C. S. LEWIS CONTRA MUNDUM: HOW THE WHOLE WORLD GROANED AND FOUND ITSELF MODERNIST

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Abstract

Just as Athanasius stood against Arianism (the ascendent faith of the ruling class of his day), Lewis stood against Modernism (the ascendent literary movement of his day). This paper will explore Lewis’s pugnacious resistance to Modernism, both as a literary-critic and as a writer of fiction, in the light of his core theological convictions, which include, like Athanasius, a firm belief in Incarnation—in the embodiment of Logos in the material world. In treating this topic, this paper will consider Lewis’s main opponent, Modernist poet T. S. Eliot, who seemingly represents all that Lewis fights against; it will explore the theological underpinnings of Lewis’s disagreement with Eliot and will evaluate Lewis’s desire to retain the image (broadly speaking) in the light of his profoundly Incarnational faith. What is more, it will aim to link that deeply Incarnational faith to his programme of literary re-enchantment.

Keywords: C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot, enchantment and disenchantment, Romanticism and Modernism, St Athanasius, discarded image, poetry and incarnation, contiguity between heaven and earth

INTRODUCTION

C. S. Lewis’s last academic work, The Discarded Image, invites readers to retain the true, good and beautiful aspects of the past and to guard against what he
famously calls “chronological snobbery.” (Surprised by Joy, 241) First and foremost a teacher and guide, Lewis’s vocation as a writer is to turn readers back to the possibility of literary transcendence, and to reawaken in them a sense of enchantment. To borrow a phrase from Malcolm Guite, Lewis and his fellow Inklings “deepen our awareness by re-enchanting the disenchanted.” (Faith, Hope and Poetry, 306) In doing so, Lewis puts himself at odds with his own age, and with what one might call its marked spirit of disenchantment. Indeed, one might say that Lewis refuses to discard the image, broadly speaking. He refuses to discard any of the ordinary good things: whether stock responses in the writing of poetry; whether the appreciation of a Romantic poet loved since childhood, who has since fallen out of fashion (Shelley); whether a staunch belief in the capacity of ordinary things to communicate perennial spiritual truths to mankind. This refusal is central to Lewis’s thinking and to his programme of re-enchantment. It is also central to his decades long feud with Modernist poet T. S. Eliot, who has a tendency rather to discard precisely that which Lewis insists must be kept.

C. S. Lewis writes an introduction to St Athanasius’s On the Incarnation, a famous treatise against the 4th Century heresy Arianism which denies the fullness of the Incarnation. It is said Athanasius stands contra mundum, against the world, as a defender of orthodoxy. Indeed, Arianism sweeps into power with such rapidity St Jerome famously complains that one day, “the whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian.” (Gwynn, 75) Almost overnight, Athanasius becomes a lone champion of orthodoxy against the new Arian thought, and he fights bitterly against it. Just as Athanasius stands against Arianism (which is, according to Hilaire Belloc, the ascendent, elite faith of the ruling class of Athanasius’s day), Lewis stands against Modernism (the ascendent, literary movement of his own day). Joy Davidman even makes the connection between Athanasius and Lewis explicit as she, albeit jokingly, remarks after his “De Descriptione Temporum” address: “How that man loves

1 Walter Hooper in C. S. Lewis: The Companion and Guide. USA: Harper Collins, 2005, p. 17 says that Eliot’s poetry, in Lewis’s view: “offended against proper stock responses”; and that “it abandoned a deliberately organised response to such things as love, friendship, loyalty.”

