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## Lewis's Literary Criticism and a Problem of Evil

### Introduction

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, I ARGUED THAT THROUGH THE DIFFICULTIES of his life Lewis came to embody his objectivist commitments. In this chapter, I will look at C. S. Lewis's literary criticism, for in it one can find expressions of his concern regarding that aspect of the problem of evil he calls subjectivism. While it might appear to some that Lewis's entire literary critical enterprise is an attempt to understand and interpret texts—and certainly this is part of his critical interest—it is more accurate to say that he is rhetorically active in refuting the various forms of subjectivism he observes in the academy. He seeks to engage and convince his readers of his point of view; therefore, his literary critical work is rhetorical in nature. He draws his readers into a dialectical development of his point of view always referencing the text as a guide to his interpretive judgments. I will also argue that Lewis saw literary studies moving away from the analysis of texts to discussions of many things other than the texts themselves. This practice of subjectivist criticism was something Lewis sought to correct. Furthermore he saw literary critical practice in its larger cultural context.

Lewis would have agreed with Richard Weaver, who asserts, "The truth is that if culture is to assume form and to bring the satisfactions for which cultures are created, it is not culturally feasible for everyone to do everything 'anyway he wants to.'"<sup>1</sup> Because of Lewis's objectivist commitments and his concerns about the dangers of subjectivism,

1. Weaver, *Visions of Order*, 11.

Lewis held similar views to those of Weaver. I will look at Lewis's judgments about the benefits of culture generally and then look at the ways he sought to address subjectivism in literary critical practice specifically. Lewis was aware that though a full and complete understanding and interpretation of any text is not likely, nevertheless, approximations are possible. Any approximate interpretation of a text, however, must be attempted with respect for the objective text itself. In this way, an object is available to which an appeal might be made whenever disputes about a text occur. Misguided interpretations can be corrected and incomplete interpretations can be developed further. Without this possibility of a corrective, thinking about texts becomes little more than the whim of the interpreter. While this may be unfortunate for literary criticism, such practices generally applied to life could, as has been mentioned, lead to the natural removal of useful checks on evil. Lewis marshals the weight of his best discursive thought to challenge subjectivism before his audience in the academy. At risk were the minds of students, who would themselves shape the academy for future generations, and thus prove influential in shaping the culture.

### Objectivism in Lewis's Literary Criticism

Many have recognized the objectivist commitments which appear in Lewis's literary critical work. Jerry L. Daniel, editor of *CSL: The Bulletin of the New York C. S. Lewis Society*, the oldest scholarly journal dedicated to Lewis scholarship, writes that Lewis "perceived most modern critics to be busily engaged in *avoiding* the essence of the works they criticized."<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Lewis scholar Bruce Edwards writes that one of the effects of radical literacy is that "the idea of objectivity is out of fashion." He notes, "A growing orthodoxy views traditional literacy . . . not as liberating, self-actualizing acquisition, but as an instrument of oppression, a tool of a technolite primed to enslave impressionable citizens to "advanced capitalism."<sup>3</sup> When this happens, according to Edwards, "readership collapses into authorship; and the text, long the most stable and reliable component in the study of literature, relinquishes its ability to *mean* or *be*."<sup>4</sup> Daniel sees in Lewis the insistence

2. Daniel, "Taste of the Pineapple," 16.
3. B. Edwards. *A Rhetoric of Reading*, 20.
4. B. Edwards, *Taste of the Pineapple*, 29.

that "one must receive the work as it is." The critic cannot even begin to "discuss literature until he has seen and received it as it was intended."<sup>5</sup> In this kind of reception of the text, Edwards observes that Lewis "struggled to balance issues of textual objectivity and readerly subjectivity, to marry reason and imagination in the reading act."<sup>6</sup> To "examine Lewis's approach to the written text," Edwards states that "one may extrapolate a 'Rhetoric of reading,' i.e., a sound, comprehensive strategy for confronting texts."<sup>7</sup> When subjectivism gives way to the objective value of the text, true subjectivity is restored; it is in proper relation to the text. It is, as Edwards says "rehabilitated," able "to understand [its] own personhood, to become something other."<sup>8</sup> Edwards reads Lewis correctly, but with his reading of Lewis comes a level of urgency which can be seen in Lewis's critical enterprise. What is at stake is not only the person's capacity to understand himself but also the culture's hope for any kind of collective identity.

