, hopelessly complicating the possibility of univocal meaning. Hierarchical oppositions are disrupted and reversed. (45)

What Martin demonstrated in Satan's methodology, we have confirmed in terms of the substance of his claims. To say that the mind is its own place is indeed to decenter all discourse and reject the possibility of a logocentric understanding of reality; for the only Center that could be adequate to hold all the disparities of human experience together in a coherent world view would be the Logos who is the Son of the great Creator himself.

Finally, we can appreciate the way in which Milton's framing of the rationale for Satan's revolt helps to clarify the choices that still face us today. Lewalski rightly notes that "Milton's epic is preeminently a poem about knowing and choosing," for the characters first and also for the reader. Knowing and choosing—or, at least, believing and choosing. Is Satan right about the mind or not? We need to know; but, barring that, our choices will depend on what we believe about the question. Milton wanted to help us ask the question, and answer it, intelligently, for only if we do so rightly can we become "discerning, virtuous, liberty loving human beings" (Lewalski 460).

Belief in the Christian God is not just another box in an intellectual survey that we can simply decide in isolation to tick or not. It is a root belief, a *weltanschauung*-generating belief that gives us grounds for faith in the ultimate goodness and meaning of creation and of life—but only on the terms of submission to the will of that God conceived as something objective and external to ourselves. In the world of Milton's poem, to reject that submission is to put oneself on a path where all goodness and meaning are inevitably lost. As Lewis wrote so perceptively, "'Evil be thou my good' entails 'Nonsense be thou my sense'" (*Preface* 99). Perhaps it is no accident that Satan's most faithful (post)modern disciples also offer us a world in which meaning is endlessly deferred in a kind of reading that is a game without goals, the freeplay of a mind that is insistently its own place, leading nowhere because "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 158; cf. Vanhoozer).

In summary, Milton created the nihilistic, Derridean form of PostModernism three hundred years in advance by trying to figure out how Satan thinks. Our analysis in their contexts of three key links in the chain of diabolical reasoning shows that, while Milton was not of his great Anti-Hero's party, he presented Satan's perspective as well as its opposite with clarity and force. Milton gives us a strong defense of objective value, but even those who are not convinced by it will find that a better understanding of his poem usefully clarifies the options that still face us today.

In the world of Milton's poem, Heaven and Hell are not interchangeable, and the rejection of the one lands a person inexorably in the other. And so he asks us what all poets ultimately ask us: to consider how far his imagined world is an accurate reflection of the real one we inhabit. A typical method of salvaging the relevance of old poems to modern people is therefore misguided. It suggests that

we can find in the text “not perhaps the truth that Milton intended to convey, but a truth that is central to our time” (Wheeler 121). Instead, it turns out that the choice that is central to our own time is precisely the one Milton was asking his Seventeenth-Century readers to ponder, the one he believed Adam and Eve had also faced, and Satan and the heavenly host before them.

We have only now caught up to the clarity with which Milton’s Satan presented that choice to himself (though he was not so forthright with Adam and Eve, of course). According to Milton, our parents have already chosen for us in the Garden, with tragic consequences; but we are offered in Christ the opportunity to unmake that choice for ourselves. What we will do with that opportunity remains to be seen.

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## DECONSTRUCTING DECONSTRUCTION

### Thursday, Lecture 3

“This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse . . . that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” 1966; rpt. *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle. Boston: Thompson, Wadsworth, 2005: 1207).

“We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (Ibid).

“The absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author” (Ibid., 1211).

“If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance . . . but because the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect the field of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions. . . . There is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions” (Ibid., 1212).

“There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign. . . . The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play, and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play” (Ibid., 1215).

“Representation and reality are not merely added together here and there in language, for the simple reason that it is impossible in principle to distinguish them” (Derrida, “Meaning and Representation,” 1967; rpt. Hazard, op. cit.: 1216).

“The so-called ‘thing in itself’ is always already a representamen. . . . the representamen functions only by giving rise to an intepretant that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1967; rpt. in Hazard, op. cit., 1232).

**Soundbytes:** “The deconstruction of the transcendental signified”; “There is nothing outside the text.”

## **LACKING, LUDICROUS, OR LOGICAL? THE VALIDITY OF LEWIS'S "TRILEMMA"**

### **Friday, Lecture 1**

No philosophical argument that C. S. Lewis ever made is more well known—or more controversial—than his famous “Trilemma” (not his word), or “Lord/Liar/Lunatic” (not his phrase) argument for the deity of Christ. N. T. Wright observes accurately that “This argument has worn well in some circles and extremely badly in others” (32). And some of the sharpest critiques have come from within the believing community.

It is curious that an argument that has become a staple of Christian apologetics should be rejected as fallacious by many who presumably accept its conclusion. With not only the validity of a much used argument but also the competence of the greatest apologist of the Twentieth Century at stake, it is time to take a fresh look at Lewis’s argument and its critics. Can we still use the Trilemma? If so, how should we approach it? At the end of the day, how does Lewis come off as an apologist and an example to other apologists? We will try to shed some light on such questions before we are done.

First, let’s remind ourselves of the argument itself as it is presented in *Mere Christianity*. Lewis is addressing a person who says, “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.” We note first of all that the Trilemma is presented not so much as an argument for the deity of Christ as a refutation, a heading off at the pass, of one popular way of evading the claims of Christ. This, Lewis argues, is the one thing we cannot say.

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (56)

The basic problem Lewis’s critics have had with this argument is their contention that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma, the premature closure of options. Marvin D. Hinten uses it as an example of one of Lewis’s alleged weaknesses: he “overlimits choices” (8). If it can be shown that there are other legitimate possibilities for how to understand the claims of Christ, it is urged, the argument fails.

The other possibilities suggested fall into basically two categories: first, the possibility that Jesus did not actually make the claims attributed to him, or that if he did, he did not mean them as the bald claims to deity for which conservative Christians have taken them; and, second, the possibility that someone could indeed be sincerely mistaken about his identity without being truly insane in a way that would necessarily compromise his views of ethics or his status and authority as a moral teacher. We will examine each of these categories in turn.

### **THE CRITIQUE: BIBLICAL CRITICISM**

First, it is argued, modern biblical criticism does not allow us to make the naïve assumption either that Jesus said everything that the New Testament attributes to him or that what he did say has the meaning conservative Christians have attached to it. Few believers are ready to sign up for the Jesus Seminar and question wholesale whether the words of Jesus as reported in the canonical Gospels are authentic. But believers do need to concern themselves with the fact that many secular people today will

not begin with a presumption of their authenticity. Thus, Wright thinks that Lewis's argument "backfires dangerously when historical critics question his reading of the Gospels" (33).

It is more common to question whether Jesus' statements really add up to a clear and unequivocal claim to deity. All that is needed to deprive Lewis's argument of its logical force is the probability that Jesus' words should be taken in some other sense. For some, Lewis's failure to consider such a possibility robs him of all credibility. "Lewis' view that Jesus' claims were so clear as to admit of one and only one interpretation reveals that he is a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide" (Beverluis 1985, 54).

What are these other possible readings? Here things get a bit murky. It is apparently easier to suggest that a greater knowledge of, say, First-Century Jewish background would make such readings possible than it is to come up with specific examples. Thus, Beverluis: "Lewis's discussion suggests that all individuals of all times and places who say the kinds of things Jesus said must be dismissed as lunatics. But this overlooks the theological and historical background that alone makes the idea of a messianic claim intelligible in the first place" (1985, 56). How exactly a knowledge of that background would alter the nature of Jesus' claims is not made clear. The best Beverluis can manage is, "When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter" (Beverluis 1985, 56).

N. T. Wright takes a different tack, appealing to the "strong incarnational principle" (32) which was the Jewish Temple, the sign of God's presence among his people. Lewis doesn't so much get Jesus' deity wrong as "drastically short circuits" the original Jewish way of getting there: "When Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven,' he is not claiming straightforwardly to be God, but to give the people, out on the street, what they would normally get *by going to the Temple*" (33; emphasis in the original). By not taking us deeply enough into First-Century Jewish culture (at least as understood by Wright), Lewis fails to give us "sufficient grounding in who Jesus really was" (33).

## **BIBLICAL CRITICISM: A RESPONSE**

The first thing to see in response to these criticisms is that they are more a practical than a logical critique of Lewis's argument. The argument itself simply presupposes that Jesus said and meant the things he is traditionally taken to have said and meant: It treats "a man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said." The argument is presented in the form, "If Jesus said and meant these things, this is what follows." To note that the initial premise is controversial in some circles is not a refutation; a refutation would require establishing that the initial premise is false, or at least probably not true. And this has simply not been done.

Why does Lewis, though, make an initial assumption that does not appear to be one that we can actually afford safely to make? It was not because he was unaware of biblical criticism. It seems to me that most critics of Lewis have simply ignored the original audience for the Broadcast Talks that eventually became *Mere Christianity*: not college educated people but simple British laypersons during World War II. To bring up the technical issues of biblical criticism with that audience would have been a foolish introduction of unnecessary complications they did not need to deal with. With a more sophisticated audience, one would have to be prepared to make a case for the authenticity of the Gospel accounts and deal with alternative interpretations. That Lewis knew of this challenge and was prepared to meet it when appropriate is proved by essays such as "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism."