2 Hilaire Belloc in The Great Heresies. UK: Cavalier Books, 2018, p. 25 says that Arianism is rationalist in its thinking, and that among its members are the intellectuals, the leadership of the army, and many old families.
being in a minority, even a lost cause minority! Athanasius contra mundum.” (Green and Hooper, 351)

This article will explore Lewis’s pugnacious resistance to Modernism; and it will do so in the light of his theological convictions, which include (not coincidentally), like Athanasius, a firm belief in Incarnation—in the full embodiment of ultimate goodness (Logos) in the material world, and in a corresponding belief that poetry is “a little incarnation” (Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 6) and that imagination [is] a truth-bearing faculty.” (Lewis, “Image and Imagination,” 34) In other words, he believes that the ordinary containers, so to speak, namely, flesh and blood, the physical world, language—and even the images one creates in one’s mind’s eye—are capable of bearing truth. In treating this topic, this article will consider Lewis’s main opponent, T. S. Eliot, who, though his co-religionist, represents all that Lewis fights against. Eliot’s apophatic tendency; his tendency to doubt the capacity of words—which “slip, slide, perish, / [and] ‘Decay with imprecision” (Eliot, “Burnt Norton” V. lines 15-16); his tendency to doubt the capacity of ordinary people, to doubt the goodness of ordinary things; and his desire to discard these in an ascetical pursuit of pure essences, puts him at odds with the more cataphatic, concrete—the more Romantic—C. S. Lewis. Indeed, Lewis writes, “Some, who dislike modern poetry, hope that it will soon perish, asphyxiated in the vacuum of its own purity, and give place to a poetry which will overlap . . . with the passions and interests of which the laity [or ordinary people] are conscious.” (An Experiment in Criticism, 98)

**THE PILGRIM’S REGRESS**

In The Pilgrim’s Regress (1933) Lewis parodies Eliot in the figure of Neo-Angular. In this parody, Lewis attributes several characteristics to Eliot. These are a perceived over-eagerness to dismiss desire as such; a tendency to denigrate the power of one’s individual vision or imagination as too subjective a means of apprehending truth; and a certain bloodlessness that comes from a too cerebral and too ascetical approach to religion. Neo-Angular coolly insists to John the Pilgrim that, to move forward on his journey, he must abandon his search for the

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3 Lewis uses this phrase in a letter to T. S. Eliot in 1931.
island—the image in his mind’s eye that he’d longed for—calling the pursuit “a dangerous, subjective motive.” (112) Neo-Angular instructs John to “forget it as soon as you can.” (112) He advocates that John discard this image which is “romantic trash.” (113) He tells John: “you must eradicate every trace of that nonsense from your mind before I can help you.” (112) John objects, “But how can you help me after removing the only thing that I want to be helped to?” (112) And Neo-Angular proclaims that he himself has never seen the island and doesn’t wish to. John protests that without this desire for the island, “I should have sought nothing and found nothing.” (112) He insults Neo-Angular, implying he is both a “blind man” and a “eunuch.” (112) John dismisses Neo-Angular’s counsel and holds firm to his vision—a vision which proves to be true; the discarding of which would have proven catastrophic to John.

In his preface to the 3rd edition, Lewis describes The Pilgrim’s Regress as a “defence of Romanticism . . . as well as of Reason and Christianity”; (9) and he writes about Eliot and the other Criterion writers whom he parodies, “These people seemed to me to be condemning what they did not understand.” (9) Indeed, Lewis’s epigraph to the Eliot/Neo-Angular chapter reads, “The men talk as if they had ‘seen through’ things they have not even seen.” (112) The epigraph echoes Lewis’s words of warning in The Abolition of Man where he writes, “The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque.” (429) He continues, “How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to ‘see through’ first principles”; (429) and he adds, “If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To ‘see through’ all things is not to see.” (429) By contrast, Eliot appears greatly to value precisely this sort of seeing through; for example, in describing the quality of Pascal’s probing, doubting faith, he praises him for being “a man of great . . . intellectual powers, who cannot avoid seeing through human beings and observing the vanity of their thoughts . . . the pettiness of their real ambitions.” (“The Pensées of Pascal,” 414) There is a certain analogy here to his praise of Donne for his supposed ability to see into “the nervous system” and “the cerebral cortex” (“The Metaphysical Poets,” 290) of life, and, therefore, “into a good deal more than the heart.” (290) Eliot’s preferred mode of vision is, as it were, x-ray, insofar as he appears to prize the seeing
through of (discardable) outer layers into purportedly truer interiors, even going so far as to class the heart as a thing almost too vulgar to be thought truly interior.

