

A distinguished academic, influential Christian apologist, and best-selling author of children's literature, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) is a controversial and enigmatic figure who continues to fascinate fifty years after his death. This *Companion* is the first comprehensive single-volume study written by an international team of scholars to survey Lewis's career as a literary historian, popular theologian and creative writer. Twenty-one expert voices from Oxford, Cambridge, Princeton and Wheaton, among many other places of learning, analyse Lewis's work from the theological, philosophical and literary perspectives. Some chapters consider his professional contribution to fields such as critical theory and intellectual history, while others assess his views on issues including moral knowledge, gender, prayer, war, love, suffering and scripture. The final chapters investigate his work as a writer of fiction and poetry. Original in its approach and unique in its scope, this *Companion* shows that C. S. Lewis was much more than merely 'the man behind Narnia'.

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO C. S. LEWIS

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2 Literary critic

JOHN V. FLEMING

The professional medievalist must be somewhat bemused by the fact that the literary scholarship and criticism of C.S. Lewis is so little known among his general readership and to some not known at all. After all, teaching literature was Lewis's 'day job' and he expended much energy and talent in writing about it. Following a brief stint as a teacher of philosophy,¹ he spent the first three decades of his career (1925-54) as a Fellow and Tutor in English at Magdalen College, Oxford, and most of the last decade at the University of Cambridge as the first occupant of the Chair in Medieval and Renaissance Literature, a professorship that had been created in large part deliberately to lure him there.

All aspects of Lewis's voluminous writings were influenced by the conditions and associations of the academic world in which he worked, but for his scholarly writing they were in a sense determinative. Though on occasion he wrote essays about authors and topics across the whole range of English literature, including even the contemporary scene,² it was the old Oxford English teaching curriculum – which privileged Old and Middle English texts (roughly from the years 1000 to 1400) and in which even early modern authors were often read from a primarily philological point of view – coupled with a special interest in Spenser from the sixteenth century and Milton from the seventeenth, that defined his principal scope of activity and that I will therefore focus on in this chapter.

The British literature faculties of eighty years ago were very different in spirit from what they are today. What might be called the 'American academic model' of a faculty credentialled with doctoral degrees and evaluated principally on the basis of the quantity and quality of published research was then unknown at Oxford. Many dons, including some of the most brilliant and most learned, published little or even nothing. The word 'amateur', meaning the lover of a subject, was still a benign term; and amateurism had not yet been trounced by 'professionalism'. Individual works of scholarship were often widely admired,

but 'publication' itself was tolerated rather than required. It is in no way surprising, therefore, that Lewis was approaching forty when he published his first major work, *The Allegory of Love*, in 1936; nor is it remarkable that throughout his career competing 'amateur' interests (the philosophy, theology, fiction and poetry treated in Parts II and III of this Companion) reduced a potentially stupendous scholarly output to one that is merely astonishing.

THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE

The Allegory of Love begins with a substantial chapter on courtly love, the concept that dominates Lewis's approach to love allegory. He was by no means a pioneer here, but his book was very influential in validating the concept. 'Courtly Love' is not a medieval term. It was first used in the late nineteenth century by a French medievalist to describe an artificial 'code' of behaviour discernible in the relations between male lovers and the female object of their desires as presented in a large body of European amatory poetry. 'Every one has heard of courtly love,' Lewis writes, 'and every one knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc.'¹

Characteristically the courtly lover must 'serve' a woman, always a paragon of beauty and usually of virtue, who is remote, aloof, and unavailable to him. The great love affairs of the Middle Ages, whether in fact or in fiction – the loves of Dante and Petrarch not less than those of Lancelot and Troilus – conform to greater or lesser extent to the 'conventions' of courtly love. Lewis finds the 'system' actually codified in the *De amore* of Andreas Capellanus, which has been widely distributed in English as *The Art of Courtly Love*. There is a poetic version in the elaborate 'ten commandments' given by the god of Love to the Lover in the *Romance of the Rose*.