Richard Weaver observes that "Culture in its formal definition is one of the fulfillments of the psychic need of man. The human being is a focal point of consciousness who looks with wondering eyes upon a universe into which he is born a kind of stranger."<sup>9</sup> Man adjusts himself to his surroundings as an outsider; when he does this in a collective fashion, the result is the creation of culture. This cultural adjustment to objective reality develops when it is "accompanied by degrees of restlessness and pain, and it is absolutely necessary, as we must infer from the historical record, that he do something to humanize his vision and to cognize in special ways his relation to these surroundings."<sup>10</sup> One can certainly infer from Weaver's remarks that these degrees of adjustment can be more or less accurate, and that a culture may be judged to be good when it makes these adjustments along lines consistent with objective reality. The complexity of reality means that no society is likely to arrive at a perfect culture, and thus culture is always in a state of development. Furthermore, Weaver observes that cultures are not

5. Ibid., 21.

6. B. Edwards, *A Rhetoric of Reading*, 2.

7. Ibid., 11.

8. B. Edwards, *Taste of the Pineapple*, 35.

9. Weaver, *Defense of Tradition*, 405.

10. Ibid.

only a corporate attempt to adjust themselves to objective reality with its demands of objective value, but they seek to do this while maintaining a degree of unity. He notes, "Culture by its very nature tends to be centripetal, or to aspire toward some unity in its representational modes."<sup>11</sup> Unity in this regard is not to be confused with uniformity. Uniformity devalues rhetoric and the discursive thought out of which it grows. On the other hand, unity encourages persuasion. The culture acts as audience and listens to the rhetor's voice to discern if what is spoken is convincing, thereby benefiting by his word. I argue, therefore, that Lewis's literary criticism comes with a strong address to the academy, warning them of the evils of subjectivism and its ability to harm both individuals and culture.

It must be noted that the objectivists' commitments evidenced in Lewis's literary criticism contributed to his clarity as a critic. Chad Walsh, scholar and friend of Lewis, may have overstated his claim when he asserts regarding Lewis that "no writer of our time has been more blessed with the gift of clarity."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Lewis's clarity as a writer and critic has been affirmed by many including those who would disagree with his points of view. Walsh adds that "his literary criticism—a field in which turgid and tortured prose abounds—was crisp, to the point, never ambiguous."<sup>13</sup> Yet Walsh sees that this clarity may at times work against Lewis: "His literary judgments are sometimes too rational, too clear-cut. He can hack his way through acres of critical nonsense, but in the process he tramps down certain interesting and important little growths of insight."<sup>14</sup> Even so, professor Clyde Kilby, Lewis scholar and founding curator of the Wade Center, writes in the context of Lewis's critical endeavors, "If values are objective and one man may be right and another wrong, then there will be an obligation to try to discover the right value and champion it. And there can be no *ought* where there is no objective value."<sup>15</sup> This is precisely Lewis's concern when he calls the academy to renounce its subjectivism and return to the objectivity of texts. Lewis critic and scholar Michael Aeschliman

11. *Ibid.*, 406.

12. Hillegas, *Shadows of Imagination*, 1.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.

14. *Ibid.*, 11.

15. Kilby, *Christian World*, 101–2.

correctly warns that "Assertions of personal preference disguised as Assertions Of value . . . weaken the conception of value itself."<sup>16</sup> These personal preferences, when cloaked in subjectivism, lead to the weakening of objective value that precedes the rise of evil. Lewis is right to be concerned about this problem, for as Weaver observes, "With the denial of objective truth, there is no escape from the relativism of 'man the measure of all things.'"<sup>17</sup>