Beverluis in 1985 rejected this defense: "When Lewis . . . justifies the popular approach on the ground that 'if you are allowed to talk for only ten minutes, pretty well everything else has to be sacrificed to brevity,' he presents not a justification but an excuse. . . . Why not write a longer book in which 'everything else' *can* be fully and fairly discussed?" (1985,57). But here Beverluis falls prey to that regrettable tendency of reviewers to criticize the book they would have preferred the author to have written rather than the book he actually wrote. Would Beverluis have an audience of simple laypersons remain unaddressed? Does he really think it makes sense to confuse them with technicalities that do not concern them? As for the "longer book," one could say that it exists in *Miracles* or can be reconstructed

from various essays that do address different, more sophisticated audiences. In *C. S. Lewis's Case for the Christian Faith*, Richard L. Purtill has a fine discussion of that larger argument gleaned from a more generous sampling of the Lewis corpus, in chapters 4-5 (45-71). Most of Lewis's critics simply ignore that context.

In his second edition of *C. S. Lewis and the Search for Rational Religion*, Beversluis tries to respond to the arguments of Lewis and others that support a traditional reading of the Gospels as giving an accurate and reliable report of Jesus' claims. He says that all such arguments "uncritically assume that the synoptic Gospels are historically reliable sources" (2007, 116). Instead of scholarship, apologists like Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli offer "a flurry of unscholarly pseudo-questions" (2007, 118), such as why the apostles would be willing to die for what they knew was a lie. Real New Testament scholars don't ask such questions because they "know" that none of the original apostles had anything to do with the Gospels. "All mainstream New Testament Scholars agree that the synoptic Gospels are fragmentary, episodic, internally inconsistent, and written by people who were not eyewitnesses" (2007, 123).

For someone who claims to find fallacious motes in the eyes of others, Beversluis has a curious blindness to the beams in his own eyes. His whole argument here depends on the fallacies of *Ad Verecundiam* and *Dicto Simpliciter*. Even if all serious biblical scholars did agree with Beversluis, that fact in itself would not make them right. But they can only be said to agree by the sleight of hand of simply (and arbitrarily) defining a "mainstream" scholar as a skeptical one. Beversluis's unqualified generalization—*all?*—has never in fact been true, and is less true now than it has been at any time in the modern age. Richard Bauckham's magisterial *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is just one recent counter-example. A basic source like Stephen Neil's classic *The Interpretation of the New Testament* could have provided Beversluis with many more.

Beversluis in his revised edition also responds specifically to Lewis's own arguments in "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism." He simply dismisses Lewis's point that people who claim to find myths and legends in the Gospels need to know something about myths and legends and his observation that source criticism when applied to modern authors where it can be checked is almost always wrong. Beversluis patronizes these concerns as "The Argument from Personal Incredulity" (2007, 123). Nevertheless, Lewis's incredulity is not just a rhetorical ploy but has very good and specific grounds in his claim that the whole enterprise of skeptical criticism is methodologically flawed—an issue that Beversluis just fails to address. We have to conclude that the authenticity of the sources simply has not been overturned.

The alternative interpretations of Jesus' claims are not impressive either. How is "When they did dispose of him, it was not on the ground that he was a lunatic but on the ground that he was an imposter" (Beversluis 1985, 56) a problem? "Liar" is one of the implied horns of the Trilemma. Isn't an imposter just one form of liar? Isn't Liar at least as incompatible with Great Moral Teacher as Lunatic? And N. T. Wright seems to expect of his readers a sophistication in modern interpretations of Jewish culture that even the Pharisees of Jesus' day did not manifest. After Jesus' declaration that the sins of the paralytic were forgiven prior to his healing, they were not saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Where can sins be forgiven but *in the Temple* alone?" but "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but *God* alone?" (Luke 5:21; emphasis added). In other words, Lewis's argument deals with the reactions Jesus' contemporaries actually made to him—not the one Wright thinks they should have made! Wright thus tempts one to apply to him Lewis's verdict from "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism": These critics are so adept in reading between the lines that they have forgotten how to read the lines themselves.

Beversluis fares no better when he claims that all that is needed is to suppose that Jesus had been "authorized to forgive sins by God" (2007, 124, emphasis added). This again simply ignores the actual reaction by Jesus' contemporaries. *They* took Jesus' words as a claim to deity, and he did nothing to allay their concerns. In order to understand their reaction, as well as the significance of Jesus' allowing it to take place, modern readers might be helped by imagining the reaction of a radical Muslim Fundamentalist to a mere human being who claimed to be Allah. It is ironic that Lewis is accused of ignoring the cultural context of the Gospels' claims for Jesus by people who have obviously failed to make the effort to

imagine the fierce monotheism of First-Century Judaism—a basic and essential prerequisite to any audience analysis of the words of Jesus! Far from Lewis’s views of the Gospels revealing him as “a textually careless and theologically unreliable guide” to them, it would seem that the accusation would better fit Lewis’s critics.

In summary, the complications raised by modern biblical criticism do not overturn the initial premise of the Trilemma, that Jesus in fact claimed deity: he made the statements, and he meant what he said. Anyone using the argument today should be prepared to make the case that he did so whenever it is needed. The wise apologist will not simply repeat Lewis’s paragraph from *Mere Christianity*, but rather adapt it to his own audience. This will involve notations such as “Here be prepared to insert ‘Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,’ along with further updated arguments.” Unlike his critics, we should look to Lewis’s other books and essays as evidence for how he himself would have used the argument from *Mere Christianity* in different contexts, and then follow suit ourselves.

### THE CRITIQUE: MISTAKEN IDENTITIES?

The second major attempt to show that Lewis failed to cover his bases involves, amazingly, the denial that only an insane person could sincerely but mistakenly believe himself to be God, or that such a mistake would automatically disqualify him as a moral teacher. Beversluis originally asserted that “We could simply suppose that although [Jesus] sincerely believed he was God, he was mistaken” (1985, 55): not lying or insane, just mistaken. He elaborates, “If we deny that Jesus was God, we are not logically compelled to say that he was a lunatic; all we have to say is that his claim to be God was false. The term lunatic simply clouds the issue with emotional rhetoric” (1985, 55). In his second edition, he adds documentation from psychological studies of insanity to the effect that “delusional people are deluded about something . . . but they are rarely, if ever, deluded about everything” (2007, 126). Just because a person is deluded about who he is does not necessarily mean that he is deluded about the content of his moral teachings. Beversluis concludes, “The sober answer to the question is No, this is not the kind of blunder that only a lunatic would make” (1985, 55).

Well, this assertion is generally correct; but surely its application to the specific case of Jesus would take some supporting. No doubt people may be sincerely mistaken about a lot of things, even having to do with their own identity, without being necessarily insane; and they can be insane without being wrong about morals. But make no mistake: We are being asked here to believe that a person could be mistaken about the claim that “Before Abraham was, *I Am*,” a person who was in a position to be familiar with the standard translation of the Tetragrammaton, the Old Testament name of God. Is this really credible? Marvin D. Hinten shows how such support might look. When he teaches *Mere Christianity*, he asks his class

if they believe angels really did appear to Joan of Arc to say she was God’s chosen instrument to save France. Half the class shake their heads no; the other (quicker-thinking) half simply sit and think it over, because they already see where it is going. None of them see Joan as insane or demonic, so if they apply Lewis’s line of reasoning they will have to admit God really did send angels to Joan, which they have no intention of admitting. I then bring Mohammed into the mix, a man who genuinely seems to have felt Gabriel appeared to him with teaching from God. We discuss ways in which a goodhearted person could be genuinely mistaken about their [*sic*] role in life: an *idée fixe*, a hallucination, etc. (8)

O. K., so the argument goes, you can be mistaken about your identity without being insane. Likewise, you can be mistaken about your identity without undermining your views of ethics. Lewis “apparently thought that if certain factual claims Jesus made about himself were false, a disastrous conclusion would follow about the truth, sanity, and reliability of his moral teachings. But why say that?” (Beversluis 1985, 55). Beversluis goes on to ask, “Did Lewis think that if Jesus were not God, there

would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?” (1985, 55). So the Trilemma fails at every point by this view. You can in theory be mistaken about your identity without being insane *and* without having false views of ethics; therefore, Lewis has failed to eliminate the “Great Moral Teacher but not God” view of Jesus and hung his apologetic on a fallacious hook. “Contrary to what Lewis claims, we *can* deny that Jesus was God and say that he was a great moral teacher” (2007, 135).

