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## "Written by the Finger of God": C.S. Lewis and Historical Judgement

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### Abstract

Lewis's distrust of scientific laws for history, rather than undercutting his practice of literary history, existed alongside a basic, cautionary trust in representing the past. His methods of history writing included offering an overall plot, developing characters and corporate quasi-characters, and making analogies with the present to increase readerly sympathy (or antipathy) with long-gone cultures. Despite his strong rhetorical tendency to generalize, Lewis did not place absolute faith in his historical narratives. They were made to be argued with, supplemented, and even over-turned. The article pays particular attention to three documents from Lewis's career as a literary historian: 1) his 1945 essay, "Addison"; 2) his two-day address in 1956 to the Cambridge Zoological Laboratory, "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages"; and 3) the opening introduction to his monumental *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. Likewise, it examines his overall attitude toward historiography, which requires a theological structure to position his suspended middle of historical and ethical judgments.

### Additional Keywords

Historiography; Lewis, C.S.—As critic; Lewis, C.S.—Theory of literature; Lewis, C.S. "Addison"; Lewis, C.S. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*; Lewis, C.S. "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages"



WRITTEN BY THE FINGER OF GOD:  
C.S. LEWIS AND HISTORICAL JUDGMENT

PHILIP IRVING MITCHELL

"I do not dispute that History is a story written by the finger of God. But have we the text?"  
—C.S. Lewis, "Historicism" 105

"I do not suppose that the sixteenth century differs in these respects from any other arbitrarily selected stretch of years. It illustrates well enough the usual complex, unpatterned historical process; in which, while men often throw away irreplaceable wealth, they not infrequently escape what seemed inevitable dangers, not knowing that they have done either nor how they did it."

—*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* ([OHEL] 558)

IN HIS OFTEN-CITED 1954 INAUGURAL ADDRESS as the Cambridge Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature, "*De Descriptione Temporum*" [DT], C.S. Lewis compared the work of historians to that of flower arranging: "I am less like a botanist in a forest than a woman arranging a few cut flowers for the drawing-room. So, in some degree, are the greatest historians. We can't get into the real forest of the past" (DT 3-4). According to Lewis, the practice of history is an antiquarian display, rather than an axiomatic science. The best one can do is attractively exhibit a number of examples from the past to entice an audience to examine them closely. Expressed this way, Lewis's confidence appears rather low in the scope, even veracity, of history. He, like all historians, was subject to what Erich Przywara has called a "creaturally metaphysic," a suspended middle in which ontological judgments of the nature of *what* happened in the past and epistemological judgments *that* they happened circle back upon each other (154).<sup>1</sup> Our present knowledge of the past can never be absolute, certain, or god-like. Yet Lewis as a literary historian, in actual practice, expressed himself with "the rhetoric of certitude" (Tandy chapter 4); that is, his history-writing relied on generalizations and assertive judgments, and there are good reasons for his

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<sup>1</sup> For a further discussion of Lewis and historical judgment, see Mitchell, "Raised by Implication": C. S. Lewis's *Studies in Words* and Historical and Moral Judgment," and for a further application of Przywara's suspended middle to historical judgment see Mitchell, "Civilizational Sickness and the Suspended Middle: R.G. Collingwood, Christopher Dawson, and Historical Judgment."

method. Lewis’s distrust of scientific laws for history, rather than undercutting his practice of literary history, existed alongside a basic, cautionary trust in representing the past. His methods of history writing included offering an overall plot, developing characters and corporate quasi-characters, and making analogies with the present to increase readerly sympathy (or antipathy) with long-gone cultures. In doing so, despite his strong rhetorical tendency to generalize, Lewis did not place absolute faith in his historical narratives. They were made to be argued with, supplemented, and even over-turned. To show this in his practice, I will pay particular attention to three documents from Lewis’s career as a literary historian: 1) his 1945 essay, “Addison”; 2) his two-day address in 1956 to the Cambridge Zoological Laboratory; and 3) the opening introduction to his monumental *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. But to do this, it will help to examine his overall attitude toward historiography because, at first glance, his theory appears at odds with what he actually wrote. That they were not entirely so requires a theological structure to position his suspended middle of historical and ethical judgments.

#### THE TROUBLE WITH HISTORICISM

Lewis distrusted theories of historical change, including Christian ones. In 1948, he had enthusiastically written to Christopher Dawson, the Roman Catholic historian and social critic, about Dawson’s Gifford lectures, which he had sent to Lewis. Lewis had already read the historian with appreciation, finding much value in his analysis of political history (*Letters* 2.398), and Lewis clearly saw Dawson as a fellow Christian intellectual opposed to the spirit of the age. Lewis admired Dawson’s treatment of Hegelianism and evolutionary developmentalism, as well as his work “on the Humanists [which] seems to me particularly sound” (*Letters* 3.1584). Yet despite this high praise of Dawson’s work, Lewis’s own conclusions about the nature of history, if taken seriously, eroded the foundations for such a project as Dawson’s. In October 1950, Lewis published his essay “Historicism,” in which he condemned the pursuit of historical, developmental causes, giving a stipulative definition for “historicism” that would have surprised much of his audience (Bebbington 180). It certainly surprised Dawson. Instead of decrying the cultural relativism associated by many with historicism, Lewis described it as “the belief that men can, by the use of their natural powers, discover an inner meaning in the historical process” (“Historicism” 100). Lewis had a different, if related, target than Dawson. “The mark of the Historicist,” he complained, “is that he tries to get from historical premises conclusions which are more than historical; conclusions metaphysical or theological or [...] atheo-logical” (100-101). In particular, Lewis worried about Christian readings of history in an axiomatic fashion. Dawson in response argued that historicism (i.e. metahistory) was not