Since Lewis's day the very concept of courtly love has been the subject of lively controversy. Some scholars (among whom I must in candour announce myself) have rejected it as unhelpful and misleading. Many others find it a useful way of approaching medieval love poetry so long as its purely literary and imaginative character is acknowledged. Comparatively few still believe, as Lewis did, that courtly love reflects an actual social reality and an important shift in the history of human consciousness and sentiment.

Courtly love, an essentially figural phenomenon, naturally tended toward literary allegory, according to Lewis, so he himself turns there in a stunning second chapter that remains perhaps the very finest

comprehensive and succinct presentation of the varieties of medieval literary allegory. He may undervalue the importance of the allegorical mode in patristic biblical exegesis, but he is learnedly aware of it. Indeed, his chapter ends with the allegorists of the School of Chartres, who 'in an age of wilful asceticism and wilful *Frauentienst* ... asserted the wholeness of the nature of man'.⁴ He now arrives at his real subject, which is the fusion of antique Latin erudition and courtly love in major poets of the later Middle Ages and into the Renaissance: Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meun, Chaucer, Gower, Usk and Spenser.

The inescapable text is the thirteenth-century French *Roman de la Rose*, in the study of which Lewis must forever be honoured as a pioneer. Given the fact that the *Roman*, 'as a germinal book ... ranks second to none except the Bible and the *Consolation of Philosophy*',⁵ its neglect by earlier scholars can be explained only in terms of the work's great length and, at times, excessive strangeness. The *Roman* had two authors. The first, Guillaume de Lorris, left a love allegory of about four thousand lines, apparently unfinished, around 1240. Sometime around 1280 a Parisian intellectual, Jean de Meun, wrote a continuation and conclusion of eighteen thousand lines more. The two parts of the poem, though they pursue the same 'plot', are markedly different in style. Lewis was of the opinion that Jean was either indifferent or positively hostile to Guillaume's psychological delicacies.

The chapter devoted to Chaucer was in a number of ways revolutionary. Lewis begins with the claim that 'for all general readers, the great mass of Chaucer's work is simply a background to the *Canterbury Tales*'.⁶ That was probably true at the time, and if it is no longer true it is only because Chaucer no longer has many 'general readers'. Lewis suggests a very different approach, which is to examine the 'early works' without reference to the *Canterbury Tales*: 'Chaucer is a poet of courtly love, and he ceases to be relevant to our study when he reaches the last and most celebrated of his works.'⁷ He is aware that there will be loss as well as gain in his procedure, but it has the advantage of demonstrating Chaucer's 'work of assimilating the achievements of French poetry, and thus determining the direction of English poetry for nearly two hundred years'.⁸

Lewis establishes a 'reading' of Chaucer's earlier work, and especially of *Troilus and Criseyde*, founded in various more or less casual comments of a number of Chaucer's contemporaries or admirers: John Gower, Thomas Usk and John Lydgate. 'Their Chaucer was the Chaucer of dream and allegory, of love-romance and erotic debate, of high style and profitable doctrine.'⁹ This statement is questionable, though one is

unlikely to question it while being swept along on the cascading white water of Lewis's prose. The technique legitimates an interpretation of Chaucer that is romantic root and branch and that disallows a very great deal that most of us see in Chaucer: 'Not many will agree with the critic who supposed that the laughter of Troilus in heaven was "ironical"; but I am afraid that many of us now read into Chaucer all manner of ironies, slynesses, and archnesses, which are not there, and praise him for his humour where he is really writing with "ful devout corage".'¹⁰

What followed in *The Allegory of Love* was no less revolutionary. Lewis unleashed his remarkable powers of invigilation and illumination on two poets – Gower and Usk – who at the time were mainly footnotes in medieval English literary history. In a chapter entitled 'Allegory as the Dominant Form' he took up writers yet more obscure, like Guillaume de Degulleville, investing them by his serious and detailed attentions with a critical dignity they have never relinquished. His book ends with a long, rich and brilliant chapter on Spenser and the *Faerie Queene*. If there is a happier concord between poet and critic than that between Spenser and Lewis, I have yet to discover it.

