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

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### ABSTRACT

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

### INTRODUCTION

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

### HISTORY OF COMPOSITION

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

The years intervening were devoted to what Sayer calls the "immense amount of reading" that Lewis did because (unlike many reviewers) he "refused to give an opinion on a book he had not read."<sup>6</sup> Gene Edward Veith reports that when Charles Huttar was working in the Magdalen

College library he saw the register of books Lewis had checked out during the late 1940's and early 1950's. It appears that Lewis had "essentially checked out the entire sixteenth-century collection."<sup>7</sup> What was too obscure for either Magdalen or his own personal library to have, he read in the Bodleian's magnificent Duke Humphrey library—basically what an American library would call its rare book room. Some of it must have been dull going, but he plowed ahead until he had mastered the entire preserved literary output of the century. At the end of some of the books from his own library he marked the date on which he had finished them, and in a few, the added annotation "Never again."<sup>8</sup>

The sheer volume of work had to have been onerous, but one of the characteristics universally praised about the finished product is its ability to convey Lewis's unabashed enjoyment of those works he found good. Sayer also notes that the task could not all have been a chore, for Lewis "enjoyed debunking current or fashionable concepts and presenting new insights,"<sup>9</sup> something he found ample scope for in this work. Neville Coghill describes Lewis as one who "spoke gladly, learnedly, and often paradoxically, throwing out powerful assertions that challenged discussion." He reports an encounter along those lines that has become legendary:

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

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

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

## SUMMARY

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

Elizabethan or Henrician universe; tingling with anthropomorphic life, dancing, ceremonial, a festival not a machine.”<sup>14</sup>

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

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

Two sets of ideas which both seemed important at the time and have since proved so get the bulk of the attention in the remainder of the introduction: Puritanism and Humanism. We think of these movements as contrasting, but as they existed in the Sixteenth Century, puritans and humanists were often the same people. A puritan was a person who wished to “purify” the Church of England, which puritans considered only half reformed, with Calvin’s Geneva as the model. (Essentially, they wanted to move the English church further down the road to Protestantism by getting rid of ecclesiastical vestments, putting more emphasis on the sermon, and replacing episcopal church government with a presbyterian or congregational scheme.) Modern caricatures tell us very little about what the real puritans were actually like. All serious Christians of the period would have seemed “puritanical” to us. Yet the puritan mentality was not one of repression or scrupulosity but of “relief and buoyancy.”<sup>16</sup> Their theology and their outlook flowed from a common experience of “catastrophic conversion.”

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

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

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

Like humanism, the very word *Renaissance* is much misunderstood and is often used to mean nothing more than whatever the speaker likes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Lewis reminds us that “The ancients were not ancient, nor the men of the Middle Ages middle,

from their own point of view. . . . But the humanists were very conscious of living in a *renascentia*.” Thus, “Our legend of the Renaissance is a Renaissance legend.”<sup>21</sup> And of this legend he thinks we ought to be more suspicious than we often are.

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

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

Book II is entitled “Drab.” Lewis does not intend “drab” and “golden” as value judgments, but as purely descriptive (a claim, as we shall see, that has caused his critics to ask, why not then “plain” and “ornate?”). Chapter I of Book II deals with “Drab Age Prose—Religious Controversy and Translation.” Of the controversialists, Lewis briefly treats John Colet and John Fisher and then spends the bulk of his time on “the opposed martyrs”<sup>24</sup> Thomas More and William Tyndale as the greatest representatives of the Catholic and Protestant positions who were writing in English at the time. If we read the *Utopia* as its contemporaries did we will conclude that its “real place is not in the history of political thought so much as in that of fiction and satire,” i.e., that it is “a satiric glass to reveal our own avarice by contrast and is not meant to give us directly practical advice.”<sup>25</sup>

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

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

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

Coverdale were laying the foundations that would eventually lead to the Authorized Version of the English Bible.