the same as idealism, and that German liberal Protestantism and German Idealism had muddled things. He gave Lewis credit for opposing such philosophical positions that mistook their own philosophy for Christianity, yet he insisted that a Christian understanding of history was compatible with an Augustinian model of time and society (Dawson 245-53).

For Dawson, it was clear that metahistory was not universal history, and yet sociology could play an important role (307-310). Lewis, on the other hand, discounted any pretense to a science or philosophy of history, even though he affirmed a general theological shape to its course. History, he held, is an interpretive study of the particulars; it cannot be an attempt to explain the deep causes or developmental pattern of historical forces. The normal means of historians, he insisted, included inferences of unknown events from known ones or future outcomes from past ones, though the later were misguided, even if allowable. Metahistorical claims could not be advanced without a comprehensive knowledge of all historical information. No one can know the totality of history because we do not know most of the past, nor has the future happened: "The philosophy of history is a discipline for which we mortal men lack the necessary data" ("Historicism" 110). To buttress this point, Lewis drew an analogy with a departed father's old drawer, forgotten, then recovered, which contained a random assortment of documents, most with no clear value to the family. Little historical data is actually recoverable or known, Lewis insisted: "I think the real historian will allow that the actual *detritus* of the past [...] is very much more like an old drawer than like an intelligent epitome" (109). Lewis, arguably, almost rendered impossible the project of a documented natural law, such as what he himself had offered in *Abolition of Man*. There, Lewis had drawn from John Buchanan Riddell's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* to assemble and classify varied moral adages so that he might defend the proposition of a universal Tao across historic cultures (Hooper, *Lewis* 330). In Lewis's defense, the object in his sights was that a predictive model of the future could be discovered from the past, not that moral universals are undiscoverable. Yet this stress on the moral universal carried with it its own problems in regards to historical judgment. In particular, if there is no pattern to history that is discoverable, then how does one make moral evaluations as to the past? They must be made within history, even if they are acknowledged as a form of objective knowledge and as presuppositionally given for all traditional cultures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis asserted that his argument for natural law was neither a strong return to classical and medieval natural law nor a covert attempt to introduce necessary theism. His argument was a softer proposal: that all moral systems share certain broad ethical presuppositions, and that there is no way to critique these moral truths except from within the historical system of them (cf. "On Ethics"). As Gilbert Meilaender observes, the moral

Unlike Dawson, who saw sociological findings as one of the structures of history, Lewis feared a science of history was a threat to human free agency and to the foundations of human moral decision-making. Lewis was particularly concerned with those using evolutionary theory, and he had as his target not only the idealism of Hegel and the dialectical materialism of Marx ("Historicism" 103), but also the cyclical theories of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee. Each imposed a model of the totality upon all the particulars. In "*De Descriptione Temporum*," he spelled out this objection:

I am not, even on the most Lilliputian scale, emulating Professor Toynbee or Spengler. [...] I know nothing of the future, not even whether there will be any future. I don't know whether past history has been necessary or contingent. I don't know whether the human tragic-comedy is now in Act I or Act V; whether our present disorders are those of infancy or of old age. (DT 3).<sup>3</sup>

This is not to say that Lewis did not also affirm a transcendent understanding. He insisted that the "primary history" of personal revelation is what truly mattered, and it was that fundamental accountability before God that rendered any human story significant:

I mean the real or primary history which meets each of us moment by moment in his own experience. [...] [W]hat MacDonald called 'the holy present'. Where, except in the present, can the Eternal be met? If I attack Historicism it is not because I intend any disrespect to primary history, the real revelation springing direct from God in every experience. It is rather because I respect this real original history too much to see with unconcern the honours due to it lavished on those fragments, copies of fragments, copies of copies of fragments, or floating reminiscences of copies of copies, which are, unhappily, confounded with it under the general name of *history*. ("Historicism" 113)

Lewis's argument from the existential and personal raises many points of tension. Formulated, thusly, 1) autobiographical history becomes the ideal shape and end of history; 2) the study of the larger past seems limited to what immediate truth it can provide the reader or scholar; 3) the purpose of history becomes the self (before God, of course) rather than any genuine love of the

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truths of the natural law "do not solve moral problems for us; on the contrary, they create, frame and shape those problems" (121).