Lewis's scintillating 'Study in Medieval Tradition', as *The Allegory of Love* was subtitled, had an immediate dramatic effect in the world of letters. Nevill Coghill, who was Lewis's close contemporary, colleague and friend, once in conversation compared its publication to a powerful explosion, wholly unanticipated, that staggered literature faculties throughout Britain: 'When we recovered and shook off the dust, we began to look around to see whether any of the comfortable old landmarks were still standing.' By 'comfortable old landmarks' he meant the informal consensus of ideas about medieval English literature that had emerged in the literature faculties at Oxford, Cambridge and London in the previous half century. Some of the landmarks were indeed still there, in fact most of them. However, things were utterly changed. Chaucer was there, but he was not exactly the Chaucer of old. This was not Chaucer the Londoner, but Chaucer the European.

Up until the time of this 'explosion' the study of medieval literature in Britain had developed in a somewhat peculiar way, as an adjunct to or implication of the study of philology. The great scholarly achievement of the nineteenth century, so far as literary study was concerned, was the New English Dictionary, now usually called the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). It was a stupendous achievement. To produce a dictionary 'based on historical principles' demanded first of all access to a huge corpus of words from all periods of English linguistic history. From this need was born the Early English Text Society (EETS). It was in EETS

editions that most of our medieval texts found their first, and in many instances their only, appearance in print. An EETS edition aimed for a philological apparatus rather than a critical or interpretive introduction. And of course the emphasis was on the English language and therefore 'Englishness' generally. Even Chaucer's great nineteenth-century editor, W.W. Skeat, a man well versed in the medieval Latin theological literature and possessed of a competent command of Chaucer's French and Italian sources, produced a scholarly apparatus much influenced by the English philological model.

As a matter of fact, however, there is not very much in Chaucer's work that he would have written differently had no one before him even penned a single line of English poetry. Lewis does not say that explicitly, but the context of his discussion of Chaucer in *The Allegory of Love* returns 'the father of English poetry' to his proper context as great cosmopolitan European, like Jean de Meun, Dante and Boccaccio. Chaucer knew these authors, two of them well, and he sought to engage with them in making new and fresh the classical tradition in its Latin and its Continental vernacular expressions.

It is perhaps the greatest achievement of *The Allegory of Love* that Chaucer studies have more or less remained where Lewis put them in 1936.¹¹ What Lewis probably thought of as his more major contributions – his discussions of medieval allegory and of medieval love – have not stood up so well.

A PREFACE TO PARADISE LOST

Lewis's critical masterpiece is probably *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), which typifies his best criticism in two important ways. First, it found its origins in a series of lectures and retains much of the tone of a vivacious and intimate pedagogy. Second, it is a monument to a fecund intellectual friendship, that with Charles Williams, who shared with Lewis, among many other things, a passionate interest in Milton. Lewis's essay performs beautifully the true office of criticism, which is to effect a respectful introduction between a reader and a work, to clarify the text and encourage the reader without attempting to supplant either, and then leave text and reader, if not too dazzled, to get further acquainted on their own. It does assume an interested and intelligent student with at least the fundamentals of a literary education.

At first blush, the idea that John Milton, an English Puritan of the seventeenth century and a man of stern morality and learned piety, would write an epic poem in which Satan is the hero and God Almighty

perforce the villain, might seem unpromising. The further historical fact that for the first two centuries after its publication *Paradise Lost* occupied a central position in the literary culture of English-speaking Christians does little to redeem that idea. But what William Blake had written as paradox in the eighteenth century – 'Note the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it'¹² – had become, with the New Criticism, something like literary orthodoxy. Satan has too many of the great lines in the poem. The autocracy of divine government is tedious in its pronouncements. On the other hand the devils' debates in Pandemonium are lively, spirited and adversarial in the best traditions of Westminster or even on occasion Washington. It was Lewis's task to help readers to discover that Milton had not merely intended but achieved something rather different from what the post-Romantic sensibility was so willing to find.