Lewis's objectivist commitments, coupled with his ability to speak clearly about literary texts, whether flawed at points, as Walsh suggests, or not, contributed to his excellence as a teacher. Aeschliman writes, "A Lewis lecture was a feast, Kingsley Aims has written; 'if ever a man instructed by delighting it was he'; he was 'a masterly teacher and critic whose knowledge and feeling were in usual accord.'"<sup>18</sup> Daniel says that Lewis was "a soul almost intoxicated with the 'pure organic pleasure' of things as they are."<sup>19</sup> Daniel sees this as a cultivated habit. Citing *Surprised by Joy* for support, he quotes Lewis stressing, "We should attempt a total surrender to whatever atmosphere was offering itself at the moment." This was written about A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, a man Lewis admired and sought to emulate for his "serious, yet gleeful, determination to rub one's nose in the very quiddity of each thing, to rejoice in its being (so magnificently) what it was."<sup>20</sup> Then Daniel adds, "This matter is important to anyone who is concerned to analyze Lewis's approach to literature."<sup>21</sup> Lewis was eager to encounter objects as they are, wherever he met them. To speak of these things clearly, especially when speaking of literary texts, increased his rhetorical powers to persuade. His words, having a reference point which he made clear, allowed his audiences to see and affirm his claims in their own minds. This approach to objectivity made him a good teacher and an appealing writer. His former student, Harry Blamires, commenting on Lewis's literary critical approach, writes, "The impulse to go out of the self, to enter into other men's beliefs, and to be admitted to experience other than our own is

16. Aeschliman, *Restitution of Man*, 67.

17. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, 4.

18. Aeschliman, *Restitution of Man*, 66.

19. B. Edwards, *Taste of the Pineapple*, 9.

20. *Ibid.*, 9, quoting C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 199.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.

what is satisfied by good literature.”<sup>22</sup> As Lewis addresses the problems of subjectivism in literary criticism, he recognizes the need to see them within the larger context of culture.

## Christianity and Culture

Since literary critical work can be affected by broader cultural concerns, and since Lewis wrote on Christianity and culture,<sup>23</sup> it is necessary to consider Lewis’s general observations about this subject before moving to more specific literary issues. Lewis begins his essay, “Christianity and Culture,” by asking, “What then is the value of culture?”<sup>24</sup> Weaver’s insight here, may help to point in the direction I believe Lewis is leading. Weaver sees great value in culture, for it is a storehouse for the “metaphysical dream” which preserves a community by maintaining its corporate and imaginative understanding of itself. This understanding must be an imaginative one for it lacks capacities for absolute knowledge. The dream must develop or the imaginative grasp calcifies into idolatries and eventually the culture ossifies. The dream advances as the culture attends to the rhetoric of its members appealing imaginatively to the “dream”—this appeal has emotional power for it is an appeal to all that the culture holds dear. Weaver asserts that “without some comparable feeling a commonwealth does not exist, for people will act in a common cause only while they are conscious of an identity of sentiment.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, sentiment may be valid, or invalid, only if there is some standard by which to judge it so. A culture may maintain its values, its shared “metaphysical dream,” but it is objective value that gives credence to the “dream.” The literature of a proper culture gives fresh visions of reality by clear reference to those things a culture values and respects, thus appealing to the emotion and making it possible for the culture to be moved in a way to adapt its corporate sense of itself to the objective world. If a culture is cut off from its literature, it loses one of its most important guides. As Lewis moves along these lines in his discussion of culture and literature, he is deeply concerned that literature not be diluted by subjectivist critical theories. Returning to the

22. Blamires, *Literary Criticism*, 351.

23. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 12–36.

24. *Ibid.*, 14.

25. Weaver, *Defense of Tradition*, 346.

question, "What is the value of culture?" Lewis refines the discussion; here he seeks to discover whether or not culture has an intrinsic value for Christians. Is it redemptive? Can it be an aid to spiritual maturity? Is a society morally improved by its culture?

Lewis considers the ideas of Dr. I. A. Richards, an atheist literary critic who held that "good poetical taste" could provide "the means of attaining psychological adjustments which improved a man's power of effective and satisfactory living all around."<sup>26</sup> For Richards, "This theory of value was a purely psychological one." And Lewis adds, "This amounted to giving poetry a kind of soteriological function; it held the keys of the only heaven that Dr. Richards believed in."<sup>27</sup> While culture, in this way, addresses that part of the problem of evil related to human deficiency, Lewis, nevertheless, rejects Richards's position for two reasons. First, as a Christian, he rejects the inherent materialism of Richards's atheistic approach to psychology. Second, he is suspicious of anything that smacks of elitism, as if "superior taste" could become a synonym for "superior character."<sup>28</sup> This could open the door to pride and the evil that is likely to follow in its wake; and Lewis stands against this.