<sup>3</sup> These were not the only instances of Lewis weighing in against axiomatic change. Even before his conversion to Christianity, he had trusted Marxist models "in effect, to dehumanize man" (Starr 38).

other; and 4) as a result, history as a discipline is relegated to the Platonic shadows. Ethical and historical judgments, parsed in this manner, would be highly relativistic, yet these were hardly Lewis's own practical conclusions. He, too, valued the historical other, and much of his scholarly work was committed to helping readers understand a past different than their own culture and time. In his *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, he had clearly warned readers against the delusion of "the method of The Unchanging Human Heart." The gap between one's own context and another historical culture's cannot be bridged by denying any significant difference (62-4). Instead, the variances must be studied and understood, "the effort of the historical imagination" to cross the differences (72). Lewis's insistence on historical distance, any more than his treatment of historical data as a forgotten drawer, was not intended to end in skepticism. Indeed, he wrote with just the opposite goal in mind.

Despite his suspicion of Christian historicism, Lewis could also make critiques based upon his Christian belief. As early as his 1946 piece, "Modern Man and his Categories of Thought," he had connected "historicism" with "developmentalism," and asserted that this was an explicit denial of the biblical notion of creation and fall, in which "the very standard of good is itself in a state of flux" (64). Historical examples and contexts, for Lewis, are applicable to each reader's "holy present," which is itself not subject to impersonal laws of material or idealist history but to transcendent standards and divine encounter. In the same manner, Lewis could draw from Christian eschatology to resist predictive history. In "The World's Last Night," he insisted that the theory of evolution had nothing to do with Christian theology (or with Progress and Social Darwinism, for that matter). The final *parousia* is "a sudden, violent end imposed from without," an end to the play that we cannot read, being that we are in it (101). Our not knowing what the future holds offers us dramatic freedom: "The playing it well is what matters infinitely" (106). Indeed, affirming only a general providentialism kept the historian "from writing a great deal of nonsense" and "to get on with the story" (OHEL 148).

This "getting on with the story" is key to Lewis's experience as a literary historian. Lewis's flower-cutting analogy underplayed historical evidence for most fields of research, except the most ancient and Paleolithic. Historians, even literary historians, as often, need to abbreviate event facts, as well as distinguish significant ones from what can be ignored. They have to summarize, classify, and even eliminate the information they have at their disposal, as did Lewis himself. When we read Lewis's descriptions of the historical process, we find we are reading phenomenological accounts, and his analogies of the drawer, the floral arrangement, or the personal encounter, as well as general descriptions of the history's limited purposes, are descriptions of researching and writing from sources. Because Lewis feared that axiomatic

causality undercut human choices in the past, he stressed what little historians knew and described a more epistemically cautious procedure.

Yet this call to hesitancy hardly stopped Lewis from expressing strong, even wide historical claims, even if he rejected the cyclical claims of Toynbee. For example, he shared with historians such as Dawson a commitment to a macrohistorical narrative of the West, one in which the modern world has fallen from some measure of the goodness of previous eras. Lewis’s “*De Descriptione Temporum*” is likely his most well-known example of this meta-story. There, Lewis was able both to express caution towards historical judgments and also to paint, nonetheless, a tragic narrative. He admitted that there was “no Great Divide” (DT 3), at least not ontologically, but the means of the divide allowed him to consider several possible breaks—between the pagan and Christian worlds, between the Dark and High Middle Ages, between these and the Enlightenment. Rather than locating the break of greatest importance between either the ancient and medieval world, or between the High Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Lewis argued that the deepest shift took place in the mid and late nineteenth century with radical changes in politics and aesthetics, as well as with the general rise of a post-Christian Europe (4-8). He half-mockingly labeled himself a living fossil of “Old Western Culture,” for he was able to give some sense of this bygone era to twentieth-century students (8-10, 12-13). Of course, this was a ruse. Lewis was as much a person of his time as his hearers, but his appointed moniker did highlight two aspects of himself; namely, that he was a scholar of the literary past who loved it and that he was a Christian, one invested in the patristic consensus of Nicene Christianity. This was not to conclude that Lewis idealized all things ancient and medieval, but he did establish himself as their sympathetic defender and as an exegete of what he believed most compatible with Christian truth. At the same time, his history of the centuries since the High Middle Ages could pinpoint numerous changes that prepared for his nineteenth-century faultline. Lewis’s jumbled drawer, then, could be assembled into a rather wide narrative of historical accountability and blame.

#### THE SUSPENDED MIDDLE

Was Lewis’s history-writing then at odds with his theory? Only up to a point. Even if we acknowledge no set of covering laws, historiography makes judgments that link events, and these have ideological frameworks, which was the substance of Dawson’s objection: “For the Christian view of history is a vision of history *sub specie aeternitatis*, an interpretation of time in terms of eternity and of human events in the light of divine revelation” (248). While it may be true that history cannot be written with the same causal confidence that the hard sciences claim, quasi-causal analysis (be it that of colligation, confirmation, or simple coherency) is at the heart of historiography, including

Lewis's. And these analyses tend to have teleological, and therefore implicitly theological, inferences to which they are joined through suppositions, agents, and settings. What made this possible for Lewis, then?