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

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

Other works covered in this chapter include Williams Roper’s biography of his father in law Thomas More (“a masterpiece . . . He shares with Boswell the power of giving to reported conversation that appearance of reality which we demand of conversations in fiction”<sup>39</sup>), John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, better known as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* (in his opposition to cruelty Foxe was “impartial to a degree hardly paralleled in that age”<sup>40</sup>), Sir Thomas Hoby’s translation of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (“though all is serious, all is graceful, spontaneous, unconstrained”<sup>41</sup>), and John Lyly’s *Euphues* (he did not invent the infamous euphuistic style, but has “the credit—or discredit—of having first kept the thing up for pages or decades of pages at a stretch”<sup>42</sup>). This chapter strangely ends without a summary of the significance of “Drab Age” prose.

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

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

sixteenth century.”<sup>48</sup> Finally, the *Defence of Poesie* is “the best critical essay in English before Dryden.”<sup>49</sup>

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

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

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

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

## CRITICAL RESPONSE

When *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* first appeared, reviews in popular papers were positive, while those in academic journals were more measured,<sup>56</sup> finding much to praise but focusing on two major points of criticism: that the Drab versus Golden schema was oversimplified and the attack on humanism unjustified. Sayer noted as late as 1988 that Oxford tutors still warn students that the book is “unsound, but brilliantly written,” and wondered whether that warning might be part of the reason that Lewis’s volume is still the best seller in the

series.<sup>57</sup> No one doubts the brilliance; how far the verdict of “unsound” is justified is still a topic of discussion.

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

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

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

One of Lewis’s strengths as a writer is that he was still in touch with an older tradition of rhetoric in which writing was meant to be *heard*. Part of his advice to an American schoolgirl who wrote to ask for help on writing was “Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You shd. hear every sentence you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken. If it does not sound nice, try again.”<sup>62</sup> This advice he practiced in his own scholarly work no less than his popular, utterly innocent of the quaint recent notion that ancient texts can somehow be elucidated by having indigestible wads of jargon thrown at them. He was one of those writers whose living voice readers can easily imagine hearing in the text, if they are fortunate enough to have heard one of the surviving recordings of it. He wrote, in other words, like he talked, and the voice one hears is quite specifically therefore the professor’s voice and the lecturer’s voice.

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

What is at issue between Lewis and his critics then may not be simply the propriety of the terms, but rather two rival conceptions of the nature and purpose of scholarly writing. We have tended since Lewis’s day to create a greater divide between the functions of teaching and

scholarship than he would have recognized as healthy or valid. What now appears in scholarly journals and monographs is usually intended only for specialists. The benefits that flow from this level of specialization are not to be denied, but there is a price that is paid for it. I know people whose academic writing has been criticized or even rejected as being too “teacherly”—as if it were present death if a lucid sentence or a memorable phrase should somehow find its way into a learned journal. Lewis represents an older set of more humane values we would do well not to lose.

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

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

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

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

Lewis’s ability to participate in this correction is related to some of the deeply held beliefs that guided his thinking in general. Green and Hooper helpfully relate Lewis’s attack on humanism to his famous opposition to “chronological snobbery,”<sup>74</sup> the peculiarly modern notion that newer, modern ideas or beliefs are automatically better or more true than older ones. A number of scholars echo this connection. “Lewis overstated his case [against humanism] . . . because he was the kind of person who reacted strongly to the idea of throwing out the old.”<sup>75</sup> Lewis refused to look at the Renaissance as a “glorious ‘rebirth’ . . . as if the Christian culture of the Middle Ages needed to be overcome.”<sup>76</sup> Lewis could not tolerate the humanists’ attitude that their restoration of good learning, which he appreciated, “meant that they regarded the Middle Ages, beloved by Lewis, as ‘barbarism’ from which the world should be liberated.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, Walsh interestingly relates the “revisionist history” of Lewis’s volume to the argument of his



inaugural lecture at Cambridge, “*De Descriptione Temporum*,”<sup>78</sup> where Lewis argues that the “Great Divide” in history belongs not between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but between the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries.<sup>79</sup> These scholars are certainly right, and they point us to the fact that Lewis’s writings, like his thought, are all interconnected. Following the connections between Lewis’s view of the Renaissance in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* and related ideas in his other books can open up a whole world of useful inquiry.