Lewis then turns his attention to the New Testament to see if he might find answers to his inquiry from the Bible. After this investigation, he concludes that the Scriptures, "if not hostile, [were] yet unmistakably cold to culture. I think we can still believe culture to be innocent after we have read the New Testament; I cannot see that we are encouraged to think it important."<sup>29</sup> Here, Lewis overlooks the significance of the creation by God of a particular people, the Jews through whom he would give his word and his Son to the world. If this is so, then culture may have significances that Lewis fails to identify. He also neglects the significance of culture and the Incarnation: God comes in flesh at a particular place and time to work out purposes that must be understood and translated into other places and times. Nevertheless, in Lewis's estimation, whether right or wrong, the Scriptures do not lend their authority for the resolution of this issue. He would have to look elsewhere to discover the value of culture.

26. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 12.

27. *Ibid.*, 12.

28. *Ibid.*, 13.

29. *Ibid.*, 15.

Next, Lewis turns to authors and periods of literature with which he is familiar. Here he did not find Christian experience necessarily enhanced by the literature *per se*, though he did believe that “the sub-Christian or anti-Christian values implicit in most literature did actually infect many readers.”<sup>30</sup> At this point, Lewis finds Newman helpful. Newman’s lectures on *The Idea of a University* sternly resisted the temptation to confuse culture with things spiritual. Even so, he exhibited an appreciation of “the beauty of culture for its own sake.”<sup>31</sup> The value of culture, according to Newman and highlighted by Lewis, is observable in four ways. First, culture is of interest for this world. Neither Newman nor Lewis was Gnostic. As Christians, they saw value in a world created by God. Civilizations, being part of the created order, could be appreciated as things in themselves, as part of a world which God had made. Lewis notes, “The cultivation of the intellect, according to [Newman], is ‘for this world.’”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the development of the intellectual life has cultural value, even though temporary. Second, culture cannot make Christians, but it can develop gentlemen. If such cultivation looks like virtue, this, according to Lewis, is an observation made at a distance. Newman “will not for an instant allow ‘that it makes men better.’”<sup>33</sup> Refinement must not be confused with virtue. Third, spiritual guides may encourage participation in cultural activities. This is not because these activities make a participant more pleasing to God, but rather because they may provide “innocent distraction at those moments of spiritual relaxation which would otherwise lead to sin.”<sup>34</sup> Fourth, Lewis observes through Newman that theology as an intellectual activity, encouraged by culture, may provide gains in “meritoriousness,” but could also lead to losses in “liberality.”<sup>35</sup> He sees in Newman a concession to a kind of goodness that is not necessarily moral but has a developmental value. The clever man is preferred to the dull one and any man to the chimpanzee.<sup>36</sup>

30. *Ibid.*, 16.

31. *Ibid.*, 18.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 19.

36. *Ibid.*



Though Lewis appreciates Newman's distinctions, he cannot see how accepting Newman's understanding could motivate anyone to spend time investing in the temporal pursuits offered by culture when eternal matters ought to demand a greater concentration of our time and energies. "Christianity and Culture" first appeared in *Theology* in March of 1940.<sup>37</sup> In the autumn of 1939, just before he published the article, Lewis preached a University Sermon at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin. Hitler had invaded Poland, and Europe was at war. Lewis had been asked to address the issue of the apparent futility of pursuing a university education when Western civilization and culture appeared to be on the threshold of collapse. In the sermon titled "Learning in War Time," he reminded his listeners that war does not increase death: death is total in every generation.<sup>38</sup> War, danger, disease, famine and accidents are reminders of the age-old situation that human life and human culture have always been fragile. It is no use waiting till all was secure before engaging in the pursuits of culture; such times never come.<sup>39</sup> "Life has never been normal."<sup>40</sup> He reminded his hearers that cultural pursuits in the midst of cataclysmic conditions are not a mere fiddling while Rome burns. "To a Christian, the true tragedy of Nero must be not that he fiddled while the city was on fire but that he fiddled on the brink of hell."<sup>41</sup> It is not "a compromise between the claims of God and the claims of culture, or politics, or anything else. God's claim is infinite and inexorable."<sup>42</sup> Even so, Christianity sets forth the dignity of human endeavor and activity. "Learning and the arts flourish" in most times and places where the Church has gained a foothold. He suggests that the reason for this may be found in the text, "whether ye eat or drink or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."<sup>43</sup>