## MISTAKEN IDENTITIES? A RESPONSE

Lewis’s critics succeed in undermining his argument only by use of a clever slight of hand known as the fallacy of Equivocation. The argument they are critiquing is simply not the one that Lewis made. The criticisms all deal with the *general concept* of mistaken identity, whereas Lewis is dealing with a very *specific case* of it, the false claim *to be God*. Treating these as equivalent is illogical at best and dishonest at worst. But Lewis’s critics have to do it in order to make their criticisms sound plausible. This weakness becomes very clear when we examine the examples Hinten uses to support the claim that mistaken identity does not entail insanity. Joan of Arc and Mohammed thought they had seen angels and had a special role in history as a result. One can just imagine that they could have been victims of some kind of hallucination or had some kind of experience that they misinterpreted, and that this could all have happened without compromising their general soundness of mind, or their views of ethics. But the problem is that such examples are simply not relevant to Lewis’s argument. They did not claim to be *God*. That is, they did not claim to have existed from eternity in a special relationship with God the Father that made them Lord and gave them the authority to command the elements and forgive sins. They did not claim that they had a prior existence that was omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent—all of which is implied in and entailed by the specific nature of Jesus’ claims. They did not claim that he who had seen them had seen the Father. *They did not claim to be the Jahweh of the Patriarchs and Moses incarnate in human flesh!*

How is it possible to miss the profound difference between all other mistakes about one’s own identity and this one? One who wrongly believes that he is Napoleon has only confused himself with another finite human being. To believe that one is Jahweh differs from all other such mistaken claims by an order of magnitude that is . . . well, infinite. It compounds a mistake of fact with an error in metaphysics. This is not, as Lewis’s critics want to believe, merely a matter of degree. The gap between any creature and the Creator is a difference of kind. To put it bluntly, therefore, Lewis’s critics’ ability to rebut his argument depends on their ability to substitute a different and inferior argument while no one is looking and get away with it. When, like Lewis, we remember the radical nature of what Jesus actually claimed, and compare it with the ridiculously inadequate examples urged against the Trilemma, the attempts to evade its force become laughably absurd.

An equal lack of attention to what Lewis actually said appears in the attempt to evade his claims about the implications of the relationship between Christ’s person and his teaching. Beversluis asks, “Did Lewis think that if Jesus were not God, there would no longer be any reason for believing that love is preferable to hate, humility to arrogance, charity to vindictiveness, meekness to oppressiveness, fidelity to adultery, or truthfulness to deception?” (1985, 55). But Lewis was not evaluating the moral truth of Jesus’ teaching; he was examining the claims of the *Teacher*. His whole argument presupposes the self-evident truth of the teachings (cf. *Mere Christianity* 137), which is part of the evidence to be considered in evaluating the sanity of the Teacher. What is under scrutiny is the claims of the Teacher. Lewis is not saying that, if he were insane enough to wrongly think he was the omnipotent God, Jesus’ moral teaching would be refuted. He is saying that the self-evident truth of those teachings and their widely acknowledged superiority to all other attempts to state the same ideals refutes, i.e., is inconsistent with, the notion that their source was a blatant liar or a megalomaniac. Nothing that his critics have said makes those propositions any more consistent than they ever were before. Beversluis’s question is simply beside the point.

In summary, the attempts to show that the Trilemma omits valid but unconsidered options all fail. In order to reject Lewis's argument, you have to be prepared to affirm that a person in his right mind can sincerely but mistakenly believe, not simply that he has been visited by an angel, but that he is Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, and still retain any credibility on anything else he might say. Since very few people in their right minds are prepared to accept that conclusion, Lewis's critics are forced to try to undermine his argument by sneakily substituting a straw man for it. Refuting that weak substitution, they then pretend to have refuted the Trilemma. But no reader who is actually paying attention should fall for this shell game—for that is what it essentially is.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lewis's Trilemma is still a strong argument and can be used with confidence, especially if we allow it to be nuanced and strengthened by its context in Lewis's body of writings as a whole. It is unfair to take a paragraph aimed at a lay audience and complain that it is inadequate to deal with people who have a more sophisticated set of issues. Of course the classic passage from *Mere Christianity* needs to be supplemented when used with more sophisticated audiences, by Lewis's other writings and by information and arguments that have come to light since he wrote. But the basic argument is sound. It is one thing to claim that it commits the fallacy of False Dilemma; it is quite another to show that other credible and valid options actually exist. Lewis's critics have simply failed to do that.

Second, Lewis's position as the dean of Christian apologists remains unchallenged. He was not infallible, but neither was he guilty of writing something in the Trilemma that was "not top-flight thinking" (Hinten 8). His unique combination of wide learning, no-nonsense clarity, elegant language, and apt analogy remains as the standard to which we should all aspire and the example we should seek to emulate. When examined carefully, the Trilemma supports that conclusion; it is not an exception to it. Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? Lacking, Ludicrous, or Logical? Plunk for Liar or Lunatic if you must. But let's not come with any patronizing nonsense about how Lewis gave us a fallacious argument. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

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## **WHY EVANGELICALS CAN'T WRITE, And How Flannery O'Connor can Help Them Learn Better**

**Friday, Lecture 2**

### **THE PROBLEM**

There is a certain irony in the fact that I, an Evangelical, am now offering to you words I wrote down about why Evangelicals can't write. Whether I am the exception that proves the rule, Posterity will have to judge (if the publishing industry ever offers it the opportunity). At the very least, the ironic presence of this essay in your hand is an opportunity for exegesis. It suggests that my title is not to be taken literally. Evangelicals obviously do write, and publish, reams upon reams of prose. What they have not tended to write is anything recognized as having literary value by the literary world.

What makes this failure remarkable is that conservative Christians--sometimes quite evangelical and even evangelistic, though not "Evangelicals"--have often done so. G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Dorothy L. Sayers, Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Madeline L'Engle, and Annie Dillard are all recognized as important literary figures *even by people who do not share their Christian commitment*. Where is the American Evangelical who can make such a claim?

The people I have mentioned who are both great writers and great Christians are all from liturgical churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, Orthodox. (Dillard, who started out as a Presbyterian, has recently converted to Catholicism.) The closest thing Evangelicalism has to a name that could rank with these is probably Walter Wangerin, Jr., who is not really a "mainstream" Evangelical but a Lutheran--again, from a liturgical tradition. Try to think of a Baptist (of any stripe), a Free or Wesleyan Methodist or a Nazarene, a conservative Presbyterian (OPC or PCA), a Plymouth Brother, a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, a Pentecostal, or a member of an independent Bible church who belongs in that company. While there may be one reading these words right now who is destined to join them, and to whom this rhetorical gambit is being grossly unfair, our experience up to now has been such that the mind is simply unable to suspend its disbelief and imagine any such thing. Instead, we get "Left Behind." In more ways than one.

Why? Is there anything Evangelicals can do about it? Is there anything they can do about it without compromising their commitment to their Evangelical distinctives? What are those Evangelical distinctives anyway?

These are the questions I will try to wrestle with--I won't promise to answer--in this essay. I do not want to overstate the case. No doubt someone could point out minor figures who are, or who have the potential to be, exceptions to the generalization which is my premise. I should be glad to hear of them, but as we are talking about general trends, they hardly overturn that premise. The liturgical churches foster a lot of schlock and kitsch of their own; but they are also communities that are capable of fostering and nurturing great writers and great writing. So far, we Evangelicals have not. In fact, one could make a case that we positively discourage "literary" writing as being of questionable spiritual value. I am just crazy enough to want to change that state of affairs.

### **SOLUTIONS?**

Often people like Thomas Howard or Sheldon Vanauken have migrated from Evangelicalism to Rome (or, like Franky Schaeffer, to Byzantium), partly because their commitment to serious art could find no home in Evangelicalism. Some of them would deny that this was the major reason, but we would be naïve to think that it was not a factor. I want to say forthrightly that I do not see such migrations as a necessity. For myself, I would define an Evangelical as a person committed to Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, to a high view of the authority of Scripture, to the Reformation doctrine of justification by



faith alone, and to the necessity of *personal* faith in Christ (and therefore the importance for most people of a personal conversion experience, as long as we do not stereotype it) for salvation. If committed Evangelicals must really give up any of *that* in order to learn to nurture serious artists and writers, then they are prepared to let art and literature perish from the earth! But I cannot believe that the God who begot the incarnate Logos and whose Spirit inspired the Gospels desires, much less requires, any such thing of them. So let us find another way, and ask, "What can we learn from these great Christian writers—and from their church traditions—that Evangelicals, can apply in their own discipling communities?" Answering this question will not only teach us Evangelicals some needed lessons, but it will also give us a chance to express our gratitude to the fellow Christians from whom we learned them, and help them identify important parts of their own traditions that need to be preserved as essential parts of Mere Christianity. Let me attempt a beginning to such an answer by examining one useful example.

### **FLANNERY O'CONNOR**

Flannery O'Connor, the Georgia writer who died of disseminated lupus in 1964, was a self-styled "hillbilly Thomist" whose two novelettes and small collection of short stories have transcended the local-color cubbyhole into which they were first placed to shock, puzzle, intrigue, and delight a growing body of readers ever since. A devout and loyal Catholic who often had more sympathy with Protestant Fundamentalists than with others in her own tradition, she said that "I am no disbeliever in spiritual purpose and no vague believer. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (32). In most of her stories the central character, whether secular or religious, starts off smugly self-sufficient but is given an opportunity to become open to the grace of God which is usually not responded to very well. A master of irony, O'Connor often puts the most profound spiritual insight into the mouth of the character who is by conventional standards the farthest from the kingdom. There are no cheap conversions, but the cumulative effect of her stories for those who understand them is to break down the modern sense of enlightened self-sufficiency and prepare readers to accept their need for grace.

### **THREE FORMS OF NURTURE**

Although she often expressed a bemused impatience with the expectations of the average Catholic reader, O'Connor also found in the larger tradition of that church a community that nurtured and supported her artistic vision. She mentions at least three forms of such nurture she found there, only one of which is liable to be present in the typical Evangelical congregation.

