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"The Stance of a Last Survivor": C. S. Lewis and the Modern World (Chapter One of The Rhetoric of Certitude)

Gary L. Tandy

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The Rhetoric of Certitude



The Rhetoric of Certitude

C. S. Lewis's Nonfiction Prose



GARY L. TANDY

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Frontis: C. S. Lewis at his desk.
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To Janet, Julia, Jackson,
and John Garrison.
And for Mom, who waits to greet us
in Aslan's Country.

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Contents



Introduction	ix
1 “The Stance of a Last Survivor”: C. S. Lewis and the Modern World	1
2 C. S. Lewis’s Rhetorical Theory	27
3 The Rhetoric of Argumentation: Invention, Arrangement, and Style in C. S. Lewis’s Nonfiction Prose	43
4 The Rhetoric of Certitude: Some Stylistic Traits of C. S. Lewis’s Nonfiction Prose	83
5 The Unity of C. S. Lewis’s Nonfiction Prose	119
Notes	125
Bibliography	127
Index	133

Introduction



As professor and scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature, C. S. Lewis wrote and published well-respected and influential literary criticism. At the same time, following his conversion to Christianity around 1930, he felt a duty to apply his argumentative and philosophical skills to the writing of Christian apologetics—defenses of traditional Christian principles against the attacks of skeptics and religious liberals. More important, Lewis lived in an age largely hostile to his attitudes and thought, both in literature and Christianity. In a period that saw such startling literary productions as *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, Lewis chose to defend traditional literary forms such as epic poetry and allegory. And in a century enamored with the theories of Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and Jung, Lewis offered a standard of mere Christianity, accepting, without apology, the sinfulness of man and God's supernatural involvement in human affairs. Thus, Lewis was faced with an extremely difficult rhetorical problem: how does a writer communicate his ideas to his audience when every social, cultural, and intellectual force is at work to undermine the very concepts he presents? A study of Lewis's nonfiction prose reveals clearly the rhetorical interplay of author, subject, and audience and the ways in which these elements manifest themselves in the style of the prose works.

In the years since his death, Lewis's literary reputation has risen steadily. While early works on Lewis tended to focus on biographical aspects, particularly his conversion to Christianity, the past two decades have seen a large number of scholarly books and articles that evaluate his literary achievement.

Still, there is a noticeable lack of critical material that analyzes in detail the rhetorical and literary qualities of Lewis's prose. A review of the body of Lewis's criticism reveals two reasons for the lack of successful rhetorical analysis of his work: the failure to see the close relationship between his religious prose and his literary criticism and the unwillingness of scholars to analyze, in a detailed manner, Lewis's style.

The first problem is understandable in view of the variety of literary genres in which Lewis worked. In addition to a substantial body of literary criticism and religious apologetics, Lewis's canon includes novels, poems, essays, science fiction, and children's fantasy. The sheer size of this canon is formidable in itself. Walter Hooper's bibliography of Lewis's writings lists 58 books; 4 short stories; 10 books edited or with prefaces by Lewis; 149 essays, pamphlets, and miscellaneous pieces; 74 poems; 40 book reviews; and 84 published letters (*Companion*). Given the volume of Lewis's work, most critics have chosen to narrow their discussions to only one or two genres. Even a study such as this, limited to nonfiction prose, demands the examination of 13 books or essay collections of literary criticism and 14 books or essay collections dealing with religion, philosophy, and ethics (excluding the letters).¹

In the published criticism of Lewis's nonfiction prose, critics have seen little connection between Lewis's religious and literary works, perhaps because the two genres are directed to such different audiences. Much to the chagrin of many of his Oxford colleagues, Lewis declared that his religious writing was not for scholars and theologians, but for the common man (see, for example, "A Rejoinder to Dr. Pittenger," *God in the Dock*). Many readers of Lewis's religious works remain unaware, however, that the creator of *The Screwtape Letters* was also a respected literary historian, and author of such an influential work as *The Allegory of Love*. Likewise, the more sophisticated scholarly audience of such works as *The Discarded Image* may find it difficult to reconcile Lewis's academic brilliance with the simplicity of such devotional works as *The Four Loves*. Because of this natural separation of Lewis's prose into these seemingly exclusive categories, many critics have failed to recognize the essential unity of Lewis's rhetoric and have failed to identify those stylistic traits common both to his literary criticism and religious apologetics.

Previous rhetorical analyses of Lewis's work have reflected this dichotomy between his religious and literary works. Richard Cunningham's 1967 study, *C. S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith*, discusses Lewis's prose from a theological standpoint. Cunningham notes that, as a student of theology, it is not his purpose "to estimate Lewis's literary contribution or grade him as a writer" (17). Bruce Edwards's 1986 study does an excellent job of defining Lewis's at-

titudes toward literature and the "rhetoric of reading," but the study confines itself to Lewis's literary criticism (*Rhetoric of Reading*).

