

## E. M. W. TILLYARD: A CATALYST FOR LEWIS'S *PREFACE*

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### Abstract

When C.S. Lewis read E. M. W. Tillyard's book *Milton* (1930), he engaged with the text through markings and annotations, particularly in the inside cover of the book. In this book, Lewis wrote an extended paragraph in direct response to Tillyard's claim that it is necessary to understand the state of mind of a poet in order to analyze his or her work. Lewis' notes focus on John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) and bear immense similarity to the themes found in his work *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). When Lewis and Tillyard debated various aspects of poetry in the 1930s, their articles were collected and published together as *The Personal Heresy* (1939). Due to the notes found in Lewis' personal copy of *Milton*, the claims made in the articles, and the striking similarities seen in *Preface*, Tillyard's impact on Lewis cannot be ignored and he must be viewed as a direct influence for Lewis' *Preface*.

**Keywords:** *C.S. Lewis, E. M. W. Tillyard, John Milton, poetry, preface, Paradise Lost, influence, debate*

C.S. Lewis' *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) revealed his passion for poetry as well as his captivation with John Milton. Though Lewis acknowledges good friend and fellow Inkling Charles Williams' lectures as a stimulus for the book in his dedication, it seems that another author was just as influential in inspiring the content for *Preface*. C.S. Lewis' personal copy of Cambridge scholar E. M. W. Tillyard's (1889-1962) book *Milton* (1930) holds many clues to just how much Lewis sought to defend Milton, especially in regards to *Paradise Lost* (1667). A short essay written in the front of Lewis' own copy of *Milton* shows how the book served as a catalyst for Lewis' lectures that ultimately became *A Preface to Paradise Lost*.

Lewis's interaction with Tillyard's text is also seen in various articles ultimately published together in a collection called *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939). Lewis and Tillyard's relationship shows how one's opposition can sometimes be the necessary impetus to one's great work. Though Tillyard is only mentioned a few times in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, his and Lewis's debate that continued the entire decade leading up to the publication of *Preface* is evidence of this very notion.

C.S. Lewis first read *Paradise Lost* in March of 1908 when he was only nine years old. Lewis's fascination with the poem continued, and his desire to represent Milton well and help others share in the passion and conviction he found in *Paradise Lost* is evident in *Preface*. Author of a best-selling C.S. Lewis biography, A. N. Wilson writes that both the lectures and the book "represent Lewis at his very best. If someone had never read Lewis before, and wished to get a taste of him, there would be no better book with which to start" (p. 171). Milton's influence extends beyond just *Preface* and is seen in Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* and *Perelandra* as well. These "Miltonic threads are woven even more deeply into the Lewis canon, partly because of his early, unfaltering interest in *Paradise Lost*" and must be acknowledged to better understand what Lewis was communicating (Hardy, p. 12).

After reading Tillyard's book and hearing the public criticism of Milton from other intellectuals, he was inspired to write *Preface*. It became such a success, in fact, that "No other book on Milton that old has remained continuously in print to the present day" (Martin, p. 170). His *Preface* "set out to correct a number of commonly held misconceptions and misunderstandings about the poem, and subsequent works of Milton scholarship rely on Lewis, both concurring with his conclusions and contesting them" (Hardy, p. 13). The names of Milton and Lewis are forever tied together. Prompted by passion and love for Milton, he responded to Tillyard's book by writing in the inside cover of the book. His passion led to the progression from an extended paragraph to an entire book of his own explaining poetry and defending Milton, all in the hope that readers would be positively affected by the message of *Paradise Lost*.

C.S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard shared a relationship birthed from their differing opinions on John Milton. After reading Tillyard's view in *Milton*, Lewis and he corresponded and debated the way to both approach and interpret *Paradise Lost*. Lewis sought a more objective view of poetry that focused on "something 'out there,'" while Tillyard preferred a more "subjective, or personal, point of view, one that believes poetry is about something that is inside the poet. Lewis would later term this view 'the poison of subjectivism'" (McGrath, p. 189). As Lewis points out in *Preface*, "poetry works not by directing attention to the poet, but to what the poet sees." (McGrath, pp. 189-90).