#### **The Christian Worldview**

First, she found a true world view, encapsulated in dogma, which constituted a lens that brings human nature and human significance into piercing clarity. "Dogma," she said, "is an instrument for penetrating reality" (178). "It is one of the functions of the Church to transmit the prophetic vision that is good for all time, and when the novelist has this as a part of his own vision, he has a powerful extension of sight" (179-80). But it is not enough simply to have been taught the truth. O'Connor understood that good writers do not simply parrot these insights; they must take this doctrinal understanding and apply it to the concrete realities of human life. "Your beliefs will be the light by which you see, but they will not be what you see and they will not be a substitute for seeing" (91). When we do not understand this distinction, Christian fiction becomes mere religious propaganda. "The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality" (163). Doctrine is a light to see human experience by, not simply a formula to be dressed up in a fictional disguise.

Some Evangelical congregations still do a good job of transmitting the biblical world view and the specifics of Christian doctrine, though too many of them have allowed the edges of that body of

material to become inexcusably fuzzy. Perhaps we have not done so well at giving our adherents the confidence to take this body of doctrine and use it creatively as a tool to understand life and experience. But on this point at least Evangelicals may with some credibility claim not to have been completely "left behind."

### **The Purpose of Art**

The second form of nurture O'Connor felt she had received from the Church was a definition of art that affirmed a spiritual purpose for the artist distinct from that of the propagandist. She quotes Thomas Aquinas as saying that art "is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made." And she adds, "We are not content to stay within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God because it reflects God" (171). This is a telling comment. That which reflects God may have an evangelistic effect. But if evangelism must be the primary purpose of everything we write, then a lot of God's character will remain unreflected--which will, ironically, not help the cause of evangelism.

I have searched the current popular Evangelical systematic theologies--Grudem, Erickson, etc--in vain for a definition of art. For us, it does not seem to be a theological topos. O'Connor complained that too many Catholic writers were too utilitarian in their approach, but at least their theologians thought art a topic worthy of attention. Indeed, Catholic theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar has made it the organizing principle of his systematics, entitled "Theo-Drama." So it is not surprising that, with no such emphasis coming from its leaders, the popular Evangelical subculture is even more addicted to pragmatism in its approach, as a brief trip through that oxymoronic commercial institution the "Christian Bookstore" will quickly show. Fiction can only be justified if it has an overt evangelistic purpose; works of visual art must have a scripture verse tacked under them. Perhaps when our theologians become concerned with the good of the thing made, some of our people will too. Until that happens we will continue to be "left behind."

### **The Sense of Mystery**

The third form of nourishment O'Connor acknowledged as a gift from the Church was a sense of mystery. The mystery of life is what good fiction is ultimately about. "It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners" (124). Therefore, "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is . . . the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (79). In Catholic worship with its sacramental focus, O'Connor found her sense of mystery nourished, and saw such nourishment as a key to the writer's ability to "penetrate concrete reality": "The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that" (163).

Does our Evangelical theology of the sacraments preclude us from nurturing our writers in this way? I think it would be shortsighted to answer that question in the affirmative. Metaphor and symbolism are central to the creative process for writers, and they are an important way that we evoke and assimilate mystery. One need not believe in transubstantiation to make the Lord's Supper more central in worship, nor would a symbolic or metaphorical view of the sacrament render it irrelevant to the lives of artists. But Evangelicals have too quickly and too often reacted to what they perceive as the abuses of the biblical sacrament in the Mass by relegating the Eucharist to a marginal role in their worship. This cannot be unrelated to the fact that we as a community are too much like the generation O'Connor described "that has been made to feel that the aim of learning is to eliminate mystery" (125). Our services, like our fiction, are justified by their efficiency in achieving pragmatic goals. Our sermons are full of practical easy steps to spiritual victory, a better marriage, or financial success; our music is designed to let us express comfortable emotions; everything is aimed at maximizing the body count at the altar call. Some of these goals are worth pursuing; but perhaps if abasement before a *transcendent* deity

felt as such were one of them, we would be better Christians as well as better writers. Until that happens we will continue to be "left behind."

## CONCLUSION

O'Connor can help us make the case that it is not the distinctive emphases of Evangelical theology, but rather a lack of other emphases, equally biblical, that has kept us from being a community good at nurturing the arts. Our pragmatism, an uncritical reflection of American culture rather than a biblical mandate; our failure to include in our theology the whole counsel of the God who called Bezalel and Oholiab and gifted them as artists; and our mystery-impooverished worship tradition are all simple failures to be what we claim to be, faithful to Scripture. They could be changed without threatening any of the doctrinal emphases that as a movement we have been right about. Until that happens, we will continue to be "left behind."

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## IN IT BUT NOT OF IT; SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

### Friday, Lecture 3

#### A: IN IT BUT NOT OF IT

I would like to speak today on a difficult and controversial topic: the Christian and Entertainment. At the risk of not being entertaining, I would ask you to entertain in your minds the even more basic issue which is logically prior: The Christian and his relationship to the world in which he is called to live and to which he is called to minister, a world that throws a lot more at us than just “entertainment.” How do we maintain Christian virtue in a corrupt and corrupting world, one which is dangerous to us but which we must know and touch in order to reach? I want to look at three passages which are foundational to any biblical view of these issues, make some simple observations about their teaching, and then try to draw some general conclusions from them.

#### I. IN BUT NOT OF (John 17:14-15).

*“I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.”*

This passage is where we get the formula “In the world but not of it.” I have three observations about this passage: what is *forbidden* in it, what is often *attempted* in response to it instead, and what is actually *commanded* by it.

What is forbidden are, by implication, two approaches to the world: *identification* with it and *isolation* from it. We are to be “not of” the world (hence identification), but Jesus does not want us removed from it (hence isolation). Now, there is a sense in which we do identify with the world. We identify with it in its need and in its suffering, as our Lord modeled for us when he accepted a Baptism for the remission of sins which he did not personally need. But we do not find our identity in the world, we do not allow it to define us, and we do not allow ourselves to be forced into its mold (Rom. 12:1). In that sense, we identify not with the world but with Christ. He defines us, he transforms us, and we find our identity in him.

Unfortunately, the easiest way to avoid identification with the world is to try to withdraw from it as much as possible, that is, to practice isolation from the world. We create our own little Christian ghetto and withdraw within its borders so we will not be corrupted. We write our own music and books and create our own TV, all of which somehow turn out to be strangely cheap imitations of what the world is doing but without the grosser forms of immorality. But this is a false approach, and Christ makes it clear he does not mean us to take it, both by his prayer here and by his example, hanging out with publicans and sinners and scandalizing the religious conservatives of his day.

Somehow we must be “in” and “not of” at the same time. But that is difficult. What we often attempt is the much easier task of taking one of the two prepositions in isolation from the other. It requires no effort at all to be “in” the world; the path of least resistance will suffice to accomplish that most efficiently. And, while it requires more effort, it is also possible to be “not of” the world. Here we create our (partially) insulated parallel universe, with borders guarded by ever-increasing lists of Rules. “We don’t cuss, drink, smoke or chew, / and we don’t go with girls that do.” But we can pursue either of these prepositions in the flesh. We do not have in ourselves either the wisdom or the strength to be “in” and “not of” at the same time. That requires the wisdom and the power of God; that requires discernment and dying to self. And so, of course, it is not to be thought of by half-hearted Christians; and so it is seldom seen.

Yet that is precisely what is Commanded: not isolated prepositions in the flesh, but the integration of the two prepositions in the Spirit. But how can we do that? A good question: it leads us to the next verse.

## II. WHATEVER IS TRUE (Phil. 4:8)

*"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence, and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things."*

My observation about this verse is a question: What kind of command is it? Answer: it is a *positive* command. It is about what we are positively supposed to dwell on. But what interests me is the fact that in our application of it we have almost universally turned it into a negative command, about what we are *not* supposed to read, watch, or listen to: "Oh, this is impure, so I'd better stay away from it!" Why have we managed to be so inattentive to what the Text actually says? We do it because the negative approach is easier. It is easier to boycott all movies (or all movies of a certain rating) than to use discernment; it is easier to swear off of "secular" music or "rock" than to listen critically to what the world is actually saying through these media, understand with empathy the cries of its lost voices, but then choose the good, and dwell on that.

I repeat: this verse says not one word about what we cannot read, watch, or listen to. It says not a single word about what we must turn a blind eye to, pretend isn't there, or be ignorant of. It says a lot about what we should nourish and feed our minds on. Contrary to the T-shirt, Nietzsche isn't peachy; he is actually very preachy, and what he is preaching is straight from the Pit. But he has been very influential and he is important, and even in his evil he can teach us some things. Therefore I was not disobeying this passage when I read him, even though he is rightly described by none of the adjectives (except possibly "excellent," in the sense of "outstanding") that the verse recommends. But that is not the kind of thing I feed my mind on constantly. On the other hand, I read Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings twice in 1968, the year I discovered it, and have read it annually since. That is what the verse is talking about.