I wish to suggest that the disconnections between Lewis's theory of history and his actual practice are evidence of the suspended middle of historical judgment itself, and Lewis's strong denial of any knowledge of the future was intended to safeguard the normal telos of human freedom. Theologian Erich Przywara and philosopher Paul Ricoeur have each offered phenomenological accounts of human understanding that include the temporal nature of persons, and as such, they help sketch the reality within which Lewis himself functioned. Przywara's *Analogia Entis* underscored that human beings, as temporal creatures, possess an openness to the future and human nature in history points beyond itself to the eternal (124). Lewis clearly held both eternal and teleological definitions of human essence, and the kind of evaluations that he practiced—logical, ethical, or aesthetic—asked questions about the nature of things. Przywara observed that any method we employ to learn about something uses “the greatest possible immediacy to this formal object” and yet there is inevitably subjective participation in the matter (133), and Lewis, too, understood that in every model there is “something of the nature of the artist as well as something of the object” (“Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages” [“Imagination”] 62-63). This extends naturally to the meaning of history.

For Przywara, the analogy of being was a means of engaging and being engaged by the actual world, “an oscillation without end between two extremes” of ontology and epistemology (191). Rather than articulating an absolute union between a historical description and the actual past or dismissing the description as only fictional, Przywara observed that the principle of non-contradiction offered a humbler assessment of truth (207-10, 216). Lewis's attitude towards historical periodization was a strong example of this oscillation from non-contradiction. History can not mean anything, and given plenty of evidence to evaluate, what we know forces our generalizations to adapt themselves. In turn, periodization is neither equivocal fiction (since it reports a colligation of real behaviors and beliefs), nor is it univocal certainty (i.e. it cannot claim to know all that can be known or why). Because for Przywara, truth is *in-and-beyond* history, it is neither established apart from history nor relativized as only history, and this strikes me as very compatible with Lewis. Lewis was committed to the project of helping readers appreciate the historical context of classic texts, so no conceptual portrait need ever obtain univocal purity, nor need it give into equivocal despair; instead, the process of description would continue in each generation. For example, Lewis noticed that the pre-modern love of rhetoric “is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors” because moderns have no taste for it, yet if that were ever to change, “the whole story

will have to be rewritten and many judgments may be reversed" (OHEL 61). A creaturely metaphysics, then, suggests a modest path for historical judgment, not only in that the truth of cultures is in-and-beyond history, but also in that past cultures and events keep revealing newly discovered significance.

"Change is never complete," Lewis observed, "[And yet] nothing is quite new; it was always somehow anticipated or prepared for" (DT 2). This temporal and open shape, Ricoeur contended, is why history shares with fiction a narrative structure. Here, too, we can see a practice that Lewis modeled, and Ricoeur's analysis additionally helps us understand why Lewis chose such methods. Typical plots and standard characters are framing devices for describing historical periods and behaviors, and they assume some measure of teleology and essence respectively, even if only as organizing devices. "Plot, in effect, 'comprehends' in one intelligible whole, circumstances, goals, interactions, and unintended results" (Ricoeur 142). Plot types universalize in that they merge together contingency and something like necessity, and yet by their nature, they offer generalizations in order to depart from them. We generalize human action and historical context in order to effect an analogy between the past and the present; in this way, they are a narrative form of the suspended middle. They gesture towards both the general and the unique. Historical periods, which function like quasi-characters as much as contexts, are finally unavoidable because it is the nature of explanations to include conceptualizations, and they must concern themselves with not only the ontological possibilities of universals and particulars, but also the epistemological issues of realism and nominalism (Ricoeur 152-3, 226-30). Lewis practiced all of this in order to understand the literary past; he, too, recognized the necessity and flexibility of historical descriptions. Arguably, then, Lewis's practice of certitude in narrative history fit with the deep structure of a creaturely metaphysics that made moral judgments possible, while distrusting axiomatic conclusions. His quasi-characterizations of periods as historical judgments always functioned analogically because narrative itself is analogical.

#### **"ADDISON" (1945) — HISTORICAL CHARACTERS AND PERIOD CONTEXTS**

Lewis's essay "Addison" (1945) stands at the center of his professional career and is a good example of his practice, which raised the question of how essential periodization is to understanding historical characters. "Addison" is an essay as much about Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, the Tory satirists, as it is about Joseph Addison, the Whig essayist, and being so, it offers not only literary assessments of the three men, but also the socio-cultural contexts that support them. Lewis's overviews of a period and its shared mentalities make ethical or aesthetic evaluation possible, for without such judgments, the historian or reader is unable to understand the past at all. "Participatory

belonging," as Ricoeur put it, is one of the necessities for judging an historical character's intentions (194). Lewis took rather complex positions on the writers and their conversation. The boisterous, even acerbic sarcasm and fun of Pope and Swift were threatening but defensible as school-boy "high-spirited rowdiness" ("Addison" 154). Addison's civil conversation, on the other hand, even when humorous, would never be marked by a lack of polish or urbane control. Lewis employed such character generalizations to describe differences across cultures for his audience. Consider the following passage:

All through the century which Addison ushered in, England was going to attend more and more seriously to the Freeports, and the de Coverleys were to be more and more effectually silenced. The figure of the dear old squire dominates—possibly, on some views, corrupts—the national imagination to the present day. This is indeed 'to make a man die sweetly'. That element in English society which stood against all that Addison's party was bringing in is henceforth seen through the mist of smiling tenderness—as an archaism, a lovely absurdity. What we might have been urged to attack as a fortress we are tricked into admiring as a ruin. ("Addison" 156)

According to Lewis, Addison was part of a larger cultural change that continued up to the present day. To borrow a term from Charles Taylor, Lewis was describing a shift in "social imaginaries," that is forms of common social narrative and metaphor (Taylor 23-30). To offer a context for understanding, Lewis generalized a social imaginary in which sentimentality was growing in explanatory power, becoming the tacit ideal of a populace, which was slowly shifting as to what it had once deemed reasonable.

Historical periods are certainly made up of practices that divide the world in certain ways, and the era brought about by Addison helped shape the modern world. Lewis asked his 1945 English audience to consider whether being the inheritors of this shift, they had not been corrupted, and he wedged in a lesson in rhetoric and its shaping of their aesthetic and historical judgments. Words like "archaism" and "lovely absurdity" offered an audience a position of moral and chronological superiority, yet Lewis also called them to account, however subtly. The gap between themselves and the traditionalism of Swift and Pope was far wider, and something had been lost. Lewis did not treat Addison or Richard Steele as cynical manipulators; indeed, he took the position that they could not have foreseen the entire effect of their work; they were part of a change in imaging the world that was wider than themselves.

It is this kind of open-ended characterization and plot that most easily reflects the trade-off between ontological assertion and epistemological hesitancy. This historical imaginary is not to be treated as simple causation;

"events are singular *and* typical, contingent *and* expected, deviant *and* dependent on paradigms" (Ricouer 208). In the "Addison" essay, common human experience allowed Lewis to examine various historical changes and yet treat them as still commensurable for his audience. The contemporary present was alike yet different than the past, and this analogy could be sympathetically navigated so that the past was still of import for his readers. Arguably, one could reduce Lewis's connections to that of two historical periods without reference to a universal Tao, yet Lewis clearly thought otherwise. A Tao with broad categories of moral behavior permitted Lewis to make a point about history and human freedom. None of the three men in question were entirely tied to their period, yet each was representative of it. Addison, Pope, and Swift were each subject to an eighteenth-century stress on "rational piety," that is a belief that the sensible person observes the local faith without any unnecessary internal perplexity over dogma. Yet the three men did not respond in the same way, even while being subject to their culture and its choices. While Pope, the Roman Catholic author of "Universal Prayer," was the least subject to the pressure of a culturally shared faith, and while Swift's version was still full of Christian angst and pain ("Swift still belongs [...] to the older world"), Addison's calm acceptance was "historically momentous" ("Addison" 157, 160). Lewis tied this change in faith to another change: that of good breeding, and he observed that this shift gave the lie to Lewis's personal temptation to treat his own standards of mannerly behavior as universal, and in admitting to this, Lewis was assuming that his 1945 audience shared the standard of propriety that arose with Addison's generation. Propriety as a category could be universal yet with different guidelines.

The differences between the three men, therefore, signified not just their individual styles and personalities but fundamental shifts that reached forward and backward in time. Lewis could argue for historical threads, connecting Swift and Pope to the hilarity of the medieval and yet also to the narrowness of Renaissance humanism; in turn, he could connect Addison to the coming Victorians and to Romantic views of the medieval, and yet still prize Addison as a classicist who at times "touches hands with Scaliger on the one side and Matthew Arnold on the other" ("Addison" 162). Lewis's final defense of Addison was rather telling:

I fully admit that when Pope and Swift are on the heights they have a strength and splendour which makes everything in Addison look pale; but what an abyss of hatred and bigotry and even silliness receives them when they slip from the heights! The Addisonian world is not one to live in at all times, but it is a good one to fall back into when the day's work is over [...]. ("Addison" 168)

Lewis often argued, "To judge between one *ethos* and another, it is necessary to have got inside both, and if literary history does not help us to do so it is a great waste of labour" (OHEL 331). Literary history as a practice assesses each era's *ethos*, seeking to provide analogical bridges to past formative experiences of understanding, and the varying works of a period allow for a variety of such experiences. They cannot be reduced to one type alone; they may even escape a period's *ethos* by reaching backward or forward to another's. Thus, the very idea that one can bridge the social imaginaries or historical mentalities raises the question as to what periods actually are. If they may be used analogically, do they have any ontological reality in and of themselves, or are they better acknowledged as simply conjectural tools?