To wit, Lewis writes, “[I]t would be foolish not to recognise the growth in our criticism of something that I can only describe as literary Manicheism—a dislike of peace and pleasure and heartease simply as such”; (“Shelley, Dryden, and Mr Eliot,” 113) and he cautions, “This seriousness must not be confused with profundity.” (113) He would not have us—his readers and students—confuse any mere joylessness of outlook for depth of observation; rather, he would guard against—and guard us against—such wanton disenchantment. In Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man*, he links this “seeing through” (a kind of cynicism) with a lack of what might plainly be called heart: “The head rules the belly through the chest,” (407) he offers. “The Chest-Magnanimity-Sentiment—these are the indispensable liaison officers between cerebral man and visceral man.” (407) In other words, the heart mediates between the animal portion of man and the spiritual. “It may even be said that it is by this middle element that man is man: for by his intellect he is mere spirit and by his appetite mere animal.” (407) Speaking of the sort of intellectuals who lack this middle element which binds body and spirit together he writes, “Their heads are no bigger than the ordinary: it is the atrophy of the chest beneath that makes them seem so.” (407) This description would seem very much to fit Lewis’s portrayal of Neo-Angular in *The Pilgrim’s Regress*.

**ANGLO-CATHOLIC AND UNITARIAN IN RELIGION**

Eliot famously declares himself “Anglo-Catholic in religion”; (“Preface to For Lancelot Andrewes,” 512) and indeed, he is. But Eliot was raised Unitarian, a faith which denies the Godhood of the Son. Much like the Arians of Athanasius’s day they deny, in other words, that God takes flesh. “The degree to which Eliot . . . disposed of the legacy . . . [of] his family’s Unitarianism . . . is questionable,” (3) writes Barry Spurr: “Reflecting late in his life, [Eliot] wrote: ‘no man wholly escapes from the kind, or wholly surpasses the degree of culture which he acquired from his early environment.’” (3) Unitarianism is, to quote Eliot, a “creedless, rational faith.” (4) It would, perhaps, be a “clear” (“Christian Apologetics,” 158) religion, per Lewis’s distinction between thick and clear faiths; and by clear, Lewis means “those which are philosophical, ethical, and
universalising” which include, Lewis writes, “stoicism, [and] Buddhism.” (158)
Indeed, “a distant relative of Eliot’s [Unitarian, Charles W. Eliot] describes what
he calls, the “religion of the future.” In Spurr’s words, “the tenets of which
amounted to an antithesis of orthodox Christianity.” (5) One of the tenets of
Eliot’s relative’s faith of the future is that there are to be “no personifications of
the primitive forces of nature.” (5) The God of Unitarianism evolves, in this
vision, into an abstract impersonal energy; Eliot’s relative writes that God would,
in the future, go on to be thought of as “exhaustless energy . . . a Vital Force.” (5)
This evolution of God into an abstract essence calls to mind Edwin Muir’s poem,
“The Incarnate One” in which he bitterly laments the very development which
Eliot’s relative appears to long for, calling it an “Abstract calamity.” (line 27) Muir
writes, “How could our race betray/ the Image, and the Incarnate one unmake/
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake?” (lines 5-7) Muir, a poet, a maker of—to use Lewis’s phrase from Reflections on the Psalms—“little incarnations,” (6)
is protesting against the unmaking—the disincarnating—of God the Son, the
Image of the Father.5 As Malcolm Guite points out, citing Muir’s poem
mentioned above, “This kind of theology refuses the full consequence and
meaning of the Incarnation, of believing the Word was made flesh.” (Faith, 11)
We may see Muir’s poem as a protest over the discarding of an image—the
ultimate Image—that of the Son, through whom we see the Father. One might
say that what begins with the seeing through of God the Son, ends in the eventual
seeing through of God the Father as well. As Lewis writes of St Athanasius: “He
stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all
the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity . . . into one of those
‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today” (“Preface to On the Incarnation” 14); and Lewis goes on to say that “then as now,
[they] included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen.” (14)
What is more, in Lewis’s estimation, “[I]t is his glory that he did not move with
the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do,
have moved away.” (14) Lewis’s praise for Athanasius has to do, largely, with the

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4 Muir’s poem blames John Calvin specifically for this, but his words would seem to apply more broadly.
5 “Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things
were created.” (Colossians 1:15-16)
saint’s unwillingness (even against great pressure) to conform to the merely rational, sensible perspectives of highly cultivated modern minds who would do away with long-held traditions. It is in this Athanasian spirit, perhaps, that Lewis declares himself one of the last “old Western men,” (13) and defiantly refuses to move with the times.