I am not saying that there is nothing that is so raw, so evil, so corrupting that we should not expose ourselves to it. There is unfortunately plenty of material out there of which these things are true, including but not limited to pornography. What I am pointing out is that our main strategy for dealing with these problems is too often negative, while the Bible's is positive. And I am pointing out that understanding this makes Phil. 4:8 the answer to the dilemma raised by Jesus' words in John 17. How do we live "in" the world without becoming "of" it? Do not focus primarily on what you can not read, watch, or listen to. Do not use ignorance as the path to safety. Rather, really feed your mind on what is Good, True, and Beautiful, and then it will respond rightly to the rest.

## III. HANDLE, TASTE, TOUCH? (Col. 2:20-23)

*"If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as 'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!' . . . These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence."*

It is not just that the negative approach is less valuable than the positive one I have recommended (and Paul commanded). The Apostle says here that the negative approach is of no value at all! Why? Because you can abstain not only from Rock but also from Country (all those "cheatin' songs"!)--hey, Mozart and Wagner were supposed to be immoral people, so we'd better abstain from Classical too--and what about all those divorces?--better add Contemporary Christian to the list. You can abstain from everything except the Psalms in the original Hebrew sung to Gregorian Chant, and still be proud, envious,

wrathful, slothful, greedy, gluttonous, and lustful. The absence of the Evil (or even of the Questionable) simply does not equate to the presence of the Good (or of Virtue). A negative photograph of the “world” is not necessarily a positive portrait of Jesus.

O.K., so what does work? What is of value? Phil. 4:8. The cornerstone of our approach to being in the world but not of it, i.e., to maintaining Christian virtue in a corrupt world, should not be all the things we do not read, watch, or listen to. It should be a mind really fed on and nurtured by the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, as we find it in Scripture and in the best of the Christian and classical traditions. You cannot keep the “impure” out of your mind. But you can keep the fresh water of Scripture and the rest that is good flowing strongly through it, so that the impure is constantly being washed away. And that is the only way to keep it pure.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I often ask my Composition students to write an essay on “Why I came to Toccoa Falls College.” It’s slightly less boring than “What I did on my Summer Vacation,” and besides, I want to know. Over the years the results have been very consistent. The one answer that I get more than all other answers combined is, “To escape the evil influence of the secular university.” This has always troubled me, and in preparing for this message I realized more clearly why. It is a negative answer, not a positive one. We came to TFC to hide. Why hasn’t anybody ever given the answer I’m looking for: “Because TFC is the West Point for Christian Soldiers!” So I want you to understand: If you came here to hide in the Christian ghetto, this is not the mentality of Conquerors for Christ, but of people who are defeated already before they ever enter the battle. Christians are not called to be afraid of the world or ignorant of it; they are called to be different from it.

Understanding this, Milton asked, “What wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear, without the knowledge of evil? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer what is truly better, he is the true warfaring Christian.” And he therefore concludes, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies forth to face her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.”

What shall we say, then? Feed your mind on the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, and it will respond properly to the rest. Develop uncloistered virtue: positive, discerning, unafraid. Then we may say with Bunyan’s Pilgrim, “Apollyon, beware what you do; for I am in the King’s highway, the way of holiness; therefore take heed to thyself.” And the gates of Hell will not prevail against us.

## **B: SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE**

*“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the Head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15, NASB).*

### **TRUTH AND LOVE**

“Speaking the truth in love” is a phrase we have come to parrot all too comfortably. If we truly understood it, we would realize that the Apostle’s exhortation in Eph. 4:15 impales the contemporary church on the horns of a dilemma designed to make its dependence on its own strength and wisdom self-destruct. When we are thus impaled, we have the opportunity to discover how little we understand of either truth or love.

The truth in a fallen world is often harsh and always hostile to human pride. When human beings—even redeemed ones—try in their own wisdom to combine that truth with love, their natural tendency is to blunt the edges and soften the blows of this terrible two-edged Sword. Thus is born theological liberalism and political correctness. But eschewing those betrayals of truth, some of us run

the opposite way only to find ourselves not with Christ's flock but with the cruel Pharisees. Thus is born legalism and self righteousness. In neither case does either truth or love really come through.

History is replete with illustrative examples. They begin at least as early as Job's friends, with their ham-fisted application to Job's situation of a very sound theology of the holiness and transcendence of God. Jehovah was not impressed with the theological correctness of their defense of His character because they had not spoken what was right about his servant, Job. I think Martin Luther was right to condemn Muentzer and the Peasant's Revolt. In fact, early in the controversy he had balanced and sensible things to say to both sides which, if they had been heeded, might have done much good. But the harshness of his attack "Against the Murderous and Plundering Bands of Peasants," urging the magistrates to "stab, kill, and strangle" as they would a mad dog those who participated, did seem to exceed the bounds of Christian charity. Even allowing for the pejorative debating style of the times, it has left an unfortunate spot on the reputation of that shining hero of the Faith ever since.

We, the American Fundamentalist Movement and its heirs, have provided more than our fair share of such examples. Carl MacIntyre and Bob Jones may have had a point when they argued in the '50's that Billy Graham was taking insufficient care to see that his converts ended up in churches that stood without compromise for the Gospel he preached. But instead of a loving critique of a brother, they launched a savage attack on an enemy. The cause of a balanced and biblical approach to ecclesiastical separation and theological integrity has still not recovered from the bad taste that episode left in our collective mouths. Or think of the glib pronouncements that were flying around a decade or so ago that AIDS was God's judgment on homosexuals. Of course, in a sense, it is; the claim was not simply false. His universe is so structured that violations of its moral programming tend to have negative consequences. But what did such pronouncements say to the family of the young lady who got HIV from her dentist? It would seem that Job's friends are still alive and well.

Perhaps the most instructive recent example is Jerry Falwell's infamous attribution of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks to God's judgment on America's tolerance of homosexuality, pornography, and abortion. As a factual statement, it may not have been so far wrong as many would like to assume. Frustration with America's decadence and its use of its media to disseminate what is perceived as moral filth is one of the explicit motivations that lie behind Islamic terrorism. Islamic fundamentalists believe that our iniquity, like that of the Amorites, is full, and that therefore our destruction by Islam, like that of the Amorites by Israel in the Old Testament, is justified. Had Falwell asked us to consider whether we might have given Islamic extremists more than a little excuse for holding this arrogant error, he might have performed a useful service. Instead, all that most people heard was anger, indignation, arrogance, and self righteousness. The apparent absence of compassion in his finger-pointing tone not only hindered and obscured, it buried and even twisted the grains of truth that really were there in his pronouncement.

The problem is not simply an insufficient grasp of either contemporary fact or biblical content (though no doubt there are many who do inadequate homework in both areas). The problem is much deeper. It is our failure to understand that truth is more than factual correctness; it is a Person, the eternal Logos, whose perspectives on those facts are essential to any truth that is whole and wholesome. And love is more than just being nice; it is a willingness to die for one's enemies that flows, like truth itself, from only one place: that same Person.

As the descendants of the Fundamentalist Movement, Evangelicals continue to wrestle with the legacy of its failures, sometimes distancing ourselves from it to the point that we forget what we owe to it. If only we could avoid its vices without losing its virtues! I've tried to summarize the history of our own struggles in the following sonnet:

**THE RISE AND FALL  
OF PROTESTANT FUNDAMENTALISM**

"Christ's Virgin Birth, his Deity, his Cross,  
His Word, his Resurrection, his Return:  
Could these be given up without the loss

Of Christian faith itself?" was the concern  
 Of those first known as "Fundamentalist."  
 If their descendants' words have proved uncouth  
 As if the mind had closed up like a fist,  
 At least they started caring for the Truth.  
 It's one of mankind's greatest tragedies  
 Beyond the power of the tongue to tell,  
 This hardening of mental arteries  
 Within a movement that began so well.  
 What they forgot should be like hand in glove:  
 Truth is not Truth unless we speak in love.

Truth without love is truth distorted; it is ultimately deceptive. And love without truth is love perverted; it is ultimately destructive. This is so even when the truth is factually correct and the love emotionally sincere. Thus are vitiated all merely human attempts either to speak or to serve. Nevertheless, healing speech and true action become possible even for sinful human beings like us when--and only when--we are actively indwelt by the One who is both Logos and Love. Then, speaking the truth in love, we may indeed grow up in all aspects unto Him who is the head, even Christ.

## **TRUTH, LOVE, AND EDUCATION**

So how practically does this apply to Christian education?

God is the God of truth. Therefore His Person is the ultimate source of truth, His Word the ultimate criterion of truth, His character the ultimate definition of the spirit of truth, and His will the ultimate guide to the use of truth. That is why truth, to be Truth, must be spoken in Love, and why any separation of either from the other destroys both: for both Truth and Love are equally expressions of His one and whole character. All this is revealed to human beings in His Son, whose portrait is definitively and authoritatively painted for them in the Bible, which prepares for, narrates, explains, and applies His coming into the world, His sacrifice, and His resurrection.

The Bible is not--though Christ is--the whole of truth. It does not contain the laws He wrote for the combustion of the stars, which had to be discovered by Physics. It does not contain many other things that are true because they are in the mind of God, things which lie dormant in the Book of His Works, Nature, to be discovered by Christian and pagan alike. They are none the less His truth for all of that. But if the Bible is not the whole of truth, it is the reliably perfect summary of and key to all of truth, for it was inspired by the Spirit to be, as Martin Luther said, "all about Christ only everywhere." And Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.