#### "IMAGINATION AND THOUGHT IN THE MIDDLE AGES" (1956)—PROJECTING A PERIOD

Even in Lewis's generation, not all historians held that one could uncover anything comprehensive about an era. Lewis, like fellow Oxford Magdalen scholars R.G. Collingwood and J.A. Smith, fell in the middle ground, for he understood that periodization is a model rather than an assured set of facts, and yet at the same time, if one is to imagine why things were significant to people in the past, one needs a setting by which to assess historical (and literary) texts (Patrick 127-8). "[T]hrough 'periods' are a mischievous conception they are a methodological necessity" (OHEL 64). In his 1957 essay "Is History Bunk?", Lewis regarded the end product of historical investigation as a synchronic picture: "We want to know how such stuff came to be written and why it was applauded; we want to understand the whole *ethos* which made it attractive" (104). The irony is that to make a claim about the *ethos* of an era, one must posit that it existed at some level. However, as Lewis understood, one need not advance that a nameable period has (or had) a separate metaphysical existence.

Lewis often weighed in against the ontological reality of historical periods. He quoted with approval British historian G.M. Trevelyan's maxim that "periods are not facts" but "retrospective conceptions that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion, but very often leading historical thought astray" (DT 2-3).<sup>4</sup> Yet Lewis also recalled fondly how Trevelyan taught him about Walter Scott who taught, in turn, to Thomas Macaulay the historical sense of

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<sup>4</sup> It might seem strange that Lewis could praise medieval historiography when it lacked "the sense of period," holding that the past is not that different than the writer's own times, yet here, too, Lewis's concern with axiomatic historicism comes to the forefront, and the best readings of the past were moral expressions of the Tao: "Hector was like any other knight, only braver." The saints and kings, lovers and warriors of the past were "friends, ancestors, patrons in every age" (*Discarded Image* 174-85).

"feeling for period" ("Sir Walter Scott" 217-18). As exemplified by his "Addison" essay, without a sense of period, it is harder for a contemporary reader to bridge the divide in understanding, as well as for the historian to write about such understanding: "The worst method of all, in my opinion, would be to accept the first impression that the old text happens to make on a modern sensibility" ("De Audiendis Poetis" 4). The contemporary scholar or reader has to seek proximity to the past through points of relational similarity, even when trying to parse out the differences; one cannot run roughshod over its historical otherness.

How, then, given these concerns, could Lewis's actual use of historical periods function so confidently?<sup>5</sup> In 1956, for example, he addressed the Zoological Laboratory at Cambridge on the topic "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages." As Walter Hooper points out, the two-day lecture served as a précis for Lewis's later *The Discarded Image* ("Preface" viii). Lewis summarized high medieval conceptions of the cosmos, including the size of the universe, its orderly nature, its hierarchical pattern, its natural and supernatural inhabitants, and its triadic organizing structures, the later which encompassed aesthetic, ethical, social, and metaphysical elements. Such a project involved generalization, as Lewis himself admitted. But to simply encapsulate was not enough for Lewis, for he also set out to shape his modern audience's imagination, in this case an audience made up of mostly Cambridge scientists.

At several points, for example, Lewis offered a different master metaphor than the one he expected that his audience held without much question. In particular, he wanted to counter an anthropological picture of religion as primitive evolutionary residuals, as well as a determinist view of interstellar space as an empty and infinite terror. To confront the first, Lewis admitted to something of a historical genealogy of certain beliefs, but only to seriously discount its value: He conceded that one *might* trace back the medieval belief in angels, demons, and fairies through a long series of written texts until one reached an ancient Attic world, and such a world *perhaps* could be said to approximate the pre-logical society of anthropologists, but such a world was as distant from the highly bookish milieu of medieval intellectual culture as that of twentieth-century Britain ("Imagination" 41-3). Lewis stressed that "Characteristically, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a spiritual adventurer; he was an organizer, a codifier, a man of system" (44). Admittedly, the world of the troubadour was closer to the oral, pre-logical one, but Lewis insisted that

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis has often been criticized for this: David Lyle Jeffrey, for example, while praising Lewis's coverage of the texts of Late Antiquity, holds that Lewis often projects nineteenth-century medievalist notions back on to the actual Middle Ages (79-83). Michael Price has a similar critique to make of Lewis's coverage of John Donne (142-3), as does Doris Myers of his treatment of Spenser (95-7).

they were not at the center of high medieval culture and that current interest in them was a product of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romanticism. As heirs to a pre-twentieth-century approach, moderns exaggerated the open-ended and boundless ineffable as a key to medieval culture, rather than the actual practice of its textual and logical actuality. Lewis suggested that it was better to understand the systematic and orderly mind of the medieval by paying attention to Gothic cathedrals, Aquinas's *Summa*, or Dante's *Commedia*. Rather than pre-logical and intuitive, the medieval mind was credulous yet always about harmonization.

To understand this approach to harmonization, especially when it comes to cosmology, a modern has to revisit his or her own inherited image of the universe. To understand the medieval imagination, "[t]he motions of the universe are to be conceived not as those of a machine or even an army, but rather as a dance, a festival, a symphony, a ritual, a carnival, or all these in one" ("Imagination" 60). In essence, Lewis treated such a high medieval conception as a social imaginary and invited his audience to entertain its analogical, emotional, and aesthetic states of being. Certainly, Lewis's appeals to the codifier and the systematizer were ones with which he hoped to engage his audience of researchers, yet he also worked to help them envision the medieval universe as a "great, complex work of art," such as those of Milton, Euclid, Spinoza, or Beethoven ("Imagination" 49). He urged them to allow for the differing analogies that medieval science would have appealed to, such as an object's desire for its end. In doing this, Lewis understood that his scientific audience was only too aware of the way we use analogies to describe scientific phenomena, and he insisted that the form of the analogy shaped how one responds to the universe, "whether you fill your universe with phantom police-courts and traffic regulations, or with phantom longings and endeavours" ("Imagination" 50).

