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978-1-107-63927-0 - Image and Imagination: Essays and Reviews

C. S. Lewis

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IMAGE AND IMAGINATION

ESSAYS AND REVIEWS

BY
C. S. LEWIS

Edited by
Walter Hooper



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PREFACE

Walter Hooper

C. S. Lewis would not have published anything he was not satisfied with, but his overflowing bookshelves contained few of his own books and writings. We can only wonder at what he'd make of this new book, which gathers up all his book reviews, forty-two in total, covering thirty-five years. These have never been collected and will be new to most readers. In addition, the book includes four major essays unavailable in print for over half a century ('The idea of an "English School"', 'Our English syllabus', the preface to *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, 'The English prose Morte'), two essays that Lewis drafted but never published ('Image and imagination', 'Lucretius'), two obituaries (on Oliver Elton and Charles Williams), his preface to *A Faith of Our Own* by his friend, the theologian Austin Farrer, the foreword to *Smoke on the Mountain* by Joy Davidman, the woman he eventually married, and his introduction to an edition of *Lazamon's Brut*, which he thought he might, one day, translate.

For ease of reference and as a guide through so broad an array of topics, I have presented the different essays and reviews under six broadly thematic sections, rather than chronologically. The first section contains general discussions of literature and literary history. The second includes Lewis's formal, published assessments of the work of his friends in the Inklings circle. A section reflecting on aspects of Christianity follows, and then the rest

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of the book considers, in turn, specific issues regarding Classical literature, Medieval and Renaissance literature, and, finally, Milton and later English literature. Within each section, material is arranged chronologically by subject (and so, for example, a discussion of Homer precedes one on Aristotle), and more general topics appear before those more narrowly focused. Readers should remember however that Lewis's mind was especially adept at forging unexpected connections. It was part of his genius to recognize that rationality and religion, the material and the metaphorical all inform one another. An essay or review in one chapter, therefore, may have – probably will have – implications for arguments expressed elsewhere.

This book will appeal principally to anyone with general interests in literature and religion, as well as those who have a particular regard for the academic work of C. S. Lewis or who simply like good English prose style. Taken together, the essays and reviews present some of his best literary criticism and religious exposition. Many were composed with the general reader in mind, having been written originally for popular newspapers and magazines such as *The Listener*, the *Observer*, the *Spectator*, the *Sunday Telegraph*, *Time and Tide*, *The Times*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. As ever, I am grateful to the C. S. Lewis Estate for permission to reproduce this material.

I owe an immense debt to Dr A. T. Reyes, the Classical scholar, best known to Lewis readers for his magisterial edition of C. S. Lewis's translation of *The Aeneid* – C. S. Lewis's *Lost Aeneid: Arms and the Exile* (2011) – and to my godson, G. E. M. Lippiatt of Hertford College, who supplied, besides much good advice, the translation of Lewis's

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French piece, 'What France means to me' in Chapter 20 (see pp. 143–6). I am very grateful to both.

Finally, I would like to thank the Syndics of Cambridge University Press for agreeing to publish this book. Dr Linda Bree, the editor in charge of its production, has been helpful and kind throughout. In 1969, I edited for Cambridge Lewis's *Selected Literary Essays*, to which I hope this new collection of writings will serve as a worthy companion and pendant.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviated references have been used:

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AV | Authorized Version (The King James Version) of the Bible |
| <i>Collected Letters I</i> | Walter Hooper (ed.), <i>The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis</i> , vol. 1: <i>Family Letters 1905–1931</i> (London: HarperCollins, 2000). |
| <i>Collected Letters II</i> | Walter Hooper (ed.), <i>The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis</i> , vol. 11: <i>Books, Broadcasts, and War 1931–1949</i> (London: HarperCollins, 2004). |
| <i>Collected Letters III</i> | Walter Hooper (ed.), <i>The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis</i> , vol. 111: <i>Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963</i> (London: HarperCollins, 2006). |
| ‘On Fairy-Stories’ | J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy-Stories’, <i>The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays</i> , edited by Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), pp. 109–61. |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version of the Bible |