Truth then came once into the world whole in the person of her divine Master, Milton realized in *Areopagetica*, and was a perfect shape most glorious to see. "But when He ascended, and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers." They hewed the lovely form of truth into a thousand pieces and scattered them to the four winds. But the friends of truth, "such as durst appear," have been gathering them up and fitting them back together ever since, wherever they could find them. "We have not yet found them all," Milton reminds us, "nor shall do, 'till her Master's second coming." With Scripture as their guide and key, then, Christian scholars should be those friends of truth best equipped to continue the search in the meantime. How tragic that so many believers prefer the comfort of the easy path and the closed mind. Nevertheless, right here in our Christian Schools and Colleges, many stalwart friends of truth still dare to appear.

Paul's agenda from Ephesians and Milton's lines from "Areopagetica" should be the epigraphs to every lesson plan our teachers compose and to every research paper our students write for class or their teachers publish in learned journals. For they mean nothing less than that teaching and the research that supports it are ways of loving Jesus and, thereby, loving each other. For every piece of the puzzle we can find--*every* piece--helps us more clearly to see Him in all his glory and his fullness.



**From POETRY READING & OPEN DISCUSSION  
Bonus Evening Session I**

**THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY  
Sonnet LXXX**

The mind is poised; the fingers grip the pen.  
     Ahead, the unexplored expanse of white  
     Lies peaceful, undisturbed—invites you in.  
     No one can tell what wondrous things you might  
 Encounter once the journey has begun:  
     The hidden chambers of the human heart,  
     That labyrinth that is fully known by none,  
     Lie perilously open once you start.  
 Solar systems far beyond our ken;  
     Dragons, wizards, elves, and warriors bold;  
     The desperate lives of ordinary men;  
     All the untold tales that must be told,  
 And any one might pick you for its Mage!  
     The grand adventure of the empty page.

**THE QUEST MOTIF**  
 (What C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien Knew,  
 And Peter Jackson Does Not)  
 Sonnet CI

Snaking out across the vast expanse  
     Of History and Legend lies a trail,  
     The footing treacherous, the markings pale,  
     And peril lies in wait for those who chance  
 To travel it. But if they can advance,  
     And if their luck and courage do not fail,  
     They may emerge into a mystic vale  
 And reach the magic realm of fair Romance.

The landscape's always changing. There is no  
     Map that can be trusted once you swerve  
     Aside; your only compass is your Quest.  
 If, true to friend, implacable to foe,  
     You're faithful to the Vision that you serve,  
     You'll find that country which the Muse has blessed.

**THE CHALLENGE OF  
PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*  
Sonnet CIV**

Plato banned the Poets from his state,  
     Yet said if one could make a sound defense  
     In liting verse with cogent arguments  
 That they do more than merely imitate  
 An imitation and dissimulate,  
     He'd take them back again. And ever since,  
     Our best minds have been trying to convince  
 His cautious Guardians of their mistake.

Sir Philip Sidney laid a firm foundation  
     In his divine *Defense of Poesy*:  
 The Poet gives us Virtue's exaltation  
     More strong than History or Philosophy,  
 Concretely shows through his imagination  
     Not just what is, but more: what ought to be.

**SOME REAL MAGIC  
Sonnet XCVIII**

Within the cadences of human speech  
     Attentive listeners can sometimes hear  
     The rhythm of the wave upon the beach  
     Or contemplate the music of the spheres.  
 Within the small sphere of the human eye  
     The watcher who knows how to look can see  
     A spirit that's as lofty as the sky  
     Or humble as the lover on his knee.  
 When in the alembic of the human mind  
     Imagination boils with memory,  
     Such vision with such sound can be combined,  
     Far more mysterious than alchemy.  
 The Philosopher's Stone we vainly sought of old  
     Could never have made such bright and costly gold.

## REVENGE OF THE DWEMS

### A One-Act Play/Socratic Tetralog

#### BONUS EVENING SESSION II

*Author's Note:* I have argued in Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters (Toccoa Falls, Ga.: Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996) that reading is a conversation in which the writers of the past and present conduct an ongoing dialog about the Great Questions, a dialog in which the Reader is enabled to participate. I offer the following as an example of what might happen in the kind of dialog (or tetralog, in this case) that can result in the Reader's mind. Lest it be thought that I have created a Straw Man, I should say that I have actually had contemporary scholars say to me (with a straight face!) many the things that I have put into the mouth of Post Modernicus. If he is a Straw Man, it is because he fulfills T. S. Eliot's prophecy: "We are the hollow men / We are the stuffed men / Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!"

#### *Dramatis Personae:*

Socrates of Athens  
Novus Criticus

Erasmus of Rotterdam  
Post Modernicus

*Three men occupy comfortable chairs in what seems to be the Senior Common Room of a well-endowed university. The first, wearing a threadbare black robe and a skull cap, is meticulously copying passages in Greek and Latin from large codexes into a smaller notebook. The second, clad in a somewhat outdated suit, the thin lapels of which seem to place him in the 1950's, clenches a pipe between his teeth. He is going over the pages of a book of lyric poetry with a fine-toothed comb, aided by a magnifying glass. The third gentleman wears proudly an almost new suit of clothes recently purchased second hand from a slightly disreputable Emperor. He is, in plain terms, buck naked, but the first two are either too polite--or too absorbed in their own work--to notice. He is slowly dripping acid onto the pages of his book with a medicine dropper. They are joined by a fourth figure: a scruffy-looking geezer in a tunic and short cloak. He has no book, but wears a quizzical expression on his face and tends to stare at people.*

**Fourth Figure:** Gentlemen, I perceive that, each in your own way, you are altogether absorbed in books. What wisdom do you find in them? Does it bring you true happiness?

**Second Figure** (*looking up suddenly*): Did you say something?

**Third Figure:** Your question seems to be rooted in outmoded categories which presuppose the existence of a viable distinction between wisdom and folly.

**First Figure:** Well, I find it a pertinent question indeed. But I don't believe we've had the pleasure?

**Fourth Figure:** Oh, sorry. You may call me Socrates--Socrates of Athens.

**First Figure** (*rising and bowing low from the waist*): A great honor, Master! I am Erasmus of Rotterdam. May I present my colleagues? This is Professor Novus Criticus.

**Second Figure** (*extending his hand*): How do you do?

**Socrates**: How do I do what?

**Erasmus** (*knowingly tapping his head*): And this is . . . er . . . Professor Post. Post Modernicus, to be precise.

**Socrates** (*trying to make sense of this*): One of the students of one of my students wrote a book called Posterior Analytics . . .

**Post Modernicus** (*shaking his head dismissively*): You're one of those DWEMS, aren't you?

**Socrates** (*aside to Erasmus*): I do not wish to appear rude . . . but what means he by this barbarous term?

**Erasmus** (*rolling his eyes*): Dead White European Males. The cause of all the evil in the universe. Welcome to the club.

**Socrates** (*opens his mouth, then pauses as if resisting temptation, and then returns to his original question*): But about books: You have all dedicated your lives completely to them. This means you must believe that they--or something they give you access to--is the Greatest Good. Have you found it to be so?

**Post Modernicus**: The whole concept of a *Summum Bonum* implies a totalizing, centering discourse whose only effect can be to destroy the freedom of the individual to choose his own values and fashion himself in accordance with his own impulses, defined only by his social environment.

**Socrates**: Is he serious?

**Erasmus**: You remember the Sophists?

**Socrates**: Sigh.

**Post Modernicus** (*striking a pose as if lecturing*): The text in itself is nothing: a series of arbitrary signs, which refer only to other arbitrary signs. But they hang together with just enough of an illusion of structure to cause the unsophisticated to think they are a narrative, a discourse maybe even describing some external reality. But of course they describe nothing, not even the mind of their author at the time of text construction; they constitute a completely self-contained world of their own. But this gives us the opportunity to construct our own discourse, a meta-narrative which can expose the inner sexual politics of the original discourse. Thereby our

students can be liberated from the false, hegemonic language of Authority which exists only to advance the interests of the oppressive white, male, bourgeois, Western power structure. They can then enjoy the free play of the mind in the text untrammelled by its falsely privileged status as a repository of some supposed objective “truth” or “meaning.”

**Socrates** (*opens his mouth as if to ask a question but never gets the chance*).

**Novus Criticus:** Now, I really must object to that! I spent my whole career trying to establish that literature is worth studying as *literature*, not as disguised history or politics or philosophy or biography. We introduced the concept of the Intentional Fallacy to keep people from reading it as autobiography so we could divert attention from the author (whose life is not strictly relevant) to the text where it belongs. We rescued literary study from the false superiority of Science by showing that it gives its own kind of pleasure and knowledge, expanding our sympathies by exposing us to vicarious imaginative experiences of different kinds. And we gave close readings of text after text to substantiate those gains. Now, to have literature reduced to politics and philosophy again, as if we had never even written—it’s almost more than a person can stand!

**Post Modernicus** (*quietly*): We learned our way of reading from you, you know.

**Novus Criticus** (*incredulously*): You what?

**Post Modernicus:** You liberated the Text from the tyranny of the Author and made it autonomous. We have to honor you for that. It was really what got the whole process started. You thought the Text could still have a meaning on its own. That was naive; but after all, your discourse was still situated in the false hopes of late modernity.