Those critics like Chad Walsh who have attempted to define Lewis's rhetoric by examining all his works have encountered a problem of another sort. Walsh, whose *C. S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics* was the earliest critical examination of Lewis's work, explains: "A literary critic determined to concentrate on purely literary considerations constantly finds himself analyzing and debating Lewis's ideas and has to struggle against recalcitrant forces if he wants to keep his analysis on purely literary tracks" (*Legacy* 247). Earlier in the same work, Walsh notes that "the temptation" in discussing *Mere Christianity* is to concentrate on the theological content and "slide quickly over its literary qualities." Accordingly, Walsh states that the aim of his book is to see how Lewis functions as a writer, not to evaluate the truth or falsehood of the particular religious doctrines he advocates (202). Ironically, in this very work, Walsh rarely gives any detailed analysis of Lewis's prose. Much of the book remains a summary of the content of Lewis's works, and when Walsh does attempt analysis, his discussion centers not on the style but on the structure of Lewis's arguments. In discussing Lewis's literary criticism, Walsh focuses on his theories, not the style of his prose. And near the end of his chapter on the apologetic prose, Walsh refers the reader to Cunningham's *C. S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* for a "technical discussion" of the prose (202). As has been noted, Cunningham's work examines the prose from a theological, not a rhetorical or literary, point of view.

Those critics who have confined their studies rigidly to stylistic analysis have faced another difficulty. It is exemplified by David Stewart's comment: "Underneath his forms and structure, however, is a foundation, namely language and style. The Lewis canon rests on a medium of words and sentences. Can anything of substance be said about them to help explain the power and appeal of his work? The fact that they draw little attention to themselves and that critics bypass them with courteous but cursory remarks suggests that there is not much to say" (93). Stewart goes on to suggest that Lewis's "prose is so uniform and lucid that it resists analysis, partly because it seems to violate the premise that style and substance are inseparable" (92). While we may agree that Lewis's style is intimately connected to his content, it seems an overstatement to suggest that his prose "resists analysis."

Given the problems encountered by these critics, it appears that the most fruitful rhetorical analysis of Lewis's prose would be one that mediates between two extremes. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to examine the rhetoric of Lewis's nonfiction prose. Rhetoric is defined broadly to include all the

linguistic and literary choices a writer makes in order to communicate with his audience. Lewis's attitudes and beliefs are examined, since they shaped his theory and practice of rhetoric, as are the social and cultural contexts in which Lewis spoke and wrote, since these largely shaped his view of audience. No attempt is made to credit or discredit Lewis's views of literature or religion, the study focusing instead on stylistic matters. At the same time, the approach is not limited to a statistical analysis of the grammatical features of Lewis's prose. Such an approach avoids the trap (into which much Lewis criticism falls) of attempting to decide whether his prose arguments are valid, honest, or even sincere. Such is the intent of Raymond Tripp in an essay on Lewis's style. He begins with the statement that "there is a widespread opinion, especially among those who disagree with C. S. Lewis, that there is something 'wrong' with his arguments" and that after reading Lewis, readers find themselves "convinced . . . against their will." Tripp concludes that Lewis's arguments are not really arguments at all but merely "rhetorical assertion and illustration" based on the strength of his personal convictions (27). Tripp's treatment of Lewis exemplifies the danger mentioned by Chad Walsh: an essay purporting to be a stylistic analysis becomes a philosophical/theological discussion of Lewis's thought and value system. By contrast, an approach that defines rhetoric as the art of making linguistic and literary choices in order to persuade or communicate with a particular audience will not ultimately concern itself with whether a writer's arguments are right or wrong. Rather it will ask, Why did the writer choose this particular method? and Were these choices appropriate and effective in view of the writer's subject and audience?

Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the study by examining the context in which Lewis wrote and the stance he adopted in reaction to the intellectual, cultural, and social trends of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 examines Lewis's comments on language, communication, and style in his nonfiction prose in order to describe his theory of rhetoric; since Lewis's theory of language was so closely related to his religious beliefs, this chapter emphasizes Lewis's theory and method of Christian apologetics. Chapter 3 analyzes Lewis's rhetorical practice in the areas of invention, arrangement, and style, emphasizing the argumentative nature of Lewis's prose and defining the broader characteristics of his style. Chapter 4 demonstrates how Lewis's rhetorical stance and rhetorical theory resulted in specific stylistic traits of diction, syntax, and rhetorical figures. The chapter examines these traits, which constitute a style or rhetoric of certitude, in detail in order to define the unique quality of Lewis's prose style. Finally, chapter 5 argues for the essential stylistic unity of Lewis's literary criticism and religious prose. Extended discussions of Lewis's

imaginative literature are omitted, as are those of his published letters. Thus, while the study does not exhaust the possibilities for analyzing Lewis's rhetoric, it does fill several gaps evident in previous studies and suggests a method for future analyses of Lewis's writing style.

“The Stance of a Last Survivor”

C. S. Lewis and the Modern World



We are to consider what men wrote, and our judgement on it must, of course, attempt to be literary, not theological. This does not mean that we are to confine ourselves rigidly to questions of style. Though we must not judge our authors' doctrine as doctrine, we must certainly attempt to disengage the spirit and temper of their writings to see what particular insights or insensibilities went with the varying beliefs, what kinds of sentiment and imagination they unwittingly encouraged.