PART I
REFLECTIONS ON LITERATURE



*C. S. Lewis's pre-eminence as an author, academic and apologist is such that we often forget he was, for the most part, a teacher. At Oxford, every term, for eight weeks, he lectured and gave tutorials in English literature to undergraduates, aside from fulfilling other duties, decanal or administrative, on behalf of the University and the residents of his College. The first two long essays here, from the collection *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (1939) reveal how important this facet of his life was to him. In both, he discusses the importance of academic rigour and intellectual exploration, not only in universities, but also in schools. The third long essay, 'Image and imagination' appears here for the first time. It is a philosophical analysis of the way an 'image' may inspire 'imagination' and vice versa. In a way, 'Image and imagination' is analogous to Tolkien's famous story 'Leaf by niggel'. Both are conceptual treatments of what is happening when an author creates an imaginary world. The other articles display the range of Lewis's literary interests, casting light on the smallest matters of bibliography, as well as more weighty problems of translation and interpretation.*

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I

The idea of an ‘English School’



Non leve quiddam interest inter humanae mentis idola et divinae mentis ideas, hoc est inter placita quaedam inania et veras signaturas atque impressiones factas in creaturis, prout inveniuntur.¹

Bacon, *Novum Organum*, i.23

The title of this paper is unfortunate in recalling that of Newman’s best book.² It is doubly unfortunate in so far as it not only suggests, on my part, an arrogant intention of pitting myself against so great a writer, but also carries with it an omen of failure on the practical side; for none of the things which Newman advised has come to pass. Yet some such title is unavoidable. I intend, it is true, to talk a good deal about the Final Honour School of English as it actually exists at Oxford. But I am concerned with that School not as an historical fact but as an approximation to an ideal. What we are doing at Oxford is of universal interest only as an indication of what, on my view, we are trying to do or ought to do. We are doubtless full of faults and do not shun criticism, provided such criticism is based on an understanding of our aims. You may not agree with these aims – though I hope that you will – but do not

Published in C. S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 57–77; originally read to a joint meeting of the Classical and English Associations (date unknown).

 Image and Imagination

blame a man for making slow progress to the North when he is trying to get to the East.

We are under no illusions as to our reputation in the outer world. What our enemies think of us is vigorously enough, if not always very lucidly, conveyed by the expressions they use – by their references to ‘the Germanic jungle’, ‘all this philology’, ‘Verner’s law’, ‘Anglo-Saxon’, and (most damning of all) ‘Gothic’. When we listen attentively to this buzz of condemnation, we think that we can distinguish two strains in it. The confusion between ‘Germanic’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ on the one hand and ‘philology’ or ‘Verner’s law’ on the other, is made, we believe, by two classes of people. In the first class we find the man who is still living in the Renaissance, the belated Ascham,³ who is quite sure that literature he cannot translate must be bad literature – must be ‘Gothic’ in the classical sense of the word. He does not like the poetry of the Dark, and Middle Ages (*ignoti nulla cupido*)⁴ and he uses ‘philology’ simply as a term of abuse. He is not really thinking of philology at all. In the second class we find a much more respectable opponent, probably a real scholar who knows that he does not know any medieval language. His objection is not to the unknown literatures – in such a man it could not be – but to comparative philology. He has in his mind the picture of a promising academic discipline, in which the young might have been guided to a systematic study of our English classics, not without some subsidiary Greek and Latin to steady their judgement, perverted and thwarted by irrelevant excursions into Germanic philology; he sees the interest which ought to have been concentrated on Shakespeare and Johnson dissipated on mere comparisons between English and cognate languages; and he wonders

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why English should have been selected to carry this purely scientific and unliterary burden which might, with equal propriety or impropriety, have been bound on the back of several other subjects.