THE LITERARY-CRITICAL DEBATES

Lewis’s literary-critical disagreements with Eliot centre largely on what we might call Lewis’s refusal to discard (various poets, and practices of reading and commenting upon poetry). For example, Eliot insists that “an enthusiasm for Shelley” is an “affair of adolescence,” (“Shelley and Keats,” 89) adding, “for most of us, Shelley has marked an intense period before maturity”; (89) and Eliot goes on to ask sharply, “but for how many does Shelley remain the companion of age?” (89) For Lewis, a thing may be good for all time; what one loved as a child or adolescent may still be savoured into maturity. Lewis does not relinquish his delights at a particular moment as though they were capable of going stale. He bristles at the notion that one must change one’s literary tastes with the passing seasons of life, or that one must conform one’s tastes to fleeting fashions: “No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally . . . worth reading at the age of fifty.” (Lewis, “On Stories,” 20) He adds, “[T]he only imaginative works we ought to grow out of are those which it would have been better not to have read at all.” (20) What is more, Lewis writes that whilst Shelley’s poems are “not perfect,” they often “display a harmony between the poet’s real and professed intention.” (“Shelley, Dryden, and Mr Eliot,” 199) The implication is that Eliot’s do not. In Lewis’s view, Shelley’s poems “answer the demands of their forms, and . . . have unity of spirit.” (199) He implies that Dryden—whom Eliot “uses as a stick to beat Shelley” (194)—does not have said unity of spirit. Shelley’s works are not perfect, concedes Lewis, but they are good; and, indeed, Lewis points to the rapturous heights which Shelley achieves in the 4th act of “Prometheus Unbound,” calling it an “intoxication, a riot, a complicated and uncontrollable splendour.” (208) To Lewis, the poem is “sustained on the note of ecstasy such as no other English poet has given us.” (206) Lewis would be loath to discard any such enchantment as this. Neither would Lewis discard Milton, who, according to Eliot, “[W]rites English like a dead language,” (“Milton I,” 159)
and offers modern poets no good example; and neither would Lewis discard *Hamlet*, which Eliot declares to be “most certainly an artistic failure.” (“Hamlet,” 143)

**DONNE, DIFFICULTY, AND REJECTING THE IMAGE**

Lewis takes special issue with Eliot’s attempt to press John Donne into the service of defending the aesthetic philosophy of Modernism, pointing to several areas where Donne’s poetic technique and style may be considered problematic. Lewis describes metaphysical poetry by its “multiplication of conceits,” (“Donne and Love. Poetry of the Seventeenth Century,” 109) remarking that these are “not conceits of any special ‘metaphysical’ type but conceits such as we find in all the Elizabethans.” (109) He continues, “When Donne speaks of morning coming from his mistress’s eyes, or tells how they wake him like the light of a taper, these fanciful hyperboles are not, in themselves, a novelty.” (109) Here, Lewis arrives at his main point: “[B]ut, side by side with these, we find, as his second characteristic, what may be called the difficult conceit.” (109) It is not novelty which Lewis principally ascribes to Donne, but a purposeful difficulty—a deliberate thwarting of the reader’s ability to readily understand the work. And Lewis takes aim at this “difficulty conceit,” (109) with full understanding that it will hit his intended target, T. S. Eliot. For Eliot, drawing inspiration from Donne, formulates his famous dictum, “poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult.” (“The Metaphysical Poets,” 289) This necessity, Eliot suggests, is a result of modernity being an age of especial “complexity” (289) and “great variety,” (289) requiring an approach that is more “indirect.” (289) Donne’s difficulty, in other words, is for Eliot one of his chief virtues, one which modern poets would do well to emulate.