*C. S. Lewis, English Literature in the
Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama*

Many critics have noticed with interest “De Descriptione Temporum,” Lewis's inaugural lecture as the professor of medieval and Renaissance English literature at the University of Cambridge. This address, delivered in 1954, is remembered primarily for its conclusion, in which Lewis portrays himself as the last dinosaur, a specimen of the Old Western order in modern society. But the lecture contains a great deal more than this memorable metaphor; it sets forth, in a systematic manner, much that is central to Lewis's thought and work. And the knowledge of these central ideas is essential for anyone wishing to understand Lewis's rhetorical theory and practice.

Lewis organizes the lecture around the question of where the Great Divide in history should be placed and offers four possibilities: (1) between antiquity

and the Dark Ages, (2) between the Dark and the Middle Ages, (3) toward the end of the seventeenth century, and (4) in the early nineteenth century. After disqualifying the first three for various reasons, he states: "It is by these steps that I have come to regard as the greatest of all divisions in the history of the West that which divides the present from, say, the age of Jane Austen and Scott" (*Essays* 7). He then goes on to support this claim by considering four areas of thought and human experience in which radical changes appeared in the previous two centuries. First, Lewis notes (he admits this is his weakest point) the changes in the political order. Specifically, he mentions the change from political rulers to political leaders and the use of advertising techniques in government. Second, regarding the arts, Lewis suggests that no prior age produced work that was "in its own time as shatteringly and bewilderingly new as that of the Cubists, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and Picasso has been in ours" and notes that this novelty applies equally in his area of specialization, poetry. Lewis has in mind here particularly the difficulty of much modern verse: he refers to a recent symposium on T. S. Eliot's short poem "Cooking Egg" at which several literary scholars could reach no agreement on the poem's meaning. Third, Lewis puts forth the great religious change, what he calls the "un-christening" (in contrast to the christening of Europe in the first centuries AD). In Jane Austen's time, he notes, "some kind and degree of religious belief and practice were the norm: now they are the exception." Earlier in the address, Lewis had noted that for our ancestors, all history could be divided into two periods: the pre-Christian and the Christian. For modern man, history falls into three: the pre-Christian, the Christian, and the post-Christian. Finally, Lewis notes the change that he calls his "trump card": the birth of machines. This change, Lewis argues, is on the same level as the change "from stone to bronze, or from a pastoral to an agricultural economy." He goes on to consider the psychological effects of this change, particularly the "archetypal image" of old machines being superseded by new and better ones, with all its implications for man's view of human purpose and progress. Thus, Lewis concludes, because of the nature of change in these four areas, the modern period represents the "greatest change in the history of Western Man" (*Essays* 8–11).

The lecture's conclusion has already been mentioned. In it, Lewis claims that he belongs not to the modern world so much as to the Old Western order, which had remained fairly constant for over two thousand years until upset by the kinds of catastrophic changes described above. With regard to the literature of this old order, Lewis states: "I read as a native texts that you must read as foreigners." And he concludes: "Speaking not only for myself but for all other

Old Western men whom you may meet, I would say, use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs" (*Essays* 14).

By the time C. S. Lewis went to Cambridge in 1954, he had already completed his most significant works of literary criticism and apologetics, and he had established a formidable reputation in academic circles as a literary historian and received worldwide acclaim as a lay apologist for Christianity. Thus, his lecture cannot be viewed as announcing a startling new direction in thought. Readers of Lewis's literary criticism (e.g., *The Allegory of Love*, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*) would have already discovered Lewis's preference for older literature and his conviction that a reader must suspend most of his modern assumptions in order to understand that literature. Rather, the lecture should be seen as a codification and systematic restatement of Lewis's basic attitudes toward the past and the present. Far from being mere curiosities couched in striking metaphors, the ideas in the lecture pervade Lewis's work, particularly his nonfiction prose. Furthermore, Lewis's basic distrust of modernity and preference for older patterns of thought are the threads that run through and unite his large body of prose work. Finally, these central attitudes may be seen as a rhetorical stance that Lewis adopted in his nonfiction prose in order to communicate effectively his religious and literary ideas in the modern world.

Although no one has examined its rhetorical implications, a few critics have seen Lewis's attitude toward the modern world as central to an understanding of his work. Peter Kreeft has remarked that Lewis's three main genres—literary criticism, imaginative fiction, and apologetics—all carry the common theme of "a lover's quarrel with the world of modernity." He goes on to call this theme "the main source of Lewis's historical significance," naming Lewis "the prophet Amos against the modern world" (13). J. A. W. Bennett relates Lewis's stance in the Cambridge lecture to his personality and beliefs: "The stance of a last survivor always attracted him; it is one of the likings that he shared with William Morris, and it early drew him to the sagas and the doomed Edaic gods. It comes easily, perhaps too easily, to a traditionalist, especially to one who rejects the view that civilization is bound to increase, easily also to a Christian foreseeing a time when faith shall not be found on the earth" (44). Here Bennett uses two words that go far toward explaining Lewis's thought. He was indeed both a traditionalist and a Christian, and these elements are important for understanding both his religious and scholarly prose.