There was of course a large irony in Lewis's project. He had only recently participated in the debate with E.M.W. Tillyard (a famous Milton scholar and intellectual historian) published under the title *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy*, in which he appeared to advance the position ('just nonsense' according to Bateson¹³) that great poetry is the product of a special consciousness for which the particularities of a historical authorial 'personality' are irrelevant. Yet the point of the *Preface* was to provide a reader with information about the history of literature and the history of theology and above all about the history of ideas deemed essential preparation for an approach to Milton. Indeed Lewis's *Preface* very closely resembles Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture* in its aspiration. Lewis begins with a typically memorable sentence: 'The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a cork-screw to a cathedral is to know *what* it is – what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.'¹⁴

The answer to the implied question 'What is *Paradise Lost*?' is that it is an epic; and this answer is the occasion for several dazzling and original chapters on epic – here characterized, with a useful binary division typical of the man's mind, as 'primary' and 'secondary' epic. By 'primary epic' he seems to mean the epic before, or untouched by, Virgil. Lewis claims that the received opinion about epic *subiect* (the 'great matter') is not in fact a literary essential, but an accidental historical implication of Virgil's response to the Augustan moment. Lewis seems to believe that the first set of difficulties to be overcome by the reader of Milton inhabits the realm of poetic manner rather than that

of theological matter. So he devotes two of his longest chapters to 'The Style of Secondary Epic' and 'Defence of this Style'.

If it is true that there recurs in Lewis's criticism an unresolved tension between the demands of history required by his erudition and a romantic subjectivity masquerading as a deference to the exceptionalism of 'great' poetry, the chapter on 'The Doctrine of the Unchanging Human Heart' makes an unequivocal case for historical criticism, for reading 'each work of wit | with the same spirit that its author writ'.¹⁵ In response to a critic who wanted to separate the 'lasting originality of Milton's thought' from its 'theological rubbish,' Lewis writes: 'This is like asking us to study *Hamlet* after the "rubbish" of the revenge code has been removed, or centipedes when free of their irrelevant legs, or Gothic architecture without the pointed arch. Milton's thought, when purged of its theology, does not exist.'¹⁶

The second half of Lewis's book is mainly serious theology approached in anything but a solemn or deadening fashion. Arresting apothegms adorn nearly every page. Its two main contributions from the doctrinal point of view are its discussion of assumptions concerning hierarchy – so essential to Milton's universe and so repellent to modern modes of thought based in dynamically interacting polarities – and the meaning of the sin of pride and its catastrophic role in the Fall. ('The Stock response to Pride, which Milton reckoned on when he delineated his Satan, has been decaying ever since the Romantic Movement began,' Lewis writes; '– that is one of the reasons why I am composing these lectures.'¹⁷) His delineation of Augustine's presentation of the tropological meaning of the Fall is so lucid and learned that I am left grieving all the more that he could have missed its relevance to the *Roman de la Rose*.

The three single most fascinating pages in the essay, perhaps, form the very short chapter entitled 'Unfallen Sexuality'. Anyone who has taught Milton to undergraduates knows that the sleepiest among them wake up to the quasi-pornography of the ninth book. But that is our familiar *fallen* sexuality. Lewis notes that Augustine's discomfort (*De civitate dei* 14) in speculating about the bliss of unfallen sexuality, which he knew must have been splendid, is the effect of a postlapsarian constitution to which what was once gratuitous nourishment is now mortal danger: 'This is a warning to Milton that it is dangerous to attempt a poetical representation of something which is unimaginable, not in the sense of raising no images, but in the more disastrous sense of inevitably raising the wrong ones. This warning he defied. He has dared to represent Paradisal sexuality. I cannot make up my mind

whether he was wise.¹⁸ If there is anything more astonishing than that Milton could be trilling about sex, it is that C. S. Lewis could be even more trilling. The reader who reaches these late pages in the *Preface* is almost guaranteed to move swiftly to the poem.