Lewis offers an example: “what I mean comes at the end of ‘The Sunne Rising’ where the sun is congratulated on the fact that the two lovers have shortened his task for him.” (“Donne and Love . . .” 109) And Lewis remarks on why this may be satisfying for a reader: “The pleasure of the thing . . . would seem to depend on recurrent tension and relaxation.” (109) One wonders whether Lewis finds in Eliot’s work—unlike Donne’s—something akin to all tension and no relaxation—all difficulty and no delight—endless purgation without the possibility of beatific bliss. Is this the key effect in Eliot’s poetry (and perhaps in
Eliot the man) which Lewis takes note of—as a sense of endless faring forward 6 without the possibility of ever arriving anywhere in particular? In this respect, perhaps the phenomenon of T. S. Eliot’s Modernism is, for Lewis, a bit like Ransom’s encounter with the shifting landscapes of *Perelandra*—an undulating, moveable, unstable thing which might at any moment recombine in some new and unexpected way; or, to borrow Eliot’s own phrase (which he uses to describe the poetic mind), like an encounter with something indeterminate because “always forming new wholes.” (“The Metaphysical Poets,” 287) Put simply, perhaps it is the prospect of remaining in a constant state of flux which poses a problem for Lewis—insofar as it would appear to deny even the possibility of reaching stable meaning.

Lewis points to the “exacting quality” (“Donne and Love . . .” 111) of Donne—another aspect of his difficulty, perhaps. (111) Moreover, he highlights Donne’s “urgency and pressure . . . upon the reader in every line”; (111) and he concedes that Donne’s occasional success in this regard “produces a rare intensity in our enjoyment . . . what a modern critic meant . . . when he claimed that Donne made all other poetry sound less “serious.” (111) But here Lewis pauses, as if to use the force and direction of his opponent’s argument against him, writing, “The point is worth investigation.” (111) Then he pivots: “For, of course, in one sense, these poems are not serious at all. Poem after poem consists in extravagant conceits woven into the preposterous semblance of an argument.” (111) Lewis then states plainly, “[T]he preposterousness is the point.” (111) Lewis takes back the ground he has ceded and advances still further: “Donne intends to take your breath away by the combined subtlety and impudence of the steps that lead to his conclusion.” (111)

Put simply, Donne is an inventor of puzzles; the ability to solve these puzzles offers special readers a kind of knowing satisfaction. His poems separate understanders from mere readers, as indeed Lewis implies, where he writes that, with respect to Donne, “the old printer’s address *not to the readers but to the understanders is illuminating.*” (111) In other words, Donne’s difficulty bifurcates readers, separating them into an inner and an outer group. “When Johnson said

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6 A paraphrase of Eliot’s recurring phrase, ‘fare forward’ from *The Dry Salvages.*

7 Italics added.
that they were resolved to show their learning he said truth . . . for there is an element of pedantry, of dandyism . . . about Donne.” (111) As Lewis writes, “Donne’s reputation . . . repels some humble readers and attracts some prigs.” (110) In other words, it divides.

Elsewhere, Lewis laments the effect of this bifurcation where he comments upon—using a very Eliotic term—the “dislocation of the aesthetic life in which little is left us but high-minded works which fewer people want to read or hear or see”; (“First and Second Things,” 24) to which he adds, “and popular works of which both those who make them and those who enjoy them are half ashamed.” (24) It is as if, having been enticed to eat of the fruit of the knowledge of good and bad literature, some readers (and writers) suddenly awake to discover themselves naked and ashamed; and a portion of these attempt something of an escape from this ruined state into a rarefied realm of a pure, cerebral, disembodied literature; a literature that is incapable of embarrassing them with petty delights and ordinary human pleasures.