Clearly Lewis considers cultural participation important, but it is not yet clear why. He continues to look for reasons why with life and death in the balance, Christians should concern themselves with mat-

37. *Ibid.*, xii. Also, see Lewis, "Christianity and Culture," 166–79.

38. C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 53.

39. *Ibid.*, 45.

40. *Ibid.*, 44.

41. *Ibid.*, 43.

42. *Ibid.*, 47.

43. *Ibid.*, 47–48. See 1 Cor 10:31.

ters of culture. Lewis's rhetorical appeals at this point are attempts to ground themselves in objective value. The first reason why Christians should concern themselves with culture, he confesses, is not too exciting, but is nonetheless validated in Scripture: It is the task of earning a living. Since Christians are instructed to do their work (1 Thessalonians 4:11; Ephesians 4:28), they are expected to participate in the life of the culture as active in its workaday world.<sup>44</sup> Second, Lewis acknowledges that though cultural activity could be harmless, it can also be harmful. Since this is the case, Christians who recognize an abuse must also see that "the task of resisting that abuse might be not only lawful but obligatory."<sup>45</sup> Proper judgment and moral discernment are necessary, for, "if you don't read good books you will read bad ones. If you don't go on thinking rationally, you will think irrationally. If you reject aesthetic satisfactions you will fall into sensual satisfactions."<sup>46</sup> Third, Lewis recognizes that there can be an intrinsic good in culture for its own sake. He is not here speaking of moral goodness, but of a goodness that is pleasurable or enjoyable. He explains it this way, "I enjoyed my breakfast this morning, and I think it was a good thing and I do not think it was condemned by God. But I do not think myself a good man for enjoying it."<sup>47</sup> Fourth, Lewis recognized that the "values assumed in literature were seldom those of Christianity."<sup>48</sup> There were, to be sure, values encountered by the reader in literature; but he categorizes most of these as "sub-values." These "sub-values" include a) honor, b) sexual love, c) material prosperity, d) a pantheistic contemplation of nature, as in Wordsworth, e) "*Sehnsucht* awakened by the past, the remote, or the (imagined) supernatural," and f) the liberation of impulses.<sup>49</sup> He makes no defense for (c) and (f), and in calling the others sub-Christian, he does not mean that they possess no value. Being "immediately below the lowest level of spiritual value,"<sup>50</sup> they can provide an avenue up into the higher Christian values. They can also provide a way toward di-

44. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 20.

45. *Ibid.*, 20.

46. C. S. Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 46.

47. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, 36.

48. *Ibid.*, 21.

49. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

50. *Ibid.*, 22.

minishing spiritual affection. As Lewis says, "Any road out of Jerusalem must also be a road into Jerusalem."<sup>51</sup> A little later he develops this idea more fully:

Culture is a storehouse of the best sub-Christian values. These values are in themselves of the soul, not the spirit. But God created the soul. Its values may be expected, therefore, to contain some reflection or antepast of the spiritual values. They will save no man. They resemble the regenerate life only as affection resembles charity, or honour resembles virtue, or the moon like the sun. But though 'like is not the same,' it is better than unlike. Imitation may pass into initiation. For some it is a good beginning, for others it is not; culture is not everyone's road into Jerusalem, and for some it is a road out.<sup>52</sup>