To this second, and reasonable, type of critic, our reply is a simple one. His information is out of date. No undergraduate at Oxford is obliged to know a single word of Gothic, old High German, or Old Norse, or to study the relations between these languages and his own. The English student can choose between three alternative courses, all of which can conduct him to the highest honours. One of these is frankly medieval, and if a student chooses it he does so because he is interested in early English and its immediate relatives. The second is a half-way house – a complicated affair that need not now concern us. The third is the literary course proper, which the vast majority of our students take.

But here comes the rub. This third and literary course, I must confess, contains three papers which the enemy will be tempted to describe as ‘philological’. The first is on Modern English, and deals mainly with the history of meaning, whether in syntax or vocabulary. The second is on Anglo-Saxon texts, and the third on Middle English texts. I do not imagine that the critic I have in view will object very strongly to the first of these. If he does, the official voice of our English School will reply with the very pertinent question, ‘Do you wish students to understand what they read or not?’ For the fact is that those who have had no experience in the teaching of English are living a fool’s paradise as regards the ability of the average undergraduate to *construe* his mother tongue. Again and again curious statements in the essays of our pupils can be

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traced back to an original failure to make out the sense of Milton or Johnson or Coleridge, as a schoolboy fails to make out the sense of Caesar or Xenophon. And with this answer I expect that the critics will be satisfied. But the other two papers – the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English texts – I fear he will regard as *vestigial*, as relics of that philological period in which, admittedly, English studies at Oxford began – *ein Theil des Theils, der anfangs alles war*.⁵ He will be in danger of looking upon them as a rearguard which has not yet been defeated but whose defeat may be hourly expected. His hopes are vain; and it is at this point that I must join issue with him. If any of the three papers is really vestigial, it is the paper on Modern English. I have just stated the official defence for it; but it would be disingenuous not to confess that this paper is a subject of dispute among ourselves. I am, in fact, one of those who disapprove of it. But that is not our present concern. I mention it only to emphasize the fact that this paper is incomparably the most philological of the three, and that the other two, so far from being vestigial, are essential to the idea of an English School as I see it.

Before I attempt to explain why, I must remove two possible misconceptions. One is the belief that Anglo-Saxon is a language other than English, or even, as used to be said, that English is a third language born from the union of two earlier languages, Anglo-Saxon and French. This is an error so gross that six weeks' study would remove it from the minds of the most prejudiced. You might as well say that Latin was a new language born from the union of Roman and Greek. Anglo-Saxon is simply early English. Norman-French is simply one of the foreign languages which, from time to time, have enriched our vocabulary.

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Most of the changes which separate what we call Anglo-Saxon from what we call Middle English had begun before the Normans landed, and would have followed much the same course if no Conquest had ever occurred. Brevity compels me to be dogmatic; but it is not really a subject that admits of discussion.

The second misconception turns on our old friend 'philology'. There is no philology in the papers on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. They are papers on texts, consisting of a core of passages for translation surrounded by questions on archaeological, textual, cultural, or historical matters relevant to the texts. The student is asked to know about *Beowulf* or *Pearl* just those things which the classical examiner demands that he should know about Virgil or Sophocles. Philology is absent, unless you call grammar philology. Before some audiences I should feel it my duty to insist rather strongly on the value of grammar. I am told that there have been critics of Chaucer who perpetrated serious blunders in translation, and built up formidable aesthetic superstructures on a purely intuitive, and sometimes erroneous, conception of their author's meaning. But I presume that every one present agrees that if you are going to read a book at all, it is desirable to be able to tell which words are in the Nominative and which are in the Accusative.

We are now, at last, in a position to come to grips with the main question. Granted that these old books are written in what is unmistakably English, and granted that we do not set philological questions on them, still, it will be asked, why should we read them? What relevance has the study of *Beowulf* for the man who wants to read modern English literature? If we are looking for sheer

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poetical merit, are there not many poems greater than *Beowulf* and no more difficult? Why not the *Iliad*, or the *Aeneid*? If, on the other hand, we are looking for the origins of Modern literature, shall we not find them in Rome and Greece? None of our great poets could read Anglo-Saxon: nearly all of them could and did read Latin, and some knew Greek.