Speaking of “Woman’s Constancy,” Lewis writes, “The merit of the poem consists in the skill with which it leads us to expect a certain conclusion and then gives us precisely the opposite conclusion, and that, too, with an appearance of reasonableness.” (“Donne and Love . . . ” 111) Lewis here lays open Donne’s formula: “the art of ‘The Will’ consists in keeping us guessing through each stanza what universal in the concluding triplet will bind together the odd particulars in the preceding six lines”; (111) offering that, “[T]he test case [for this] is ‘The Flea.’” (111) The tension resolves and the reader is rewarded for his effort; it does all “bind together,” (111) Lewis writes, meaning to imply that the same cannot be said for Eliot’s work. For it is not only Eliot’s similarities to Donne that Lewis calls our attention to, but also his differences. It appears Lewis wishes to point out the fact that Eliot has appropriated Donne’s vices—namely, difficulty; a tendency to speak past readers—whilst failing to acquire his virtues—his ability to produce “very strong and . . . peculiar pleasure,” (112) for example. There is no suggestion in Lewis’s writings (public or private) that there is any pleasure, peculiar or otherwise, to be found in Eliot’s poetry. And Lewis suggests something else, too—namely, that Eliot, in raising Donne’s (occasional) virtue—his difficulty—above all other poetic virtues, has the effect of turning it into a

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8 Italics added.
vice; or, as Lewis writes in a difference context, “by valuing too highly a real, but subordinate good, we . . . come near to losing that good itself.” (“First and Second Things,” 24)

However, Lewis acknowledges that “it is desirable not to overlook the special congeniality of such poetry to the twentieth century.” (“Donne and Love . . . ” 112) Here, he tends to concede to Eliot that Donnean difficulty is somehow suited to modernity; but, he quickly cautions against “giving to this highly specialised and . . . very limited kind of excellence a place in our scheme of literary values which it does not deserve.” (112) This is consistent with a theological principle which Lewis cites elsewhere: “St Augustine defines virtue as ordo amoris, the ordinate condition of the affections in which every object is accorded that kind of degree of love which is appropriate to it.” (The Abolition of Man, 404)

What is more, Lewis goes on to write, “Donne’s rejection of the obviously poetical image was a good method—for Donne.” (“Donne and Love . . . ” 112) But Lewis cautions against “think[ing] that there is some intrinsic superiority in this method, so that all poetry about pylons and non obstantes must needs be of a higher order than poetry about lawns and lips and breasts and orient skies.” (112) We may reflect upon Lewis’s clear preference for “orient skies” (112) in poetry to the “etherised” skies of Eliot’s “Prufrock,” (line 3) about which Lewis—in his own poetic critique of Eliot’s love song—writes, “[F]or twenty years I’ve stared my level best/To see if anything—any evening—would suggest/ A patient etherised upon a table,” (“Spartan Nactus,” lines 3-5) only to conclude with the deadpan, “In vain, I simply wasn’t able.” (line 6) Whereas Lewis acknowledges that “Donne’s obscurity, and occasional abstruseness have sometimes . . . produced magnificent results, and we do well to praise them,” (“Donne and Love . . . ” 112) he does not hail any of Eliot’s abstruse efforts as instances of magnificence or success worthy of our admiration. This is another difference between Eliot and Donne which Lewis, arguably, wishes to draw our attention to, namely, that Donne, in many instances, achieves success. If in Donne’s poetry “preposterousness is the point,” (“Donne and Love . . . ” 111) for Lewis, Eliot’s poetry is a species of preposterousness without any point whatever.

Further, Lewis asserts that the nature of the difficulty has changed: “To say that all new poetry was once as difficult as ours is false” (“De Descriptione Temporum” 9); he acknowledges that some of it is difficult, but “not in the same
way” (9); he writes that “even with the dark conceits in Donne there was one correct interpretation of each and Donne could have told it to you.” (9) Lewis explicitly contrasts this with Eliot where he recounts “a recent symposium on Mr Eliot’s ‘Cooking Egg.’ Here we find seven adults . . . whose lives have been specially devoted to the study of poetry discussing a very short poem which has been before the world for thirty-odd years” (9); Lewis continues, “and there is not the slightest agreement among them, as to what, in any sense of the word, it means.” (9) Lewis distinguishes the difficulty of Donne—and with it, the difficulty of past poets—as belonging to another species of difficulty than that of Eliot; and that, where the former may have been difficult, one could at least come to understand them; and to have an understanding in common with others. According to Lewis the changes which occur in literature between prior epochs do not constitute “a novelty comparable to, say, The Waste Land, or Mr Jones’s Anathemata.” (4) In Lewis’s view, these previous changes between epochs cannot “be judged equal to the change which has taken place in my own lifetime.” (4) Lewis writes, “I do not see how anyone can doubt that modern poetry is not only a greater novelty than any other ‘new poetry’ but new in a new way, almost in a new dimension.” (9)