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

## EVALUATION

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

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

A second quality Lewis brings to the table is his sheer capacity not only for enjoyment, but for the communication of his enjoyment of the literature of his period. Calin, it is true, criticizes Lewis for his “penchant for value judgments,”<sup>88</sup> thinking him ironically like the evaluative critics Lewis condemns in *An Experiment in Criticism*.<sup>89</sup> But the critics Lewis

condemns there are mainly *negative* critics. His own practice may be more in line with what he calls the “emotive critics” who “did me very good service by infecting me with their own enthusiasms.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, many more writers see this tendency as a plus in Lewis because his tastes are cosmopolitan and his judgments are so often positive and generous. Kay Stevenson notes that whenever Lewis’s “affection” for the authors he treats shines through, the results are “almost always appealing.”<sup>91</sup> Walsh justly says, “Lewis is singularly free from packaged judgments and is able to respond to a book as though he were reading it for the first time. He is happier to find a few lines to praise than to cast a whole work into outer darkness.”<sup>92</sup> And, he adds, Lewis “is that type of scholar least in fashion—the appreciative critic, whose great gift is to whet a reader’s appetite . . . and to give him just enough practical guidance so he can find his way.”<sup>93</sup>

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

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

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

Lewis reminds us why we want to read, and he makes the joy of reading possible again for people who are interested in something besides the politics, sex, gender, race, and skeptical epistemology that dominate too much of current critical discussion. He makes reading something that appeals once again to the full humanity of a robustly human being. In other words, he makes literary study a humane pursuit again. He does this even when triumphing over a massive scholarly apparatus, and he does it with style, wisdom, and grace, even when he needs balance and correction. For that reason, Bennett’s summary of his achievement is right on target. “Perhaps it is no accident that . . . [Lewis] more than once lets fall a phrase that could equally apply to himself. ‘To read Spenser,’ he says, ‘is to grow in mental health.’”<sup>98</sup> Even 696 pages of such growth is not too much.

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**NOTES**

1. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, edited with a preface by Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), v.
2. C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*, The Oxford History of English Literature, edited by Bonamy Dobree, Norman Davis, and F. P. Wilson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954). In 1990, Oxford University Press retitled and renumbered the volumes, so that Lewis's book was changed from volume III to volume IV and was retitled *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century*. See Joe R. Christopher, "English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama," in *The C. S. Lewis Reader's Encyclopedia*, edited by Jeffrey D. Schultz and John G. West, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 151.
3. Christopher, op. cit., 151.
4. C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves, 1935, in *They Stand Together: The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves (1914-1963)*, ed. Walter Hooper, 475 (New York: MacMillan, 1979).
5. George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (1988; reprint Wheaton: Crossway, 1994, 326.
6. Ibid., 323.
7. Gene Edward Veith, "Renaissance," in *Reading the Classics with C. S. Lewis*, ed. Thomas L. Martin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 121, n. 1.
8. Sayer, op. cit., 323.
9. Ibid.
10. Neville Coghill, "The Approach to English," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 60-61.
11. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974), 282.
12. C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942).

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13. For general analyses and evaluations of Lewis's contributions as a literary critic, see Bruce L. Edwards, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Reading: C. S. Lewis's Defense of Western Literacy* (Provo: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature of Brigham Young University, 1986), and Donald T. Williams, "A Larger World: C. S. Lewis on Christianity and Literature." *Mythlore* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 45-37.

14. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 4.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 34.

17. Ibid., 33.

18. Ibid., 18.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., 19.

21. Ibid., 55-6.

22. Ibid., 129.

23. Ibid., 123; cf. C. S. Lewis, "The Fifteenth-Century Heroic Line," *Essays and Studies*, 24 (1939), rpt. in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. Walter Hooper, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 45-57.

24. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 164.