Lewis's short essay he wrote in his copy of *Milton* encompasses themes found in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. In fact, the very first sentence of the essay,

“More than any other poem P. L. leaves things where it did not find them” (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.), is found in Lewis’s conclusion to *Preface*, writing that the reason the story of *Paradise Lost* is complete is because it “fulfills the conditions of a great story better perhaps than any other, for, more than any other, it leaves things where it did not find them” (p. 133).

A timeline can be deduced of events leading to *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, beginning with the publication of E. M. W. Tillyard’s *Milton* in 1930. After that, T. S. Eliot’s criticism of Milton was released in 1936 (Lewis refers to “Mr. Eliot” throughout *Preface*). During the 1930s, Tillyard and Lewis debated until their collective work was finished in 1939. Soon after, Charles Williams delivered his lecture in January of 1940 and Lewis delivered his own lectures on Milton at the University College, North Wales in 1941. Finally, *Preface* was published in 1942, acknowledging his good friend Williams in his dedication. It appears that the entire decade leading up to the book directly contributed to the final product. He and Tillyard’s interaction resulted in the redirection of “attention from the personality of the poet to the formal constituents of the poem itself,” which is seen throughout *Preface* (Schwartz, p. 24). Annotations left in Tillyard’s *Milton* shows how Lewis felt a duty to defend Milton and his works.

One of the most tangible examples of this is seen in markings found in the margin of Lewis’s copy of *Milton*. Though referring to another one of Milton’s works, *Comus* (the work Williams’s lecture focused on), it still shows his allegiance to the poet. Both Tillyard and Lewis’s remarks were in response to Samuel Johnson, who said, in reference to *Comus*, “As a drama it is deficient” (Tillyard, p. 66). Lewis double-underlined and wrote a check mark next to Tillyard’s claim that: “All such criticism rests on fallacy, because not a little of *Comus* is deliberately and successfully dramatic” (Tillyard, p. 66). Written above, Lewis notes: “Readers of *Comus* have usually failed to see that it is an experiment, not entirely unsuccessful, in drama” (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.). These quotes presented Lewis with an incentive to extensively explain the history of poetry and the purpose of different kinds of poems in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, something he spends the first few chapters doing.

Some of the critics of *Paradise Lost* that most upset Lewis were those that neither knew what an epic poem was nor understood what it set out to accomplish. He also made it clear from the beginning of *Preface* that to truly understand the poem, one must contemplate the author’s intentions. Lewis carefully constructed *Preface* to begin with “a consideration of what Milton himself thought about epic. Lewis is admirably clear about the need to settle what exactly Milton thought he was doing before attempting any judgment on *Paradise Lost*” (Williams, p. 115). As styles of poetry have shifted through the centuries, Lewis tracks these changes so readers can approach *Paradise Lost* with an understanding of the context in which it was written.

Lewis emphasizes this need to understand the context of the poem from the first page of his book. He opens by saying that the “first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it was meant to be used... The first thing the reader needs to know about *Paradise Lost* is what Milton meant it to be” (p. 1). He then spends the next few chapters helping readers understand how to appropriately read *Paradise Lost* in an age where the form is unfamiliar in order to better recognize Milton’s intentions.

Lewis also suggests that *Paradise Lost* must be approached with humility and without preconceived assumptions or else the reader will be at risk for misinterpreting the epic poem. One “who seeks only to have his own views mirrored, his own thought elaborated, inevitably misses what is there... Lewis found in *Paradise Lost* much more than a re-enforcement of his own convictions” because of his open-minded approach (Samuel, pp. 271-72). Later in the book, Lewis carefully explains why the character of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is so often misconstrued and favored among the audience.

This misconception and favorable view of Satan came about during the Romantic era when Milton’s Satan was seen as a tragic hero (Schwartz, p. 24). In fact, the Romantics found Satan a much more interesting character than Christ in *Paradise Lost* because of this (Kort, p. 68, 145). Lewis admits that while Satan “is interesting to read about... Milton makes plain the blank uninterestingness of *being* Satan” (p. 102). Admiring Satan becomes a trap one too many readers seem to have fallen into. This temptation and ultimate act of admiring Satan has severe consequences and means one must “give one’s vote not only for a world of misery, but also for a world of lies and propaganda, of wishful thinking, of incessant autobiography” (Lewis, p. 102). An entire chapter in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, appropriately entitled “Satan,” is dedicated to converting “those who admire Satan” for the wrong reasons and to instead help readers to see him as a simply well-crafted character (Lewis, p. 95).