THE DISCARDED IMAGE

Lewis has another stunning essay as a literary critic, and it must be mentioned here even at the cost of a chronological violation and of trespassing into Dennis Danielson's territory in Chapter 4 of this Companion. *The Discarded Image* (1964), though published only posthumously, codifies ideas he was developing during the length of his career. Strictly speaking it is not so much a work of literary criticism as an essay in intellectual history. Yet it is appropriately subtitled 'An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature', for it succinctly and brilliantly lays out before the interested student the principal features of that alterity to be discovered on the other side of the Enlightenment and the triumph of the Copernican model. It would be hard to say whether it is more impressive in its erudition or in the artful manner in which the erudition is masked lest it intimidate a beginner.

If literary art is 'imitation' in the sense used by Aristotle, to understand literature, let alone to judge it, requires of its reader some prior knowledge of the world it imitates. Lewis was a pioneer in what later French historians would call *l'histoire des mentalités* – the shifting history of human mental structures. The 'image' that we have 'discarded' is precisely the pre-modern understanding of the structure of the universe with the Earth as its centre, and with human beings the central reality of an Earth created by an omnipotent and immanent God. It is this universe, and not ours of infinite galaxies randomly distributed in an infinite space, that is reflected in medieval and Renaissance literature.

This 'old' world was perhaps created and was certainly sustained by certain classic texts, and Lewis introduces his reader to the small library of ancient and early medieval writers (such as Claudian, Macrobius and Boethius) most influential in its delineation and transmission. A consistent theme of *The Discarded Image* is textual power, the tenacity and longevity of ideas once accepted as authoritative, the cohesion but also the constrictions of a worldview which 'everybody' believed. Textual power often involved textual paradox. Lewis points out, for example, that our ancestors' belief in marvellous beasts, a fairy world, and ranks of unseen angels and demons was caused by the same thing that has caused us to disbelieve in them: literacy. Intellectual history is

not history's only branch, but I know of no better introduction to the fundamental assumptions undergirding the medieval and Renaissance literature of Christian Europe than *The Discarded Image*.

ENGLISH LITERATURE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

The greatest single monument to Lewis's astonishing literary erudition is his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, a contribution to the multi-volume Oxford History of English Literature. (Lewis, exasperated by the length of time it took to write – a full fifteen years – nicknamed it his 'O hell!' volume.) This is described on the title page as 'the completion of the Clark Lectures' given at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1944, and now a decade later, considerably revised and much expanded, published in Oxford in 1954. It is in every sense a very large work.

Lewis loved binary patterns, and two important binaries structure his book, though he begins by questioning a bifurcation long cherished by literary historians. He was a pioneer in a scholarly trend, now very widely accepted, that seeks to describe the cultural and especially literary developments of Europe in the period from 1300 to 1700 in terms of gradual developments, continuities and new initiatives as opposed to a dramatic and revolutionary movement from the 'Middle Ages' to the 'Renaissance'. So he began his book with a long and brilliant introduction, called 'New Learning and New Ignorance', which is probably a permanently valuable contribution to intellectual history, in which with great subtlety he painted the backdrop necessary to understand the peculiarities of insular humanism that define much of the British sixteenth century.

One background chapter demanded another, a long essay of a hundred pages on late medieval literature, but here divided between the cultural history of Scotland and that of England. The implicit priority of Scotland was intentional and innovative, and his essay anticipates another current scholarly trend that looks beyond the 'Scottish Chaucerians' to examine a rich literature in its fullness.

Another structural binary, perhaps more questionable, is his stylistic division between 'drab' and 'golden' (the quotation marks being authorial and essential). This was doubtless a clever and useful distinction when he introduced it in one of the Clark Lectures. It is a consistent principle of his criticism that literary style can never be wholly separated from literary content, and his terminology makes a confrontation with the stylistic inescapable. But what was perhaps a brilliant

device for a single lecture may become coercive over the length of a book of seven hundred pages. At times it may be unclear whether there is much distinction between golden/drab and good/bad, or what C.S. Lewis really likes and what he likes less.