Lewis himself would have vehemently rejected any biographical approach to his work; however, there is some evidence that his adoption of the minority/outsider role may have begun early in his life. His biographers record the

fourteen-year-old Clive's unpleasant experiences at Malvern College, noting that not only did the boy's great intelligence make him different from his classmates but his "temperament . . . resisted all appearances of collectivism and standardization" (Green and Hooper 36-37). It was here that Lewis first encountered what he later called the "Inner Ring"—that socially elite group from which he was excluded.¹ Roger Green and Walter Hooper also note that Warren Lewis, Clive's older brother, who had been happy at Malvern, was somewhat perturbed that his own brother was a social outcast at the same school (36-37). In manhood, though Lewis became an extremely sociable man, his pattern was to move primarily in a small circle of like-minded friends. As Humphrey Carpenter's work *The Inklings* demonstrates, this group had all the characteristics of a small band of determined survivors fighting against forces in the outside world. Carpenter notes that the "ideas and interests of the Inklings contrasted sharply with the general intellectual and literary spirit of the nineteen-twenties and thirties" (xiii-xiv). Lewis himself described the attraction such a group held for him in an essay on Rudyard Kipling: "When we forgather with three or four trusted cronies of our own calling, a strong sense of community arises and is enjoyed. . . . We may all be engaged in standing together against the outer world" ("Kipling's World," *Essays* 245). George Bailey has suggested that at Oxford his devotion to a small group may have been as much by necessity as by preference. Bailey notes Lewis's distance from most of his fellow dons, remarking that he was aware of only two friends of Lewis's at the university, Tolkien and Dyson, the English don at Merton. The reason, according to Bailey, was that "as popularizer of Christian dogma, Lewis was embarrassing to the academic community" (120). Whatever the reasons, personal or social, it is clear that Lewis demonstrated in his own personality and habits an embattled posture toward the outside world, and that this posture was often shared by a few like-minded associates.

But it is John Wain, British novelist/poet/critic and a personal acquaintance of Lewis's, who has given the most penetrating analysis thus far of Lewis's attitude toward the modern age. In a not altogether flattering essay on Lewis—which begins with the observation that "every don is equipped with a persona, a set of public characteristics that in time he finds hard to lay aside even in private"—Wain notes that Lewis grew up in the Edwardian age and his "chief allegiances were to that age." From 1925, when he became a fellow of Magdalen, Wain continues, "it was easy for him to ignore the modern world" since Oxford has not changed greatly since Edwardian days. "Even before he got his fellowship, he had noticed the 1920's only to draw away from them in

hostile dissent. From about 1914 onward, he disliked modern literature because it reflected modern life" (71). Wain relates this withdrawal from his own age to Lewis's impersonality in human contacts. Lewis, he says, "deliberately adopted the role of a survival. He was Old Western man, his attitudes dating from before Freud, before modern art or poetry, before the machine even." Wain notes that "there is an element of disabling unreality about the striking of such an attitude. A man born in 1850 might naturally inhabit an older 'order'; a man born, as Lewis was, in 1898 could only reconstruct it from boyhood memories and adult reading. Lewis, who was twenty-four in the year that saw the publication of *The Waste Land*, couldn't claim to belong to a generation whose taste in poetry, for instance, was formed before Eliot 'came along'" (72). Wain explains the all-pervading contentiousness of Lewis's writing by referring to Lewis's "dinosaur" role: "He was fighting a perpetual rear-guard action in defense of an army that had long since marched away. . . . What Lewis was actually doing, most of the time, was interpreting the past in terms of the Chesterton-Belloc era as he reconstructed that era in his own mind" (72-73).

One need not agree with all of Wain's underlying assumptions to recognize the significance of his remarks. For example, it is obvious that Wain himself denies the validity of much of Lewis's thought when he describes Lewis's army as having "long since marched away." Lewis would no doubt have replied that if the ideas that G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc had put forth were true in the early twentieth century, then they would be equally valid in the 1940s and 1950s. Still, Wain makes a key discovery when he remarks that Lewis "deliberately adopted the role of a survival."

It is this deliberate adoption that is crucial to an understanding of the rhetorical qualities of Lewis's prose. If it is true that the role Lewis characteristically adopts is that of an Old Western thinker in opposition to the modern world, then it is important to note the specific passages in his work that reveal his attitudes toward modern thought, society, religion, and literature, since these form the foundation upon which he based his rhetorical theories and strategies. Lewis's attitudes toward the modern world will be discussed under the following headings: Reason, chronological snobbery, the model, politics and society, religion, and literary criticism.