**Socrates** (*grins impishly and mutters under his breath*): This is going to be more fun than I thought!

**Novus Criticus:** O.K., admittedly the whole concept of meaning is highly problematic. But we still want to maintain a specifically literary value for literary study. If you are really interested in politics, why not study politics?

**Post Modernicus:** But don’t you see? The problem isn’t just in the relationship of the Author to the Text but in the very nature of language itself. We now know that language is an arbitrary system of signs that are never univocally or simply related to the “signified”; that it is a historical phenomenon situated in particular contexts; that it *creates* our perceptions, and doesn’t simply express them. It follows that any kind of centering discourse--whether of author or text--is illegitimate. Since we are disabused of the illusory notion that language expresses some kind of universally accessible “truth” or “meaning,” we are able to see it for what it really is: an instrument of power or control. Hence, any criticism that is intellectually respectable and socially responsible inevitably ends in politics.

**Novus Criticus:** But . . . that seems so limited.

**Socrates:** Yet you can think of no way to justify a different conclusion?

**Novus Criticus:** No, I can't. But this can't be right. It feels . . . *inhumane*. And that sentiment has to count for something.

**Post Modernicus:** It feels uncomfortable to you because it deconstructs the bourgeois power structure that inevitably defines your discourse.

**Socrates:** I wonder: what power structure defines *yours*?

**Post Modernicus:** Uh . . . uh . . .

**Socrates:** Never mind. I don't think we have heard from Erasmus yet. Why do you read?

**Erasmus:** That's simple: to understand the wisdom of the Ancients, and learn from them. To have contact with great minds that would otherwise be inaccessible through distance in time or space.

**Post Modernicus:** But they lived in a wholly different world from you, inhabited a wholly different universe of discourse. To think you can just take their thoughts like bricks and plug them into your own intellectual structures without fundamental distortion! You don't even begin to understand the way in which all truth claims must be radically historicized. That is so naive!

**Erasmus:** Naive? Historically? I hardly think so. Didn't Lorenzo Valla expose the Donation of Constantine as a forgery? Didn't I realize that *poenitentiam agere* doesn't mean "do penance?" That *In principio erat verbum* should have been translated *erat sermo*?

**Post Modernicus:** You just don't even begin to get the point, do you?

**Erasmus:** Are you saying that *poenitentiam agere* does mean "do penance?"

**Post Modernicus:** No! The very idea that *either* meaning can simplistically be called "correct" is what is simply no longer thinkable.

**Socrates:** So, you are contending that there is no such thing as an "objective" meaning of a text, external to any individual interpreter, which interpretation must try to approximate as closely as possible?

**Post Modernicus:** Exactly!

**Socrates:** On the other hand, if what you have just said is true, you also contend that meaning is an objective reality inherent in the text itself, to which an interpreter must submit.

**Post Modernicus:** No! That is exactly what I deny.

**Socrates:** My point exactly. Do you not see that by denying the validity of my deliberate misconstrual of your statement, you deny the validity of your own position? For you attribute to your own discourse precisely all the properties you deny to every other.

**Post Modernicus:** Come again?

**Socrates:** For example: when you order one of your modern foods--say, a large pizza with double pepperoni--do you send it back if it comes small with green peppers and anchovies instead?

**Post Modernicus:** Of course. What kind of question is that?

**Erasmus (aside):** One you obviously haven't "digested" yet!

**Socrates:** In your opinion, ought a philosopher and instructor of youth to live in accordance with his own teachings?

**Post Modernicus:** That is undeniably so. Hypocrisy is perhaps the only clear and unequivocal evil. But I would add that the whole concept of "accordance" is highly problematic.

**Socrates:** In your case especially. If you say that meaning and truth are purely subjective phenomena, determined by the social and historical position of the interpreter so that there is no absolute or universal "right" or "wrong," yet you send back the incorrectly prepared pizza, why then should any of your pupils ever again take seriously any word that proceeds from your mouth?

**Post Modernicus:** That's entirely different.

**Socrates:** Can you explain precisely wherein lies the difference? Your *teaching* is that language relates only to other language and does not correspond to any objective external reality; but your *action* is that you expect it to correspond with your pizza.

**Post Modernicus (patronizingly):** As I have already explained, language is not the repository of some kind of objective "meaning," but it is an instrument of power. It allows you to do things, to perform illocutionary acts like ordering pizza. And one does expect the waiter to get one's order right.

**Socrates:** I'm afraid I do not understand your use of the word "right."

**Post Modernicus:** One expects the waiter to be a member of an interpretive community that defines certain parameters of competence in the use of the system of signs that forms its discourse. We can crudely say that the order is "rightly" or "wrongly" interpreted; but these are not simple objective absolutes. Their meaning is relative to the constantly changing dynamics of the community of discourse.

**Socrates:** I see. But if the waiter spoke English as a second language, would you still expect him to be competent enough to get the order right?

**Post Modernicus:** This kind of thing has obviously happened.

**Socrates:** If you wrote the order down, would you still expect it to be filled correctly?

**Post Modernicus:** Well, they are in fact frequently written down--by the one who takes the order if you phone it in.

**Socrates:** Fascinating. The number of intermediate steps keeps increasing, yet you would still expect to get the pizza you requested. If the message was read the following day, by a third party, would the reader know what kind of pizza had been ordered--say, as a day-old historical fact?

**Post Modernicus:** Well yes, but . . .

**Socrates:** And if a week had passed? A year?

**Post Modernicus** (*reluctantly*): Yes, I suppose.

**Socrates:** And if it were after the death of the one who had ordered the pizza?

**Post Modernicus** (*with irritation*): Yes! But it is not the same. Literary interpretation is much more complex.

**Socrates:** Yet we have already begun to introduce complexities without altering the situation in the least. Suppose that hundreds of years had passed, the language was no longer intelligible except to scholars, and the message had been much more complex than our example. Are not these only differences of degree?

**Post Modernicus:** No, of kind. A fictional discourse is not the same as a seemingly straightforward specification of a pizza order.

**Socrates:** Granted, the genre matters. But do not writers have means at their disposal for indicating that they are writing a fictional story rather than a factual account or an order? And would not these cues be part of the message? On the issue of whether the utterance has a meaning capable of objective determination, then, the differences are still only differences of degree, are they not?

**Post Modernicus:** Let us grant that they are. What then?



**Socrates:** Then in principle, there is no reason why, given sufficient care, we should not be able to know with moral certainty what was in the mind of the one who composed the message. Is there?

**Post Modernicus:** Very clever. But the validity of such linear reasoning is one of the things we have learned to question as a tool of the oppressor. And when the complexity reaches a certain critical mass--which happens much more quickly than you seem to realize--how can you ever be *sure* without being intellectually irresponsible--sure enough to privilege your reading as superior to any other?

**Erasmus:** I just do it.

**Post Modernicus:** I beg your pardon?

**Erasmus:** I just do it. The fact is that human beings do have the capacity to imaginatively enter into the world of another mind--even one as convoluted as yours--and understand it through the miracle of language.

**Post Modernicus** (*incredulously*): Miracle?

**Erasmus:** If you were a modernist, your objection to the concept of miracle would be understandable, if illogical, since language does indeed have a divine origin. But you claim to have outgrown modernism. I wonder if you really have. I myself find the miraculous completely intelligible.

**Post Modernicus:** You have got to be kidding.

**Erasmus:** Not at the moment; there is not a single bi-lingual pun in my mind. For look you: everybody communicates successfully all the time--or I should say most of the time. You are doing it right now, even in (and in spite of) your very efforts to deny it. And we used to do it quite well in my day. My contemporary Machiavelli (not one whose thinking I would generally recommend, by the way) put it very nicely: "In the evening I return to my house and go into my study. At the door I take off the clothes I have worn all day, mud-spotted and dirty, and put on regal and courtly garments. Thus appropriately clothed, I enter into the ancient courts of ancient men, where, being lovingly received, I feed on that food which alone is mine, and which I was born for; for I am not ashamed to ask the reasons for their actions, and they courteously answer me." Now, I would accept his testimony over yours, for, while he did recommend lying in certain situations, he at least knew what a lie was; and based on my own experience, I believe that he did as he said, and that the Ancients did what he says they did.

**Post Modernicus:** Haven't you heard anything I said about the nature of language?

**Erasmus:** I heard you indeed very well, and understood you well enough also. You say that it does not enable us to know or communicate the truth. But like the Schoolmen you

have woven a net of abstract theory in which you are yourself ensnared; for your distracted reasonings about language have nothing to do with the way any human being other than those whose minds are corrupted and unhinged by the Schools actually talks, writes, or reads. For I tell you that language can sometimes actually bring you closer to the truth even than unmediated experience. I wrote that the Scriptures can render Christ “so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon him with your very eyes.” And this is quite true, as untold numbers of His followers throughout history would be prepared to testify. Yet because false words can blind us, as even your unreal abstractions have blinded you, you would have it that all must be blinded by all words at all times. And this is nothing but sophistry.