Lewis implicitly suggests that culture can play a role in the process of conversion for some, but that there are no guarantees. He suggests two roles that culture might play in the lives of the converted. First, the pre-Christian joys, which might have played a part on the road into Jerusalem, need not to be forsaken at conversion. The pleasures to be found in the suburbs of Jerusalem do not have to be disparaged.<sup>53</sup> For this reason, it is clear that Lewis was not a Gnostic, nor could he be accused of being a strict Platonist. Second, people may engage themselves in glorifying God by doing something that becomes a glory to God in its very offering. Those whose aptitudes lead them to lives of literature, music, fine arts, and scholarship can benefit spiritually by these activities if they are offered to God.<sup>54</sup> The cultural activity itself is not meritorious. It will not be the means of salvation, but, as an act of self-giving, will be evidence of spiritual health. Lewis warns, however, that it is not the cultural activities themselves which are spiritually valuable, but the offering; i.e., "doing it as unto the Lord." In this way, any kind of hierarchy that identifies one type of activity as superior to another is a false hierarchy. Sweeping a room, as an activity offered to God, is as exalted, in that sense, as writing the *Summa Theologica*.

Having said this, Lewis admits to doubts. In his own field of literature, he is aware of a tension that exists between objective and subjec-

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., 23.

53. Ibid., 24.

54. Ibid., 24.

tive approaches to criticism. On the one hand, if criticism of books is objective, then judgments of the text can also be judged by how fairly they represent that text. On the other hand, if criticism is reduced to subjective judgments, making criticism merely a matter of taste, then all judgments are valid and none significant. Lewis senses the tension between two kinds of good and bad in literature—one objective, and thus moral, the other subjective and without moral implication. He struggles to fit these two approaches “into a consistent philosophy of values,” and adds, “but it is one thing to be unable to explain a phenomenon, another to ignore it.”<sup>55</sup>

Lewis believed this tension between the subjective and objective was healthy, as long as both were operational. This acceptance of tension led to a development in his literary thinking that would arrive at full stature in his *An Experiment in Criticism*,<sup>56</sup> which he would publish some twenty years after the “Christianity and Culture” article. In this investigation of Lewis’s literary criticism and the problem of evil, the question still remains: in what way is culture generally, and literature specifically, a road into Jerusalem, and in what way is it a road out? And what might the implications of this be for subjectivism and the problem of evil? Lewis addresses these matters before the academy rhetorically, developing his argument logically as he builds his case against subjectivism.

## Christianity and Literature

Having considered what Lewis has said about culture, I now turn my attention to what he has written about literature, seeking to understand the larger problem of subjectivism and literary criticism. Lewis published, “Christianity and Literature,”<sup>57</sup> a year before “Christianity and Culture” first appeared. Here Lewis begins by attending to the question of Christianity and literature specifically. He thinks little can be said about the topic, for the rules that govern what might be called “Christian literature” are not much different than rules that govern literature in general. Putting it simply he writes, “I think, Christian

55. *Ibid.*, 35.

56. C. S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 61. This will be developed further later in the chapter.

57. C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*. 36.

literature can exist only in the same sense in which Christian cookery might exist. Boiling an egg is the same process whether you are a Christian or a pagan."<sup>58</sup> He wonders if it might be more profitable to explore "what may be called the Christian approach to literature; about the principles, if you will, of Christian literary theory and criticism."<sup>59</sup> Lewis then begins to identify two things that a Christian approach to literature would oppose.

First, the Christian approach would oppose the idea of genius in literature. Here he identifies some "key-words of modern criticism;" these are "*Creative*, with its opposite *derivative*; *spontaneity*, with its opposite *convention*; *freedom*, contrasted with *rules*."<sup>60</sup> Because man's creative endeavor is the work of created beings, Lewis believes, perhaps too strongly, that a Christian approach to literature ought to be derivative, conventional and obedient. He writes, "In the New Testament the art of life itself is an art of imitation: can we, believing this, believe that literature, which must derive from real life, is to aim at being 'creative,' 'original,' and 'spontaneous?'"<sup>61</sup> It appears that Lewis has defined too narrowly a New Testament approach to art generally and a Christian approach to literature specifically. To limit Christian art to that which is imitation is short-sighted. His consignment is either too inflexible, allowing for no other options, or too ambiguous, not clarifying as carefully as he could what it is that he opposes to "creative." If he means by this that he rejects anarchy in art, so be it. If he is trying to rein in an antinomian approach to art that acknowledges no rules whatsoever, then perhaps his position is acceptable. But if he is trying to suggest that the artist must be prevented from doing something unconventional

58. *Ibid.*, 1.