REASON

In an essay entitled "The Poison of Subjectivism," Lewis describes what he sees as a distinctive trait of the modern outlook:

Until modern times no thinker of the first rank ever doubted that our judgements of value were rational judgments or that what they discovered was objective. The modern view is very different. It does not believe that value judgements are really judgments at all. They are sentiments, or complexes, or attitudes, produced in a community by the pressure of its environment and its traditions, and differing from one community to another. To say that a thing is good is merely to express our feeling about it; and our feeling about it is the feeling we have been socially conditioned to have. (*Christian Reflections* 73)

Lewis gave an extended treatment of modern subjectivity in the Riddell Memorial Lectures, which he delivered at the University of Durham. Published in 1943 as *The Abolition of Man*, these three lectures are a concise and at times biting satiric indictment of modern social, ethical, and scientific thought. The thesis of this work is that there is a sole source of all value judgments, which may be called the Tao, Natural Law, Traditional Morality, or the First Principles of Practical Reason. Because this is the sole system of value, modern man's effort to refute it and set a new system in its place is futile (*Abolition* 56). Lewis takes as his point of departure a textbook in English composition written for upper-form schoolchildren. He draws on specific statements from the text to show that the underlying assumptions of the book deny the possibility of objective value judgments. For example, in discussing the story of Coleridge and two tourists at the waterfall, one of whom called the scene "sublime," and the other "pretty," the authors note that the assertion "That is sublime" really means "I have sublime feelings" (14). Lewis suggests that such an analysis encourages students to regard all judgments of value with suspicion, emphasizing the subtle way such an attitude could work on the minds of young readers (17).

Lewis goes on to note that until modern times, "all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it" (25). Thus, Coleridge could agree with the observation that the waterfall was sublime because it was more "just" or "appropriate" than the observation that the waterfall was pretty. Lewis quotes several classical writers in support of this view, including

Aristotle, who said that the "aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought" (26). By contrast, Lewis notes that moderns tend to regard such "stock responses" with suspicion. In another context, Lewis notes that one of the proper functions of art is to maintain stock responses, and he therefore rejects I. A. Richards's theory that stock responses in literature are a sign of artistic inferiority (*Preface* 55-56).

In answer to this "poison of subjectivism," Lewis offers "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are" (*Abolition* 29). To the objection that approvals and disapprovals are emotions and as such not subject to logic, Lewis answers that emotional states can be in or out of harmony with Reason. "The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it" (30).

As indicated by *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis believed that all knowledge depends on the validity of Reason. In his early allegorical work, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, it is Reason who frees John from the prison of the Spirit of the Age. In a similar way, Lewis saw his own apologetic works, based on inquiry and reasoned argumentation, as an antidote to the free inquiry spirit of the modern world.

For Lewis, the sacrifice of objective truth had serious implications. First, it precluded rational discussion. All ideas could be attacked, but not on the basis of whether they were right or wrong. Lewis notes that the modern method was to assume without discussion that your opponent was wrong, then to explain "how he became so silly" ("Bulverism," *God in the Dock* 273). Lewis saw this vice as so prevalent that he invented a name for it: Bulverism. As a result of Bulverism and the denial of logic, according to Lewis, a "great deal of contemporary thought is, strictly speaking, thought about nothing—all the apparatus of thought busily working in a vacuum" ("Meditations in a Toolshed," *God in the Dock* 214). More important, Lewis felt that the gradual change from emphasis on object to emphasis on subject would lead eventually to extremes of behaviorism in which a small number of "Conditioners" controlled the rest of mankind. He refers to this dark future at the end of *The Discarded Image* and describes his vision in more detail in the final lecture of *The Abolition of Man*: "The final stage is come when Man by eugenics, by prenatal conditioning, and by an education and propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology, has obtained full control over himself. Human nature will be the last part of Nature to surrender to Man" (72). And in another context, Lewis quotes lines from Shelley's *The Cenci*, which he felt described accurately the thought and sentiment of twentieth-century man:

'Tis a trick of this same family
 To analyse their own and other minds.
 Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
 Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
 Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
 Into the depth of darkest purposes:
 So Cenci fell into the pit; even I
 Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself
 And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,
 Show a poor figure to my own esteem,
 To which I grow half reconciled. (109–19)

Chad Walsh summarizes well the extent to which Lewis's emphasis on Reason placed him in the minority in his own day:

At no point in his thinking is Lewis more out of sympathy with the intellectual climate of the times than in his sturdy reliance upon Reason. Like a few other lone wolf thinkers, he has observed the wholesale belittling of reason, which is almost the hallmark of the first half of the twentieth century. Certainly he has seen more clearly than most the intimate relation between Reason and morality and the results if the two go down together. By his clear defense of Reason he is doing his best to make it intellectually respectable to think. And in so doing, he astonishes his readers with new ideas—straight from the darkness of the Middle Ages. (*Apostle* 114)

CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY

Carl Jung, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, defines the "exemplary modern man" as one who is "moving towards a fuller consciousness of the present and finds that the ways of life which correspond to earlier levels of consciousness pall on him" (197). C. S. Lewis, far from being the exemplary modern man described by Jung, demonstrates in his prose a strong attraction to older ways of thought and a decided antipathy to modern consciousness of the present. In fact, Lewis saw modern man's infatuation with the present as one of his chief flaws, and he coined the phrase "chronological snobbery" to describe it.