One of the reasons readers are so drawn to Satan is because he “is the best drawn of Milton’s characters” (Lewis, p. 100). Evil characters are much easier to create than good characters and are often more entertaining because no one “can truly fathom ultimate goodness” (Hardy, p. 31) since “we do not really know what it feels like to be better than ourselves” (Lewis, p. 101). However, because it is where temptation lies, it is easier to think up a character that completely gives way to all of his or her passions. The reader is drawn to these villainous characters, the Satan in *Paradise Lost* specifically, because the “Satan in Milton enables him to draw the character well just as the Satan in us enables us to receive it” (Lewis, p. 101). As author Wesley A. Kort states, “Evil seems colorful and various. We can conclude that Lewis thinks this is a grand deception. Here and elsewhere he wants to make the point that evil, while it may

appear to be various and creative, is really repetitive, monotonous, and derivative” (p. 68).

In one of Lewis’s references of Tillyard in *Preface*, he directly mentions page 258 of *Milton*, suggesting that Tillyard and other scholars are overcomplicating simple truths in the poem (Lewis, p. 71). Lewis states, “I think we must suppose that the real nature of the Fall and the real moral of the poem involve an idea so uninteresting or so intensely disagreeable to them that they have been under a sort of psychological necessity of passing it over and hushing it up. Milton, they feel, must have meant something more than that!” (Lewis, p. 71). This also goes back to the final lines of his short, hand-written essay in his copy of *Milton*: “Milton has told the story of Man. If we do not like it, so much the worse for us” (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.). If critics are trying to overcomplicate the story and then disapproving of Milton, perhaps it is simply because they do not like the message of the poem.

In his copy of *Milton*, Lewis underlines the following text on page 258: “The theme of *Paradise Lost* is less that of obedience to God than of obedience to σωφροσύνη, to temperance, to the rational against the irrational part of human nature” (Tillyard, p. 258). The Greek word *sophrosyne* is the concept of having a sound mind and overall excellence in character which leads to other virtues like prudence and self-control; it is an ideal that many Greeks sought to reach. In the margin, Lewis notes, “Distinction meaningless to a Theist” and reiterates this comment in *Preface* (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.). Referencing Joseph Addison’s interpretation of *Paradise Lost*, Lewis writes

If there is no God, then Milton’s poem...has no obvious relation to real life. It is therefore necessary to sweep away the main thing Milton was writing about as a mere historical accident and to fix on quite marginal or subsidiary aspects of his work as the real core. For there can be no serious doubt that Milton meant just what Addison said: neither more, nor less, nor other than that. If you can’t be interested in that, you can’t be interested in *Paradise Lost*. (Lewis, p. 71)

Seeds of *Preface* are found in other areas of *Milton* as well. Throughout the book, Lewis has underlined text or written in the margins, actively engaging and interacting with Tillyard. The following is an excerpt from the book, the underlined text being what Lewis underlined on the page.

It is strange how little, till quite recently, critics have concerned themselves with the meaning of *Paradise Lost*. The style, the versification, the celestial geography, the thought, who is the hero: all these have concerned the critics far more than what the poem is really about, the true state of Milton’s mind when he wrote it”. (Tillyard, p. 237)

In the margins next to this text, Lewis wrote “the arch error” in response to this critique of *Paradise Lost* (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.). Lewis’s vehemently promotes his contrasting view in *Preface*: the reader must be concerned with what the author is trying to say instead of just looking the author’s background and ‘state of mind.’ Alister McGrath references this quote directly in his own biography of Lewis, writing that *A Preface to Paradise Lost* “sets out superbly the background to Milton’s epic poem, and considers its meaning. Lewis argued forcefully that what mattered in poetry was not the poet but the poem. For Tillyard, *Paradise Lost* was ‘really about the true state of Milton’s mind when he wrote it’” rather than Milton’s intentions and ultimate product as Lewis so carefully considered (p. 189).