**LEWIS’S OBJECTION TO ELIOT’S POETRY OF DISENCHANTMENT**

Ultimately, Lewis’s strongest objection is to Eliot’s poetry, which seems to him one great exercise in the discarding of that which is good, true, and—to borrow a phrase Lewis uses to describe Shelley’s Prometheus—“of sane, public, and perennial interest.” (“Shelley, Dryden . . .” 205) Indeed, Lewis “regards Eliot’s work as a very great evil,” (Fruoco, 87) and declares, “no man is fortified against chaos by reading *The Waste Land.*” (Lewis qtd. in Fruoco, 87) Lewis refers to Eliot’s works as “poems of disintegration,” (qtd. in Fruoco, 87) saying those who read *The Waste Land* are “infected with chaos.” (qtd. in Fruoco, 87) What is more, Lewis objects to a perceived elitism in Eliot; and it is clear Eliot does, in his thinking, reserve to the poet’s mind a special quality which he suggests is not present in the mind of the non-poet; he writes that the poet “is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man’s experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary”; (“Metaphysical . . .” 287) he writes, “[T]he latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or
with the noise of the typewriter.” (287) Whereas, according to Eliot, “in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.” (287) Both by his denigratory appraisal of the capacities of ordinary men, and by his claim for poets having special abilities, Eliot would appear to be at odds with Lewis, who champions the goodness of ordinary things both in theology (the goodness of flesh and blood bodies), and in poetry—the goodness of “stock responses . . . that ordinary people can understand” (Hooper, *The Companion and Guide*, 17)—against what he perceives to be needless innovations which would disrupt the stable transmission of vital truths. Moreover, according to Robert Banks, Lewis “had a high estimate of the average person.” (53) Indeed, writes Banks, in “*An Experiment in Criticism* . . . Lewis] treats the instincts of the ordinary thoughtful reader with the same, indeed sometimes higher, regard than the literary critic.” (53)

**MIDDLE THINGS AND MATERIALITY**

Lewis maintains the importance of middle things. He writes, “If Mr Eliot disdains the eagles and trumpets of epic poetry because the fashion of this world passes away, I honour him. But if he goes on to draw the conclusion that all poetry should have the penitential qualities of his own best work, I believe he is mistaken.” (*A Preface to Paradise Lost*, 132-133) He states plainly, “As long as we live in merry middle earth it is necessary to have middle things.” (133) He summarises his point in pithy and memorable terms: “Mr Eliot may have success in persuading the reading youth of England to have done with robes of purple and pavements of marble”; (133) but, Lewis concludes, “he will not therefore find them walking in sackcloth on floors of mud—he will only find them in smart, ugly suits walking on rubberoid.” (133) In his view, people won’t embrace radical renunciation, they will embrace something debased and spiritless instead. Lewis’s mistrust of Eliot’s Modernism bears a relationship to his defence of “middle things,” (133) his mistrust of radical negation, and his advocacy on behalf of the ordinary good. Eliot does not champion the middle things; does not tend to see, to borrow a phrase from George Herbert, “heaven in ordinary.” (line 11) This places Lewis in opposition to Eliot and in opposition to what he sees as the disenchantments of Modernism. Central to Lewis’s programme of re-enchantment is his profound sense that there is a strong analogy—a vital connection—between the things of this world, and the eternal things; and that
we ought not so hastily discard all of our earthly desires, as some of them, at least, might well lead heavenward.