In his spiritual autobiography, Lewis defines chronological snobbery as the "uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discred-

ited" (*Joy* 207). Lewis did not believe, however, that this way of thinking had suddenly sprung up in the twentieth century. He also identifies chronological snobbery in writers as early as the sixteenth century. He notes, for example, that Gabriel Harvey "was almost, like a modern, concerned with period, with being contemporary, anxious to follow the change of times. He proclaims in 1595 that the 'date of idle vanities is expired' and a new age of Spartan austerity about to begin. He is thus to be classed with Willes as a very early instance of that historical attitude towards the present which has since become so common" (*English Literature* 352–53). Earlier in the same work, speaking of Richard Willes's book on geography, Lewis notes that we first meet "that type of advertisement, since so common, which may be called chronological intimidation. Willes would have us buy his book because geography is the science of the future, because we are entering upon the geographical age" (308). As we shall note, Lewis saw this same chronological intimidation operating in literary studies (e.g., the attacks of Hulme, Eliot, and Pound on romanticism) and in theological discussions (e.g., the attacks of liberal theologians on truths traditionally held by Christians).

Lewis's dislike of chronological snobbery stemmed from his realization that his own age was also a "period." As he reminds us, "Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period" ("On the Reading of Old Books," *God in the Dock* 202). Thus, while people of the past were no cleverer than moderns and made as many mistakes, they did not make the same mistakes (202). Lewis used several times the analogy of two travelers to explain two different attitudes toward past and present: "It is like the difference between a mature and traveled man's love for his own country and the cocksure conviction of an ignorant adolescent that his own village (which is the only one he knows) is the hub of the universe and does everything in the Only Right Way. For our own age, with all its accepted ideas, stands to the vast extent of historical time much as one village stands to the whole world" (*Medieval and Renaissance Literature* 138). One of the effects of this easy assumption that the latest is best was a misreading of history and literature. As the following passages indicate, Lewis was not afraid to imply that older ways of thought and behavior were superior to the modern:

It is only natural that we, who live in an industrial age, should find difficulties in reading poetry that was written for a scholastic and aristocratic age. (*Allegory* 173–74)

A clear recognition that our own age is quite abnormally sensitive to the funny side of sententiousness, to possible hypocrisy, and to dullness, is absolutely necessary for any one who wishes to understand the past. ("What Chaucer Really Did to 'Il Filostrato,'" *Essays* 34)

In each of these passages, Lewis reminds readers that we must be aware of our modern assumptions so as not to misinterpret or fail to appreciate older ways of thought.

Lewis notes that whenever our modern presuppositions mislead us in our interpretation of the past, we are looking at "something on the lens of the glass we look through, not something in the historical object" (*English Literature* 5-6). Thus, in the preface to *The Discarded Image*, Lewis negatively criticizes those readers who "prefer not to go beyond the impression, however accidental, which an old work makes on a mind that brings to it a purely modern sensibility and modern conceptions" (vii-viii).

Lewis identifies at least two sources for this tendency toward chronological snobbery. One, which he emphasized in his Cambridge inaugural lecture, is the assumption encouraged by the age of machinery that what is new is necessarily better and what is old is, by definition, obsolete (*Essays* 11). The second reason is what Lewis calls the "indurably evolutionary or developmental character of modern thought." As he points out in discussing the demise of Scottish poetry in the sixteenth century, however, "what is vital and healthy does not necessarily survive. Higher organisms are often conquered by lower ones" (*English Literature* 113). In fact, one of the major theses of Lewis's history of sixteenth-century English literature is that "every new learning makes room for itself by creating a new ignorance." As an example, he notes that in the twentieth century, the sciences are "beating back the humanities as humanities once beat back metaphysics" (31). As Bruce Edwards notes, Lewis's keen awareness of the dangers of chronological snobbery led him, in his literary criticism, apologetics, and fiction, to adopt a rehabilitative stance: "This rehabilitative stance manifested a reverence for the past, a principled skepticism of one's own period's mores and dogma, and a profound propensity for recovering and preserving lost values and ideals" ("Rehabilitating Reading" 30).

Lewis once commented that he hated and distrusted "reactions not only in religion but in everything" ("The World's Last Night," *Last Night* 94). The comment suggests one of Lewis's central ideas in his apologetic works. Besides dimming man's historical and literary insight, chronological snobbery, according to Lewis, causes many to deny the validity of Christianity without granting it serious consideration. Thus, Christianity was rejected on the grounds that it

was an ancient belief and ancient beliefs are assumed to be false. Even if Christianity were not rejected totally, Lewis notes that modern theologians often chose to ignore those doctrines in Christ's teaching that it had in common with the thought of first-century Palestine and to select those that "transcend" the thought of that ancient age. As an example, Lewis notes the rejection of the doctrine of Christ's Second Coming by many modern scholars and theologians ("The World's Last Night," *Last Night* 96-97). Once again, Lewis found modern thinkers guilty of chronological snobbery, for they were assuming a priori that the thought of the modern age was correct.