A majority of the passages Lewis annotated concern the meaning of the poem. Lewis wrote “thanks!” (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.) next to Tillyard’s assertion that “It is folly to discount a motive merely because it is professed. But that the apparent or professed meaning of a poem or passage can be very different from its deeper meaning is very easily proved” (Tillyard, p. 237). Lewis states that one of the reasons *Paradise Lost* is so often misinterpreted is because critics are looking at it as if it were a religious poem, something he feels “need not be” (p. 132). Instead, *Paradise Lost* “is a poem depicting the objective pattern of things, the attempted destruction of that pattern by rebellious self-love, and the triumphant absorption of that rebellion into a yet more complex pattern” (Lewis, p. 132). Though at the surface it appears to be a religious poem, an “apparent” observation as Lewis notes, the meaning goes deeper than that (p. 132).

One of the passages in the book Lewis most interacted with, the underlining reflecting Lewis’s own annotations, reads: “The meaning of a poem is not the story told, the statements made, the philosophy stated, but the state of mind, valuable or otherwise, revealed by the sum of all the elements of the poem” (Tillyard, p. 239). Lewis wrote “fatal” next to ‘revealed by the sum of all the elements’ and expounded upon this throughout his *Preface* (© copyright CS Lewis Pte Ltd.). Again, Lewis paid special attention to passages about the meaning of the poem and commented several times on Tillyard’s insistence to look at Milton’s state of mind. As McGrath notes, Lewis’s “literary ‘criticism’ consisted in understanding the intentions of the writer, receiving the work, and thus experiencing an inner enlargement” (p. 189). To Lewis, understanding the distinction between the intentions of the writer and the ‘state of mind’ of the writer was crucial.

In *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis responds to this notion in his first essay. He states that Tillyard’s book’s “concealed major premise is plainly the proposition that all poetry is *about* the poet’s state of mind” (Tillyard and Lewis, p. 4). The problem with this, Lewis states, is that “if the emotion were strong, apparently, it would have to be egoistic; if the poem were good, it would express

the emotions arising out of the poet's personal situation" (Tillyard and Lewis, p. 4). Later, he summarizes his argument, claiming that, "when we read poetry as poetry should be read, we have before us no representation which claims to be the poet, and frequently no representation of a *man*, a *character*, or a *personality* at all" (Tillyard and Lewis, p. 5). In his final essay response, he calls examining the state of mind of Milton an "irrelevant question" altogether (Tillyard and Lewis, p. 99).

Lewis respected Milton's work so highly and disagreed so strongly with Tillyard's evaluation of the poem that he could not help but write a response to Tillyard in defense of Milton. Just as there are similarities in the short essay Lewis wrote in his copy of Tillyard's *Milton* to what was published in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, there are also many similarities between *Preface* and Lewis's claims in *The Personal Heresy*. Tillyard's influence as a Milton scholar prompted Lewis to advocate for Milton and write his own views for the masses.

It is possible that without Tillyard's publication of *Milton*, Lewis would have kept his thoughts that culminated in *Preface* private. Their opposition led to a respectful debate to succinctly share their ideas, something other writers and artists have done as well to various degrees. The negative influence Tillyard had on Lewis is undeniable. Diana Glyer defines negative influence as "a situation where one work is created in deliberate opposition to another (p. 37)." She provides the following illustration: "Suppose an artist visits an exhibition of paintings, and he strongly dislikes the work he sees. He leaves the exhibition agitated and angry, and then 'he walks home and makes some paintings in protest'" (Glyer, p. 38). This is essentially what Lewis did; Lewis's articles in *The Personal Heresy* and *A Preface to Paradise Lost* were in respectful protest of the ideas Tillyard and other Milton critics had circulated. Lewis opens his second article of *The Personal Heresy* with the sentiment:

A friend of mine once described himself as being 'hungry for rational opposition.' The words seemed to me to hit off very happily the state of a man who has published doctrines which he knows to be controversial, and yet finds no one to voice the general disagreement that he looked for. It was with just such a hunger that I sat down to read your formidable *Rejoinder* to my essay on the *The Personal Heresy*. In such matters to find an opponent is almost to find a friend, and I have to thank you very heartily for your kind and candid contribution to the problem. (Tillyard and Lewis, p. 41)

Though they disagreed on fundamental ideas about how one should approach poetry, their debate was conducted with respect and they highly regarded one another as influential scholars. Each had a fascination with Milton that they desired to share with the public. Because of their differing views, Lewis's interactions with Tillyard, either through *The Personal Heresy* or by writing in his copy of *Milton*, served as a catalyst for one of his most popular works.

Without the negative influence Tillyard had on Lewis, it is possible *A Preface to Paradise Lost* would have never been written.

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