**Post Modernicus:** But you are yourself a walking example of the situatedness of all discourse. You don’t understand the conditions of modern thought, and your friend Socrates started off by misconstruing Novus Criticus’ greeting. You simply can’t jump across culture like that, and we now know that each individual is a cultural and linguistic system unto himself.

**Erasmus:** Aha! You said he *misconstrued* it--and so he did. I never said accurate interpretation was always easy--just that it is possible. And if there were no objective meaning to our statements, you could not even point out this misconstrual as evidence for the radical subjectivity of meaning.

**Novus Criticus:** But wait a minute. It’s like you never even heard of the Intentional Fallacy!

**Erasmus:** I had not, of course. But now that I have, I recognize its usefulness but also think it is a fallacy to press it too strongly.

**Novus Criticus:** But once a text has been created, it becomes an artifact with its own independent existence.

**Erasmus:** Quite right.

**Novus Criticus:** And it then means what the words mean when interpreted in the total context of their recorded usage and the structures they create.

**Erasmus:** I fully agree.

**Novus Criticus:** And our only access to that meaning is through a close reading of the words themselves.

**Erasmus:** If you include the historical context, I would agree most heartily.

**Novus Criticus:** And because only the words themselves can tell us this, the Author’s alleged or purported “intention” can be a misleading distraction in that process. People sometimes fail to express the meaning they intended.

**Erasmus:** I would not even dispute that this is a potential danger. But it remains true that when we applied this process to our example, we knew what kind of pizza Post Modernicus wanted. We knew the kind he *intended* to get, in other words, and that *intention* was precisely the meaning of his utterance. Hence, it follows that Authorial Intention is necessarily foundational to a true understanding of the meaning of the text. I do not claim that it necessarily *exhausts* that meaning, but I do insist that it is necessarily foundational to it.

**Socrates:** You have reasoned well, my friend.

**Post Modernicus:** I don't follow that at all. The only evidence you two have offered for your alleged objective meaning is a bunch of logical slight of hand.

**Erasmus** (*looking concerned*): If there is a fallacy in my reasoning, I would gladly have it pointed out.

**Novus Criticus** (*beginning to understand*): I think he simply means that you used logic.

**Socrates:** Well, to clarify, how *do* you prove your assertions?

**Erasmus:** I don't need to. That real communication happens every day is an inescapable fact of human experience which Post Modernicus, with all his sophistication, has been unable to avoid.

**Socrates:** In other words, you mean it is what we used to call a First Principle--what I believe today's philosophers call "something properly basic."

**Erasmus:** Exactly. We take the existence of an objective meaning of an utterance--which corresponds to a real subjective state that existed in its author and to which the subjective state of the interpreter can arrive, or at least approximate--and which the interpreter can therefore get either right or wrong--as our starting point. There simply is no other way to proceed without giving up our sanity, because to deny this is simultaneously to deny our right to deny it. And the job of the philosopher or literary critic is, by starting from first principles, to build up our ability to receive the Author's message in its fullness and richness, with precision--not to rip out from under us through his sophistry the very foundations that make such building possible. That is to betray the whole enterprise of good learning and to lead our culture on the short route to madness, irrelevance, barbarism, and chaos.

**Post Modernicus** (*desperately*): But didn't you hear yourself? You just used the word "approximate." My subjective state can never be known to be identical to anyone else's. So your precious "objective meaning" is still a complete chimera.

**Erasmus:** Not at all. Analogy is quite sufficient, as even the Schoolmen recognized, even with their insufferably barbarous Latin. But let me ask you this: Is the semantic cup

half empty . . . or half full? Actually, it is frequently almost completely full (as even you would be if you had ever gotten the right pizza). So I do not understand why you insist on concentrating on the twentieth part that is empty to the point that you are unwilling to allow anyone to drink the rich wine that is so abundantly and deliciously there! If you do not like wine, that is your own business--but why then seek work as a wine taster? Go perform honest labor with your hands and bring benefit to your fellow citizens.

**Post Modernicus:** You make everything sound so simple. If it is all so cut and dried, why bother to read--or teach--at all?

**Socrates:** Why do *you* teach?

**Post Modernicus:** Our role is to problematize the Text so that our students will see past its pretensions of meaning to realize that it unavoidably radically undermines its own purported message.

**Novus Criticus:** Hmmm . . . Is it possible that you are projecting the conflict in you own mind onto other writers who may not have shared it?

**Post Modernicus** (*looks offended*).

**Socrates:** What then *is* the end of instruction?

**Novus Criticus:** To help students understand and appreciate as fully as possible the text that was actually written--not to encourage them to impose their own biases on it.

**Post Modernicus** (*rolls his eyes*).

**Erasmus:** To guide them in the quest for Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.

**Post Modernicus** (*buries his head in his hands*).

**Novus Criticus:** To teach critical methodology.

**Socrates:** To ask the right questions.

**Erasmus:** Yes, all of this: as the servant of the Text and its Author--not their enemy!

**Post Modernicus:** I find your language highly offensive.

**Socrates:** If the sandal fits . . .

**Novus Criticus** (*looking up suddenly as if seeing Post Modernicus clearly for the first time*): Er . . . excuse me . . . but aren't you a bit . . . er . . . underdressed?

**Post Modernicus** (*shaking his head sadly*): I see that you are not really committed to being part of the academic community. As head of the English Department and chair of the Tenure Committee, I am afraid I must inform you that your contracts will not be renewed. Regrettable--but we simply cannot tolerate such offensive attitudes and the hate speech they promote on our campus.

**Socrates, Erasmus, and Novus Criticus** (*in unison*): What!?

*Lights go down. When they come back up, Socrates, Erasmus, and Novus Criticus are out in the street, with an ivy-covered brick wall in the background.*

**Novus Criticus:** What the . . . ?

**Erasmus** (*sighs*): In my day, I had to contend with the intransigent ignorance of the monks and the empty speculations of the Schoolmen.

**Socrates:** And I with the Sophists.

**Erasmus:** But even in their wrongheadedness, they believed that Truth existed, and in their way they loved it. I called them enemies of good letters and sound learning, and so they were. But now: who would ever have thought that I could feel nostalgic for Scotus and Aquinas!

**Socrates:** The sophists did *not* love truth, or wisdom. They loved sophistication for its own sake . . . and money.

**Novus Criticus:** And I've been listening rather closely (pardon me—it's an old habit, but a good one). And Post Modernicus, by his own admission, seems to love only . . . power.

**Socrates:** In my day, we had a precise, technical word for people like that. We called them *Tyrants*.

**Novus Criticus:** So, what do we do now?

**Erasmus:** At least our books are still in the Library.

**Socrates:** For now.

**Novus Criticus:** But the way they're being taught to read them . . .

**Erasmus:** *Sancte Socrates, ora pro nobis!* Holy Socrates, pray for us!

**Socrates:** Why do you call me *sanctus*? *Pius*, maybe (though I was accused of the opposite). And I don't even have a cock to sacrifice. But if I did, what grounds have you for believing that I could alter the will of Zeus?

**Erasmus:** Never mind. Or, ask me again sometime. I would love to tell you about the Philosophy of Christ.

**Socrates:** Who?

**Novus Criticus:** In the meantime, what *are* we going to do?

**Socrates** (*grinning wickedly*): You know, I never even held a professorship. All I did was ask questions. Yet I managed to garner a rather killing reputation for corrupting the youth!

**Erasmus** (*almost doubles over with laughter*): Post Modernicus actually *means* to say that meaning is meaningless! He's trying to *communicate* that texts can't communicate--in a *text*!

**Novus Criticus:** You are right. No matter how trendy--and powerful--and entrenched Post Modernicus seems now, his castle really is built on sand. He cannot beat us in the long run. Shall we pop over to the Student Center for a beer? And maybe a little conversation with some students?

**Erasmus:** A little red wine for me . . .

**Socrates** (*rubbing his hands with glee*): Yes, let's. . . . as long as they don't serve hemlock!

*They link arms and head off stage right. As they disappear, Socrates is heard to say*

**Socrates:** I wonder if Asclepius ever got that chicken . . .

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Donald T. Williams holds a BA in English from Taylor University, an M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a PhD in Medieval and Renaissance Literature from the University of Georgia. He is the author of six books: *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit* (Broadman, 1994), *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), *The Disciple's Prayer* (Christian Publications, 1999), *Mere Humanity: G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien on the Human Condition* (Broadman, 2006), *Credo: An Exposition of the Nicene Creed* (Chalice Press, 2007), and *The Devil's Dictionary of the Christian Faith* (Chalice, 2009). He has also contributed essays, poems, and reviews to such journals as *National Review*, *Christianity Today*, *Touchstone*, *Modern Reformation*, *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, *Philosophia Christi*, *Theology Today*, *Christianity and Literature*, *Christian Scholar's Review*, *Mythlore*, *SEVEN*, *Christian Educator's Journal*, *Preaching*, and *Christian Research Journal*. An ordained minister in the Evangelical Free Church of America with many years of pastoral experience, Dr. Williams has spent several summers in Africa training local pastors for Church Planting International, and currently serves as Professor of English and Director of the School of Arts and Sciences at Toccoa Falls College in the hills of NE Georgia. His website is [www.doulomen.tripod.com](http://www.doulomen.tripod.com). He blogs at [www.journalofformalpoetry.com](http://www.journalofformalpoetry.com).