59. *Ibid.*, 3.

60. *Ibid.*, 3.

61. *Ibid.*, 6. Lewis writes, "An author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom. Our criticism would therefore from the beginning group itself with some existing theories of poetry against others. It would have affinities with the primitive or Homeric theory in which the poet is the mere pensioner of the Muse. It would have affinities with the Platonic doctrine of a transcendent Form partly imitable on earth; and remoter affinities with the Aristotelian doctrine of *mimesis* and the Augustinian doctrine about the imitation of nature and the Ancients. It would be opposed to the theory of genius as, perhaps, generally understood; and above all it would be opposed to the idea that literature is self-expression" (7).

because it is less than a Christian approach to art would permit, I must disagree. Convention, at that point, is a myth. In a strict sense, imitation is never utterly conventional. An individual, “fearfully and wonderfully made” engages in something particular, unique, not having been tried in quite the same way and under the same set of circumstances before. Art may have an imitative quality, but the picture being painted has not been attempted before on this canvas and with the same brush strokes. Furthermore, periods, movements, or schools in art, music and literature are, by their very existence, indications that something new has happened. The new school may have borrowed, copied, even mixed elements from the past to discover and make something new. It may be that Lewis would respond and suggest that the creative ability is itself derivative. But if that is the case, is it not safe to suggest that man made in the image of a Creator could create something unique? If God is Omniscient, human creativity will not produce something outside the realm of what He knows and may in fact be the way in which He chooses to bring new things into existence. Of course, I am not suggesting that man could create as God, *ex nihilo*; but as God can bring something new into existence, could we not expect that man, made in that image, as sub-creator, could also produce works of art that are not limited to mere imitation? Should Lewis respond that all acts of man, as creative acts, will always be acts of imitation, then it would seem that we could expect no progress in the arts whatsoever. His suggestion that a Christian approach to art and literature would be one that was opposed to genius appears to be weak. Lewis makes no argument against subjectivism here.

The second element a Christian approach to literature would oppose, and one that narrows in on Lewis’s concern about subjectivism, is that Lewis believes a Christian approach to literature would oppose “the idea that literature is self-expression.”<sup>62</sup> He illustrates what he means by “self-expression” as he contrasts the *Confessions* of Rousseau with the *Confessions* of St. Augustine. Rousseau exhibits “his own temperament” as “a kind of absolute,” whereas Augustine desires an enlargement of himself, ashamed of the fact that his is “a narrow house too narrow for Thee to enter—Oh, make it wide. It is in ruins—Oh, rebuild it.”<sup>63</sup> It is at

62. *Ibid.*, 7.

63. *Ibid.*, 9.

this point that a reader begins to see Lewis's awareness of the effects of subjectivism on literature. The road out of Jerusalem, it appears, may be the road into self, whereas the road into Jerusalem may be the road out of self. At this point Lewis begins to clarify what he thinks a Christian approach to literature ought to include. The importance of such thinking is underscored by Weaver; he writes, "Rhetoric at its truest seeks to perfect men by showing them better versions of themselves."<sup>64</sup>

### *An Experiment in Criticism*

*An Experiment in Criticism* was one of the last books of literary criticism Lewis would write before his death.<sup>65</sup> The book is an attempt at a new approach to literary critical methodology. Instead of making judgments on books, Lewis wonders if it might be more profitable to make judgments about the way that books are read. He is cautious as he proceeds.

According to George Bailey, a former student, "Lewis had three standard forms of comment on an essay. If the essay was good: 'There is a good deal in what you say.' If the essay was middling 'There is something in what you say.' If the essay was bad: 'There *may* be something in what you say.'<sup>66</sup> Then Bailey adds that when literary critical judgments were to be made, Lewis would warn, "not with Brogans, please, slippers are in order when you proceed to make a literary point."<sup>67</sup> Lewis sought to tread softly as he guided his readers through his own experiment. He admitted that

Observation of how men read is a strong basis for judgements on what they read; but judgements on what they read is a flimsy, even a momentary, basis for judgements on their way of read-

64. Weaver, *Ethics*, 25.

65. C. S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*. Lewis prepared another book of literary criticism for publication before he died, it was *The Discarded Image*, which had been Lewis's Prolegomena lectures to Medieval and Renaissance literature, a series, as Lewis says in the preface, "given more than once at Oxford" (*Experiment in Criticism*, vii). Though the lectures were edited for publication after *Experiment in Criticism*, all the data suggests that it was work substantially done earlier than the *Experiment*. It can well be said that *An Experiment in Criticism* reflects Lewis's thinking about literary critical theory at the end of his life.