At first glance, we would seem to be worlds apart here from Lewis's cut flowers or rediscovered drawer. To speak of the medieval era as he did before the Cambridge Zoological Laboratory, Lewis had to employ a highly overdetermined set of data, and he wove together a rather complex picture that reinforced his generalizations. Yet this actually parallels well some aspects of his analogies. Because he was a literary critic and historian, he drew from numerous texts to build this portrait. He was always aware that the picture he offered was colligative, even at points conjectural. That all of this relied on assertive simplification did not seem to threaten Lewis, and that such a figure was a composite did not surprise him or really endanger his project. He openly acknowledged that "most people would now admit that no picture of the universe we can form is 'true' in quite the sense our grandfathers hoped" ("Imagination" 62); rather, the question was which models suggest a more

beautiful, human existence. This was not just an admission that the science of the Ptolemaic universe was wrong; it was also an admission that world pictures are built upon shifts in mentalities, including the modern one. Implicitly Lewis's address had a tragic quasi-plot. He wondered before the scientists present for his second lecture, "What our own models—if you continue to allow us models at all—will reflect, posterity may judge" ("Imagination" 63). Such an ending perhaps only feigned helplessness for a literary scholar like Lewis, but it did offer a pungent question.

By the time that Lewis published his longer version in *The Discarded Image*, he set out a more complex view of science. In its epilogue, he cautioned that "we should misrepresent the historical process if we said that the irruption of new facts was the sole cause of the alteration" (219). Instead, "when changes in the human mind produce a sufficient disrelish of the old Model and a sufficient hankering for some new one, phenomena to support that new one will obediently turn up" (221). Lewis was not only aware that the details of historiography change as new evidence is discovered or as new questions are asked, he also understood what Thomas Kuhn would make famous in the history of science; namely, that paradigms do alter our reading of the past (Martin 346). The question for Lewis was as much one of quality as of accuracy, and, being that there can be no absolute human accuracy, which models provide some measure of humanity. Periodization, then, could be employed with the understanding that it was subject to revision.

#### **"NEW LEARNING AND NEW IGNORANCE" (1943-1954)—HISTORIOGRAPHY AND IDEOLOGY**

As both his "Addison" essay and his address to the Zoological Laboratory suggest, Lewis did not use the language of historical character and period for bridging only the sympathy gap between current audiences and the social imaginaries of the past; he also invested historical periods with ideological importance, for they are also moral imaginaries, not only in that they function as comparative analogies to the present, but also in that they offer genealogies of contemporary successes and failures. In practice, as we have seen, Lewis could acknowledge the limits of literary period modeling. Throughout *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, he provided examples of poets who either fit or did not fit the model in question, who functioned as transitions, as test cases, as unexplained anomalies, or as variations on a theme—each acting to both affirm and give the lie to the model or tradition in question (cf. OHEL 464, 469, 476, 481, 523, 531). "'Periods' are largely an invention of the historians. The poets themselves are not conscious of living in any period and refuse to conform to the scheme" (OHEL 106). Yet the language of historical periods is still a necessary tool if one is to trace the genealogy of influence across time and space.

Like his portraits of Addison, Pope, and Swift, Lewis chose to treat writers, not only as part of a period, but also as partaking of various periods. The subject in question could not only share in one period of reflection but also inhabit older points of consensus and anticipate coming ones.<sup>6</sup> For instance, when discussing the Scottish writer Gavin Douglas, Lewis could place him as standing in the medieval and ancient tradition while opposing the new *renascentia*. Douglas shared the medieval “blindness” of treating the underworld of Virgil’s *Aeneid* in Christian terms, yet Lewis does not regard this as “a very heavy” blindness, for Douglas’s medievalism partook more of the ancient world than the new learning did. At the least, Lewis judged, Douglas was “no further out in one direction than many Virgilians are out in the other” (OHEL 86).

Yet Lewis’s willingness to treat historical periods as ideological quasi-plots was clearly evident in his introductory chapter, “New Learning and New Ignorance.” The title signaled a controversial stance: from the get go, Lewis rejected a Whig history of unidirectional progress, and he insisted that a literary historian must focus on what mattered to the era in question, yet it was also clear that Lewis did not have high praise for the Ciceronian rhetoricians of the new humanism or for the Puritans who in some cases followed in their wake. He recognized that because British education was the descendent of Renaissance classicism, it was difficult for certain readers to entertain a less than exemplary notion of the Ciceronians. Indeed, the standard language of periodization—Ancient, Medieval, Modern—arose from their self-appointed rejection of the centuries before them: “And what can *media* imply except that a thousand years of theology, metaphysics, jurisprudence, courtesy, poetry, and architecture are to be regarded as a mere gap, or chasm, or *entre-acte*?” (OHEL 20). Lewis charged the humanists with losing the ability to read the ancients for their poetic greatness because as rhetoricians they held to a thin standard of Latin style and decorum. The humanist rejection of scholasticism and of the medieval romance was fundamentally a fear of being considered vulgar, rather than a willingness to engage with any seriousness the questions of metaphysics (20-30).<sup>7</sup> But, then,