A second possible problem, this one fully anticipated by the author, concerns scale and proportion. The sixteenth century was opulent of literary genius in Britain, but it was opulent also of literary mediocrity. One has the impression that Lewis had read, and read with care, his way completely through the *Short Title Catalogue*. My memory of first reading this book as a graduate student is of my dismay at being overwhelmed with an avalanche of authors' names and book titles of which I had never heard. One suspected that John Colet's commentaries on the Pauline epistles were more important than John Rastell's *Book of Purgatory*, but absolute certainty was wanting. In a brief preface, Lewis writes thus: 'Good books which are remote from modern sympathy need to be treated at greater length than good books which everyone already knows and loves. Bad books may be of importance for the history of taste and if they are passed over too briefly the student's picture of a period may be distorted.'¹⁹

Lewis's knowledge of the religious literature of the second half of the sixteenth century – much of it controversial and polemical – was extraordinary. It must have been a challenge to the imaginative, cheerful and charitable Christian apologist to try to read with sympathetic understanding so much in his 'own' genre that was leaden, cheerless and vitriolic. But the review of that vast literature was not simple duty. It provides the intellectual and ideographic backdrop against which a few authors and works of unquestioned genius can stand out in their authentically noble profiles. His third section (entitled 'Golden') begins with the *tour de force* of a lengthy chapter on Sidney and Spenser. One has the impression that the author arrived at this chapter as a thirsting Bedouin might arrive at an oasis. The reader who has attended every page of the second book ('Drab') will feel no less refreshed.

Lewis was a brilliant reader of Spenser, a great poet who today commands too few readers of any stripe. It is arguable that the best chapter of *The Allegory of Love* is the final chapter devoted to Spenser, and Lewis's skill as a Spenserian is again on display in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. He is not entirely unsparing of the 'fauls that Spenser never quite outgrew', we call him a Golden poet because there is so much gold, not because there is so little Drab, in his work.²⁰ But he was enamoured of Spenser's allegory and had a rare understanding of its symmetrical analogies, which were so loved by and so typical of

medieval and Renaissance artists of all kinds. A remark he made at the beginning of the *Preface* concerning Milton is probably even more apt for his view of Spenser: 'when the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and ... what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted.'²¹ Space does not allow me to discuss his various essays on Spenser in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*,²² nor his unfinished *Spenser's Images of Life*, posthumously edited by Alastair Fowler and published in 1967.

ASSESSMENTS

Though it fills several volumes, Lewis's formal literary scholarship is but a small part of his published corpus, and much of it had to be wrenched from his unwilling hands so to speak or gathered from the papers he left at his death. Even so, given the fecundity of his mind and the energy of his constitution, it is impossible in an essay of this length to do more than try to characterize some of his most important contributions. Even harder is it to offer a synoptic summary of his achievement as medieval and Renaissance literary critic, as I must now attempt to do.

A preliminary issue demands attention. Lewis was a Christian, and he naturally wrote as a Christian. The question of the degree to which Lewis the Christian apologist and Lewis the critic were the same man could command a study of its own, but several times he states his awareness of the difference between a pulpit and a lectern.²³ In his approach to acknowledged Christian masters like Dante, Spenser and Milton he exhibits and sometimes explicitly states a warm sympathy with their most fundamental religious ideas. On the other hand he was strangely content to identify 'courtly love', an extra-Christian if not anti-Christian substitute for the foremost of the theological virtues, as the mainspring of medieval European poetry. It is my opinion, expressed elsewhere,²⁴ that in his pursuit of 'courtly love' in the *Roman de la Rose* he became the corrupting Aristotle who misled a generation of readers in understanding the supremely important poem he had done so much to rescue from oblivion.