25. Ibid., 167, 169.

26. Ibid., 173.

27. Ibid., 174.

28. Ibid., 177.

29. Ibid., 182.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 189.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 192.

34. Ibid., 195.

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35. Ibid., 237.

36. Ibid., 247.

37. Ibid., 268.

38. Ibid., 281.

39. Ibid., 287.

40. Ibid., 300.

41. Ibid., 307.

42. Ibid., 313.

43. Ibid., 324.

44. Ibid., 329.

45. Ibid., 331.

46. Ibid., 333.

47. Ibid., 338.

48. Ibid., 339.

49. Ibid., 343.

50. Ibid., 352.

51. Ibid., 386.

52. Ibid., 393.

53. Ibid., 490.

54. Ibid., 541.

55. Ibid., 557-8.

56. Sayer, op. cit., 326.

57. Ibid.

58. Helen Gardner, "Learning and Gusto: *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, by C. S. Lewis," *The New Statesman and Nation* 48 (October 30, 1954): 546.

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59. Miller MacLure, Review of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, by C. S. Lewis, *The Canadian Forum* 35 (July, 1955): 94.

60. Kay Stephenson, "On 'Religious Controversy and Translation': An Introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 4, no. 6 (April, 1973): 3.

61. William Calin, "C. S. Lewis, Literary Critic: A Reassessment." *Mythlore* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 11-12.

62. C. S. Lewis to a Schoolgirl in America, 1959, in *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Edited with a Memoir by W. H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 291.

63. Calin, op. cit., 11.

64. See Paul Oskar Kreisteller, *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (1955; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 92-119, E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Scribner's, 1956), 31-67, and Donald T. Williams, *Inklings of Reality: Essays toward a Christian Philosophy of Letters* (Toccoa Falls, Georgia: Toccoa Falls College Press, 1996), 78-103 for more balanced treatments of humanism that can offer a correction to Lewis and which support Milward's contention.

65. Father Peter Milward, S. J., *A Challenge to C. S. Lewis* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995, 47.

66. Lewis, *Preface*, op. cit.

67. See for example Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 2 volumes (1929; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

68. Calin, op. cit., 6.

69. Wallace K. Ferguson, *The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), chapters X and XI.

70. Calin, op. cit., 7.

71. J. A. W. Bennett, "Grete Clerk," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, edited by Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 46.

72. Chad Walsh, *The Literary Legacy of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 188.

73. Veith, op. cit., 109.

74. Green and Hooper, op. cit., 284; cf. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1955), 207-8.

75. Austin and Ruth Turney, "*English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*," *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 13, no. 12 (Oct., 1982): 4.

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76. Christopher, op. cit., 151.
77. Stephenson, op. cit., 5.
78. C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," 1955; Rpt. in *Selected Literary Essays*, Edited by Walter Hooper, 1-14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
79. Walsh, op. cit., 187.
80. Milward, op. cit., 44.
81. Ibid., 45.
82. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, op. cit., 164.
83. Sayer, op. cit., 326.
84. Edwards, op. cit., 9.
85. Sayer, op. cit., 245.
86. Ibid., 326.
87. Bennett, op. cit., 47.
88. Calin, op. cit., 12.
89. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 121: "Can I say with certainty that any evaluative criticism has ever actually helped me to understand and appreciate any great work of literature? . . . The evaluative critics come at the bottom of the list."
90. Ibid., 122.
91. Kay Stevenson, "On 'Religious Controversy and Translation': An Introduction to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*." *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society* 4, no. 6 (April, 1973): 4.
92. Walsh, op. cit., 189.
93. Ibid., 247.
94. Stevenson, op. cit., 4.
95. John W. Simons, Review of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, by C. S. Lewis, *The Commonweal* 61 (Feb. 25, 1955): 558.
96. Christopher, op. cit., 151; cf. Lewis, *Experiment*, op. cit., 121-2.

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97. Edwards, op. cit., 84.

98. Bennett, op. cit., 49; cf. Lewis, *Allegory*, op. cit., 359.



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