I will take the second question first, and before I attempt to answer it, let me protest that I am no enemy of the classics. I have read the *Aeneid* through more often than I have read any long poem; I have just finished re-reading the *Iliad*; to lose what I owe to Plato and Aristotle would be like the amputation of a limb. Hardly any lawful price would seem to me too high for what I have gained by being made to learn Latin and Greek. If any question of the value of classical studies were before us, you would find me on the extreme right. I do not know where the last ditch in our educational war may be at the moment; but point it out to me on the trench-map and I will go to it. At present, however, we are only asking whether it is true that the origins of English literature are to be found in the classics. And perhaps if 'the origins' here means 'all the origins' no one, however, ignorant, would answer Yes. At most our critics can only mean that of the innumerable debts which our literary tradition owes, the debt to Rome and Greece is the greatest and most important. I do not think this is true.

The first step in an inquiry into its truth is to rule out the greatest Greek poets and philosophers. Except on a few isolated writers such as Milton and Gray,⁶ these have no influence worth talking about before the nineteenth century. Chapman's Homer, and even Pope's,⁷ might almost

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have been written to prove that Homer was invisible to Englishmen until the Romantic Revival had cleared their eyes. In drama, Seneca is of far more importance than all the Greek tragedians put together. The real Plato counts for less in our tradition than that strange theosophy which Ficino⁸ and others called 'Platonic theology'. Aristotle, I admit, in a slightly Thomized form, bit deeply into the minds of the Middle Ages; but where are the literary results of this? On seventeenth-century criticism we can trace his influence at every step, but it is an influence almost wholly mischievous.

Having got rid of these august but irrelevant names, it may be well to remind ourselves of the authors who have really affected us deeply and over long periods. Of the Romans those naturally come first who enjoyed the same degree and nearly the same kind of prestige both before and after the Renaissance – the great Kings whose reign had begun before *Beowulf* was written and has not ended yet. I mean, of course Boethius, Ovid, and Virgil – and I would put them roughly in that order of importance. Immediately below these, in length and security of reign, we might put Juvenal, the moral works of Cicero and Seneca, Horace, Statius, Claudian, and a few others. Apuleius and the elder Pliny would come a good deal higher than they do in our modern scholastic tradition. Of the Greeks, the great gossiping authors, the repositories of anecdote, like Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, would stand at the top of the list. Second to these we should find, indistinguishably blended, the joint influence of Theocritus and the novelists – Longus, Heliodorus, and the like; and perhaps – but I am doubtful about my facts here – the influence of the *Anthology*.⁹

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Having identified the influential authors it remains to consider what their influence really was. It is clear, in the first place, that our literature is not greatly indebted to them for its forms. We are apt to forget that Milton's classical epic and classical tragedy are lonely exceptions. Most attempts to transplant an ancient form into English literature have failed. Milton is the single survivor in a forlorn hope where Cowley, Blackmore, and Glover fell: *Samson* lives, but *Gorboduc*, *Cato*, and *Caratacus* do not. A list of our best narrative poems would contain *Troilus*, *The Faerie Queene*, *The Prelude*, *Don Juan*, and *Endymion*, and would leave out all our classical epics save one. A list of our greatest dramas would give an even more striking result. Our lyric poetry is, no doubt, richly decorated in certain periods with borrowings from ancient Latin and Greek, though they are not more numerous than its borrowings from medieval Latin, from Italian, and from old and modern French. Its chief serious attempt to adopt an ancient form, however, has left behind it only one or two successes by Gray amidst a ruinous waste of 'Pindarique Odes'; and in the very nature of things formal similarities between quantitative lyric and rhymed accentual lyric must be very superficial. Already in *Summer is icumen in* we are basing our lyrical poetry on discoveries in music which the Greeks never made. The novel, born from the marriage of the periodical essay and the romance, or the sonnet, descending from the Provençals, are even farther removed from ancient literature. The Satire and the Pastoral are more instructive, for in them we can see side by side the unhappy attempts to adhere to the classical form and the happy departures from it. The Roman model – the static, rambling diatribe – is preserved by Donne, Hall, Marston,

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