The student of Lewis the critic must immediately be struck by the social context of his literary thought. He was a man of deep intellectual friendships, and he enjoyed the good fortune of having friends who were great in more senses than one, men who shared broad sympathies and imaginative powers: Owen Barfield, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and many others. The Inklings were a donnish coterie in the old and

admiring sense of that word, and Lewis began as a coterie critic even as Chaucer began as a coterie poet.

His generosity of spirit is evident in the warmth of his praise of colleagues and friends like Williams and Tolkien, but no less so in the stance adopted toward his adversaries – of whom he had quite a few. The 'controversy' with Tillyard, though neither combatant pulled many rhetorical punches, leaves an impression of erudite high jinks rather than intellectual rancour. His disagreements with Eliot, which were numerous and deeply felt, were (in public at least) kept in proportion: 'I agree with him about matters of such moment that all literary questions are, in comparison, trivial.'²⁵ He appears to have been actually offended by Denis Saurat's *La pensée de Milton (Milton, Man and Thinker)*, but what he says just before making that almost clear is that 'Milton studies owe a great debt to Professor Saurat'.²⁶ Perhaps the only time Lewis approaches genuine scorn for a fellow literary critic is in his handling of Derek Traversi.²⁷

C.S. Lewis the literary scholar commanded three powerful tools. The first was a remarkable erudition. He knew about as much as it is possible to know from reading the primary sources in his field. Next, he had a supremely supple imagination and historical sympathy that allowed him to make surprising, illuminating connections among the numerous categories of his vast learning. Finally, he had to a remarkable degree that capacity defined by Pope as 'true wit' – the power to put into felicitous language 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'.²⁸

His erudition was founded in his knowledge of languages, beginning with his native English, which he commands with a powerful mixture of reverence and audacity, but extending also into the European vernaculars in their various historical periods and, especially, classical Latin and Greek. Lewis lived perhaps at the very end of the age when nearly all European literary scholars knew their Virgil and their Horace, and probably also their Homer and their Theocritus; but Lewis's classicism went far beyond textual familiarities. Familiarity with a text is not always the same thing as familiarity with a language. He had internalized the languages, and not only the texts. In *Surprised by Joy* he writes that he early learned that upon encountering the word 'naus' [navis] he should summon to mind not the word *ship* but a ship itself with its sails and creaking ropes, or its ranks of oars.²⁹ In his criticism Lewis allows us – perhaps forces us – to see old texts in the vivacity with which he saw them.

To be able to imagine in detail and with coherence a large physical, social or intellectual system that might exist in some time or world

other than our own is of the same genre of capacity as to be able to imagine a vanished past within the time scheme of our own world. In Lewis there was no large distance between the primary and secondary imaginations of Coleridge. He is hardly less imaginative in the expression of his thought as in the thought itself.

Readers of Lewis do not need a professor to tell them in a Cambridge Companion that he was a remarkable prose stylist. The style is there for all to enjoy: his range of cadences, the perfect word plucked from a vast vocabulary, the mixture of the learned and the homely, the striking analogy likely to cause a reader to stop to admire or to rebel in the middle of a page, the tone of authority that never becomes the tone of the bully. What a professor *can* point out, perhaps, is that Lewis's prose is probably most confident and also most magnificent when he is addressing an audience most like himself: an audience admiring of and widely read in the earlier periods of English literature. Hence I would argue that his literary scholarship is, from the point of view of writing skill alone, his greatest work. Why do we 'like' Milton's Satan? Anyone who has read *Paradise Lost* knows why, in some impressionistic and usually unarticulated sense, a sense that 'oft was thought'. But Lewis is able to tell us in a single sentence of wide critical applicability, halfway to being an epigram: 'It is a very old critical discovery that the imitation in art of displeasing objects may be a pleasing imitation'.³⁰