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<sup>6</sup> The common complaint against *The Discarded Image*, that Lewis reduces the complexity and diversity of the medieval period to a single picture, should be weighed against this understanding of Lewis’s. For example, Robert Boenig believes that Lewis’s description of the European Middle Ages is too uniform, tending to lump together differing ethnic regions, as well as differing classes and social groupings. He charges that Lewis tends to project the writings of the intelligentsia back onto the rural and town cultures (29-30). Yet Lewis understood quite well that a generalized *ethos* is subject to numerous individual (and subcultural) variations and conflicts, and one suspects he would take such criticism to heart.

<sup>7</sup> Donald T. Williams assesses the changes in scholarly responses to Lewis’s picture here. Most would agree that Lewis draws a one-sided portrait in need of balance, yet some have

Lewis speculated, “Perhaps every new learning makes room for itself by creating a new ignorance” (31). Such a statement was as close as Lewis came to an historical axiom.

Lewis also allowed this axiom to shape his overall discussion of the period. He made similar observations about high magic, the new geography, the first stages of European colonialism, the new political theory of the divine right of kings, the changes in modern authorship, and the growth of Puritanism. He highlighted these in order to counter traditional and contemporary preconceptions about the period. In the latter case, he found himself reflecting on the pros and cons of historical analogies: “Modern parallels are always to some extent misleading. Yet, for a moment only, and to guard against worse conceptions, it may be useful to compare the influence of Calvin on that age with the influence of Marx on our own” (OHEL 42). The problematic historical analogy was still a useful structure. Lewis held that the first Puritans were actually the radical left-wing of their day, both in their doctrinaire passion and their insensitivity to the more horrible implications of their systems: “[W]e may suspect that those who read it with most approval were troubled by the fate of predestined vessels of wrath just about as much as young Marxists in our own age are troubled by the approaching liquidation of the *bourgeoisie*” (43). He furthermore suggested that just as the hard-core Marxist is surrounded by fashionable dilettantes, so Calvinism had had both its radical center and its less serious fringe (44). Again, Lewis understood that such general characterizations were not entirely effective when describing actual individuals, and he acknowledged that the humanist and the Puritan could often be the same person. Both considered themselves the cultural new wave, hoping to sweep away the old corrupt standard. Yet Lewis recognized in Calvinism a *Zeitgeist* that shared the deterministic element of Renaissance astrologers and magicians and the period’s affective element that placed a high value on the human person.

Given such strong, even antipathetic positions on the period, it may still seem surprising that Lewis held to his basic mistrust of periodization, but in light of his sense of the suspended middle of historical judgment, it is not too surprising. With good reason, he thought, he mostly avoided the term “Renaissance” because it no longer meant for the average reader the humanist revolution in learning. All that this really did was encourage modern distortions, either in painting the Reformation as “almost nothing but liberation and enlightenment” or, in reaction to this, as “the destruction of a humane and Christian culture” (OHEL 55-6). Perhaps aware that his own portrait of the period had tended in this direction, Lewis apologized that he offered “no model

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begun to understand what Lewis was gesturing towards and see his extreme as a corrective of an earlier one (152-4).

of neatness," for "it is too neat, too diagrammatic, for the facts." The historian he warned "must beware of schematizing" and must remember that individuals could combine opposed positions: "a Protestant may be Thomistic, a humanist may be a Papist, a scientist may be a magician, a sceptic may be an astrologer" (63).

Why, then, did Lewis write with such assurance only to undercut it at the end? I suspect it was humility. The method of analogical historiography would not claim for itself a science of assured predictability, nor even an assured genealogy of moral decay or progress. Lewis was only too aware that human learning could not with justice claim absolute knowledge, so neither then could its historical suppositions and conclusions operate as if they were irrefutably certain—a certainty he would not extend to the paradigms of modern science either. Of course, Lewis still had faith in human universals and in natural law; behavior was basically normative across space and time, even if the particular shape of these norms morphed somewhat. Having told a good story with arresting characters, Lewis, ever the Christian Platonist, admitted that the meaning of the story may be but "pictures we see in the fire." The more assured one is about the *Zeitgeist*, the less the period has likely been examined (63). Yet if history cannot provide predictable laws about the past, present, or future, neither should it be reduced to equivocation. The practice of history involves some measure of probability and can be argued by a redrawing of the lines of historical evidence via counter-narratives and counter-descriptions, and such narratives have at their heart assumptions about human nature and human purposes. Nevertheless, the lessons that one draws from the past still speak, and the models are still applicable. If truth is in-and-beyond history, then such lessons should be asserted with conviction, even as one realizes that they may yet be subject to the say of one's descendants.



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