Indeed, in Lewis’s theological thinking, ordinary good things like bread and wine are not the least but the most fitting symbols to communicate the extraordinary goods of heaven—for example, water is an apt means to convey the spiritual cleansing of baptism; bread and wine aptly communicate the spiritual nourishment intended in the Lord’s Supper. What is more, these common things are fitting symbols precisely because they are commonly available to all people; they are not reserved for the elite or the special. If Heaven itself should deign to give us common materials to symbolise (and, as sacraments, to effect) communion with the divine—to bring us into contact with the divine—Lewis says, it ought to be good enough for us. Emphasising the flesh and blood aspect of Christian belief, Lewis writes, “the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts—[remarking] that we are His fingers and muscles.” (Mere Christianity, 64) He goes on to offer, with deliberate understatement, that “perhaps that explains one or two things.” (64) Then Lewis gets to the heart of the matter: “It explains why this new life is spread not only by purely mental acts like belief, but by bodily acts like baptism and Holy Communion.” (64) Here, Lewis calls attention to the physical aspect of Christianity: “There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature.” (64) Lewis goes on to state plainly, “That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put new life into us”; (64) and he writes, “We may think this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.” (64)

This is a constant in Lewis’s thinking: there is for him, an analogy between heaven and earth; not surprisingly, then, he is at ease in describing the things of heaven, the eternal things, in terms of humble earthly stuff. He shows us that in his thinking there is a certain continuity between high and low (heaven and earth); that the former might be understood, however darkly, in the light of the latter. He is clear these two categories (heaven and earth) are distinct; they are in no way equivalent and must not be confused one for the other. In Miracles he states categorically that supernature is superior to, and gives rise to, nature; that nature “has its taproot” (43) in supernature and, as such, the relation between the two is “unsymmetrical,” with supernature vastly superior. (43) Nevertheless, there is, for Lewis, also a certain continuity (even a contiguity) between them;
everywhere Lewis emphasises that ordinary things shed light upon the things of heaven and so are not to be too easily discarded for their not being perfect. In this way he differs from Eliot who tends to pay attention rather to the discontinuity between the things of heaven and the things of earth—who tends to emphasise the radical separateness of the two. Whereas Lewis sees in the patterns of normal human things—in art, in nature—the footprint of the divine, Eliot is seemingly preoccupied with what we might call the gap between the two domains. Lewis’s perspective seems the more straightforwardly Incarnational of the two, insofar as it appears to acknowledge the contiguity between heaven and earth that is effected in the person of Christ.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite their differences, Lewis and Eliot are brought together after the death of their mutual friend Charles Williams in May 1945. According to Jonathan Fruoco, “[F]or many years Eliot had been Lewis's white whale . . . and he tried for over twenty years to correct him or to ridicule him every time he could.” (90) But after the death of Williams, Lewis decides to “give up the spear.” (90) In a letter from Lewis to Herbert Palmer in 1945, Lewis explains why: “Noble rage is an ignis fatuus and always turns in the end to shrill peevishness” (qtd. in Fruoco 90) and he concludes that fighting all things Eliotic is “no subject for a man to spend his life on.” (qtd. in Fruoco 90) Their friendship deepens further when, in 1959, as the two men cooperate in revising the Psalter, they have dinner together with Joy and Valerie. (91) After Joy dies, Lewis successfully places his first and only book, A Grief Observed, with Eliot’s Faber and Faber. But even as Lewis and Eliot finally become friends, their underlying differences—aesthetic, philosophical, theological—are not resolved; they are simply forgotten. Lewis, in a spirit of philia, tells Walter Hooper, just before Lewis’s death in 1963: “You know I never liked Eliot’s poetry, or even his prose. But when we met this time I loved him.” (qtd. in Fruoco, 91) As Lewis says, it is the peculiar mark of friendship, as distinct from other forms of love, that it is the least practical, the most like that between angels. (The Four Loves, 93) He describes friends as standing “side by side, absorbed in some common interest.” (73) Whatever Lewis’s misgivings about Eliot, he ultimately comes to believe that they are, at least, facing in the same direction, and looking towards the same end.
Works Cited


**BIONOTE**

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