Notes

- 1 See the essays by Taliaferro and Meilaender in this volume (Chapters 8 and 9) for a discussion of two of Lewis's principal philosophical concerns.
- 2 These essays, which include studies of Bunyan, Austen, Scott, Kipling, Orwell, 'four-letter words' and science fiction, are to be found in SLE and EC.
- 3 AOL 2.
- 4 AOL 110.
- 5 AOL 157.
- 6 AOL 161.
- 7 AOL 161.
- 8 AOL 161.
- 9 AOL 162.
- 10 AOL 163–64.
- 11 Another important contribution to Chaucer studies was his essay 'What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*' (1932), repr. in SLE 27–44. It was this essay of Lewis's perhaps more than any other that inspired D.W. Robertson to write his own classic 'The Concept of Courty Love as an Impediment to the Understanding of Medieval Texts' (1968). According to Lewis, what Chaucer had 'really done' to the *Filostrato*

of Boccaccio was to 'have corrected certain errors that Boccaccio had committed against the code of courtly love'. His chief means of correction was to 'medievalise' the story of Troilus. It is a demonstrable fact, however, that Chaucer makes a much more rigorous attempt than ever Boccaccio did to be 'classical', that is, to write a historical novel in which his ancient pagan characters act like ancient pagans. The love conventions within the poem certainly do constitute a 'code' of sorts, but the codification is that of Ovid in his *Ars amatoria* as stylistically modernized by two great medieval Ovidians, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.

- 12 William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, pl. 5; see *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 150.
- 13 F.W. Bateson, reviewing *The Personal Heresy in the Review of English Studies* 16 (1940), 488.
- 14 PPL 1.
- 15 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, ll. 233-34, the epigraph to ch. 1 of PPL.
- 16 PPL 65. Lewis is responding to Denis Saurat, *Milton, Man and Thinker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), 111.
- 17 PPL 56.
- 18 PPL 122.
- 19 EL p. v.
- 20 EL 368.
- 21 PPL p. v.
- 22 The collection includes a few gems – particularly some pieces on Dante, with whom one can but wish he had engaged more fully – but also some unpublished work.
- 23 See e.g. PPL, ch. 12, 'The Theology of *Paradise Lost*'.
- 24 John V. Fleming, *The Roman de la Rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), *passim*.
- 25 PPL 9.
- 26 PPL 82.
- 27 SIL 62-63.
- 28 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, ll. 297-98: 'True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd, | What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd'.
- 29 SBI 115.
- 30 PPL 94.

3 Literary theorist

STEPHEN LOGAN

TWO SENSES OF 'LITERARY THEORY'

The claim that C.S. Lewis was a literary theorist is, from one point of view, uncontroversial. If literary theory is understood as the practice of reflecting philosophically on the nature and function of literature, then there seems little doubt that Lewis made a contribution to literary theory. In this sense, Aristotle's *Poetics*, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* and the *Selected Essays* of T.S. Eliot are all works of literary theory. Several of Lewis's books may be said to contain, or consist of, literary theory so understood: *An Experiment in Criticism* most obviously and explicitly, but also *The Discarded Image*, his side of the debate with E.M.W. Tillyard in *The Personal Heresy*, the chapters on the concept of the Renaissance in his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, and the discussion of primary and secondary epic in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. In this reckoning of Lewis as a literary theorist, we should include, moreover, a large body of essays, such as 'De Audiendis Poetis', 'De Descriptione Temporum', 'On Three Ways of Writing for Children', 'On Period Tastes in Literature', 'The Genesis of a Medieval Book', 'The Parthenon and the Opative' and 'Bluspels and Flansferes: A Semantic Nightmare'. By no means does all such work fall within the realm of English studies. 'Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism', for instance, is theoretical in that it argues that what passes for literary criticism in theology is often insufficiently literary. Perhaps even more important in terms of their cumulative effect are the more scattered discussions – such as substantial, if topical, items as the sequence of three essays gathered by Walter Hooper under the title 'Christianity and Literature', or even the statements sent to *Delta* (a Cambridge undergraduate magazine) in response to the imputation of a patronizing pedantry of critical approach. There are also the innumerable remarks in Lewis's published letters which demonstrate the consistency with which his mind was trained upon