66. Keefe, *Speaker and Teacher*. 81.

67. *Ibid.*

ing. For the accepted valuation of literary works varies with every change of fashion, but the distinction between attentive and inattentive, obedient and wilful, disinterested and egoistic, modes of reading is permanent; if ever valid, valid everywhere and always.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, the goal of his “experiment” is to discover what he can observe and learn from the way people read books.

He divides readers into two basic categories: the few, or the literary, and the many, or the unlitrary. The unlitrary tend to read a book only once: and “the sure mark of an unlitrary man is that he considers ‘I’ve read it already’ to be a conclusive argument against reading a work.”<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, the literary will return to certain books over and over again throughout the course of their lives. Lewis explains that the many, the unlitrary, tend to read only for the event.<sup>70</sup> Once the plot is known and the conclusion settled, they see no reason to return again to the same book. For the few, the literary, the entire world, which the book has opened up to their senses, keeps drawing them back. They are not dissuaded from returning to the book because they already know its surprises. It is the very nature of the surprises themselves that beckon them to return. It is the enjoyment and exposure to the very quiddity of the world the author has invented, with all of its sensual experience, that draws the literary back again and again.

Lewis clarifies the difference in the reading of the few and the many when he considers how they each look at visual art.<sup>71</sup> “The distinction can hardly be better expressed than by saying that the many *use* art and the few *receive* it.”<sup>72</sup> He warns, “We must not let loose our own subjectivity upon the pictures and make them its vehicles. We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations.”<sup>73</sup> Of course this is difficult, but it is a discipline

68. C. S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 106. Lewis writes that “Fashions in literary taste come and go among adults, and every period has its own shibboleths” (C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, 40).

69. C. S. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 2.

70. *Ibid.*, 30, 36–37.

71. *Ibid.*, 14–26.

72. *Ibid.*, 19.

73. *Ibid.*, 18.



worth cultivating. If it is never attempted then we remain provincial. He informs his readers,

We must use our eyes. We must look and go on looking till we have certainly seen exactly what is there. We sit down before the picture in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.<sup>74</sup>

At this point Lewis has not yet classified the activity of “using” literature as negative. Nor is he ready to say that the activity of receiving literature is good. So far, it is a matter of understanding how those who use art “do not really see the pictures as they are.”<sup>75</sup> Lewis writes, “The real objection to that way of enjoying pictures is that you never get beyond yourself.”<sup>76</sup> Apart from utilitarian benefits, the art means nothing to the many.

Lewis acknowledges the subtle ways that “using” may interfere with the possibility of gaining a clear grasp of a text. He recognizes complexities and gives his readers a list of possibilities far from exhaustive. Even so, it is a good start at discovering how “using” can affect the way we see. First, he looks at the possible way even scholars may be found among the many.<sup>77</sup> Their former love of literature has atrophied to the point of mere professional concern. Literature still has a place for them, but its purposes are utilitarian and focused primarily on making a living. Second, he considers the status seeker.<sup>78</sup> This is a person “entirely dominated by fashion.” He has a desire to be recognized at parties as one on the cutting edge. For the status seeker, literature is a tool that keeps him up on the trends of the moment and connects him with the people whose company matters to him the most. The third, and perhaps most subtle, group of “users” Lewis mentions are the devotees of culture.<sup>79</sup> These are people who expose themselves to a wide range of cultural activities. They are not driven by enjoyment. They have not found pleasure in the activity of reading. Their drive is for “self-improvement.”

74. *Ibid.*, 19.

75. *Ibid.*, 21.

76. *Ibid.*

77. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

78. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

79. *Ibid.*, 8–11.