THE MODEL

Living in an age of science, Lewis steadfastly refused to believe that modern science had, at long last, figured out what the universe was like. Such a stance is not surprising, considering his outcries against chronological snobbery. Lewis's careful study of the history of thought prevented him from uncritically accepting the so-called advances of modern science. As Raymond Tripp notes, "Few scholars were as keenly sensitive to 'the psychological history of the West' as he. In all aspects and stages of his work one encounters the idea that our 'models' have changed, that new mystiques replace old" (32).

A comprehensive statement of Lewis's theory of models can be found in *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. As the subtitle indicates, Lewis is concerned in the work not with literature per se, but with the acquaintance with older "world views" that a reader must have in order to understand the literature. As Lewis explains: "In every period the Model of the Universe which is accepted by the great thinkers helps to provide what we may call a backcloth for the arts. But the backcloth is highly selective. It takes over from the total Model only what is intelligible to a layman and only what makes some appeal to imagination and emotion. Thus our own backcloth contains plenty of Freud and little of Einstein" (*Discarded Image* 14). Thus, the model, in Lewis's definition, contained more than scientific ideas. As Robert Smith states, Lewis was pointing to the "essential harmony of Platonic and Christian thought that coalesced in the Middle Ages and continued into the Renaissance. Lewis saw a massive body of works of art and literature that differed in details but not in their essential view of reality. This entity he referred to as the Model. Around the Model revolved, in one way or another, almost all of the Old Western Culture" (29). Though Lewis asserts in *The Discarded Image* that we should respect each model and idolize none, he admits to his personal delight in the medieval model of the universe, with its

combination of "splendour, sobriety, and coherence" (216). The terms with which he describes the model go far toward revealing Lewis's antipathy toward the modern model, in which he saw little that was splendid, sober, or coherent. "Hence," Lewis notes, "to look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest—trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, and theirs was classical" (98–99).

Similarly, "In modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in this, he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light" (74–75). From such remarks it is not difficult to determine which perspective Lewis prefers. In another typical comparison, Lewis notes that the fundamental concept of modern science is that of natural laws,² while that of medieval science was composed of sympathies, antipathies, and strivings among the elements of the universe. Lewis goes on to suggest that it matters a great deal on the imaginative and emotional levels "whether we project upon the universe our strivings and desires, or with the moderns, our police-system and our traffic regulations" (92–94).

It is obvious from his comparisons throughout *The Discarded Image* that Lewis sees the modern "model" as cause for the sense of despair and meaninglessness in modern thought. Modern man, he notes, feels "confronted with a reality whose significance he cannot know, or a reality that has no significance; or even a reality such that the very question whether it has a meaning is itself a meaningless question. It is for him . . . to discover a meaning . . . or at least a shape—to what in itself had neither." By contrast, the "Model universe of our ancestors had a built-in significance. The only difficulty was to make an adequate response" (203–4). Obviously, such a statement recalls Lewis's belief in the objective values and reason that made appropriate and inappropriate responses possible. Man's nature, Lewis notes in another work, was discoverable through reason: "The Existentialist feels *Angst* because he thinks that man's nature (and therefore his relation to all things) has to be created or invented, without guidance, at each moment of decision. Spenser thought that man's nature was given, discoverable, and discovered; he did not feel *Angst*. He was often sad: but not, at bottom, worried" (*English Literature* 392). And in remarking on Spenser's artistic welding together of a variety of philosophies (Protestant, chivalric, Platonic, Ovidian, Lucretian, and pastoral), Lewis explains that the poet could do so because his assumptions were different from ours: "It is scepticism, despair of objective truth, which has trained us to regard diverse philosophies as historical phenomena, 'period pieces,' not to be

pitted against one another but each to be taken in its purest form and savoured on the historical palate. Spenser could not feel thus because he assumed from the outset that the truth about the Universe was knowable and in fact known. If that were so, then of course you would expect agreements between the great teachers of all ages just as you expect agreements between the reports of different explorers" (*English Literature* 386–87).

Though Lewis's concept of models involved more than scientific thought, he felt that one of the crucial errors of the modern model had its origin in Darwinian theories. Lewis was careful to point out, however, that the popular idea of evolution was very different from the scientific versions. Thus, in an essay entitled "The Funeral of a Great Myth," Lewis compares the popular myth of evolution to a drama with a prelude and acts, implying the artificial, unscientific nature of evolutionary thought (*Christian Reflections* 86–88). In another essay, to debunk evolutionary assumptions, Lewis shows how his concept of chronological snobbery is closely related to the errors of evolutionary thought: "The first prehistoric drawings come, not from earlier scratchings, but from the hand and brain of human beings whose hand and brain cannot be shown to have been in any way inferior to our own; and indeed it is obvious that the man who first conceived the idea of making a picture must have been a greater genius than any of the artists who have succeeded him" ("Two Lectures," *God in the Dock* 209).

POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Peter Faulkner comments in a work on modernism that the chief event in the cultural and social life of the period 1910–1930 was the breaking up of the nineteenth-century consensus. As examples, he notes the labor movement and the activities of feminist groups. He comments that with increased social mobility, "Accepting one's place, loyalty to authority, unquestioning obedience, began to break down; patriotism, doing one's duty, even Christianity, seemed questionable ideals" (14). In the areas of science, he notes the probing of anthropology into the primitive roots of religion and psychology's focus on the power of the unconscious. Finally, Faulkner points to the "sense of complexity which was to be the modernist writer's fundamental recognition" (14).

Lewis was well aware of the forces at work in the modern world that were undermining older beliefs and modes of thought. In evaluating the probable future of Spenser's reputation, Lewis mentions many of the elements contributing to the modern reaction to the romantic: "The whole conception is now being attacked. Feminism in politics, reviving asceticism in religion,

animalism in imaginative literature, and, above all, the discoveries of the psycho-analysts, have undermined that monogamic idealism about sex which served us for three centuries" (*Allegory* 360). In the religious realm, Lewis saw modern forces as erasing the sense of sin necessary for an interest in Christianity. Specifically, Lewis pointed to a lopsided ethical view that over-emphasized kindness (in the modern mind, a vague feeling of benevolence) and the exclusion of such virtues as temperance, chastity, and humility. The second cause was the impression that psychoanalysis left on the public mind that the "sense of Shame is a dangerous and mischievous thing" (*Pain* 56).

Though Lewis normally avoided discussing politics, his strong convictions regarding personal freedom led him at times to criticize the collectivist tendencies that he saw in twentieth-century government. In this regard, Lewis resembled earlier Christian writers such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, whose efforts were aimed at restoring individual dignity and freedom. Still, Lewis's emphasis in his work is very unpolitical compared to that of Belloc and Chesterton. Richard Cunningham finds in Lewis an "almost congenital characteristic: his distrust of authority and rebellion against collectivism; and his passionate attachment to individualism, to the freedom to think and choose and live, to a man's being his own man" (42). Lewis traced the modern hatred of personal freedom from Rousseau through Hegel and saw man's freedom disappearing not only in the extremes of Nazism and Communism but even in England. Speaking at a banquet for devils, Lewis's *Screwtape* notes: "I heard the other day that in that country a man could not, without a permit, cut down his own tree with his own axe, make it into planks with his own saw, and use the planks to build a tool-shed in his own garden" ("Screwtape Proposes a Toast," *Last Night* 59). Though he valued freedom, Lewis was not blind to the weaknesses of democracy. Again speaking satirically through *Screwtape*, Lewis puts forward his belief that democracy has inherent qualities that discourage individual excellence: "The Democracies were surprised lately when they found that Russia had got ahead of them in science. What a delicious specimen of human blindness! If the whole tendency of their society is opposed to every sort of excellence, why did they expect their scientists to excel?" (67). We have already seen that Lewis abhorred the modern political preference for the leader with magnetism or personality over the older diligent, just ruler. He used the portmanteau word *Govertisement* (government by advertisement) to characterize the political activities of mid-twentieth-century England, with its endless "appeals, drives, and campaigns" ("De Descriptione Temporum," *Essays* 8).

As an apologetic writer, however, Lewis was not much concerned with political and social tendencies in the theoretical realm.³ Rather, he was interested in the way ideas and attitudes filtered down to the common man and changed the way he viewed reality. In one essay, for example, Lewis observes that fully industrialized societies have destroyed the ideal of good work so that "built-in obsolescence" has become an economic necessity. Lewis goes on to contrast this state with the biblical injunction to produce by our labor "that which is good" ("Good Work and Good Works," *Last Night* 72). At times, Lewis's criticisms of modern social views and practices took a milder form. An example is his explanation of a modern's inability to appreciate the ceremonial and solemn aspects of Milton's poetry: "in an age when every one puts on his oldest clothes to be happy in, you must re-awake the simpler state of mind in which people put on gold and scarlet to be happy in" (*Preface* 17). In this case, his tone is that of one who, while not condemning the modern attitude and practice, expresses a clear admiration for the older (and simpler) modes of thought and behavior.

RELIGION

As a writer of Christian apologetics, Lewis was obviously concerned with the prevailing religious climate of his day. Not surprisingly, he took a strong stance against the prevalent modern attitude toward religion and put forth as an alternative a belief in the traditional Christian faith.

Unlike many Christian writers, however, Lewis did not attempt to bolster the cause by pretending that Christianity was triumphing over unbelief. Rather, he painted, if anything, an overly bleak picture of the situation. He spoke of the "un-christening" as an accomplished deed, readily admitting that religious belief and practice were the exception rather than the norm ("De Descriptione Temporum," *Essays* 9-10). In fact, Lewis felt that unbelief was so far advanced that modern men were much more difficult to convert than were the pagans to whom the early Christians preached: "The post-Christian man of our day differs from [the Pagan] as much as a divorcee differs from a virgin. The Christian and the Pagan have much more in common with one another than either has with the writers of the *New Statesman*" ("Is Theism Important?" *God in the Dock* 172). Lewis saw ample evidence of the decline of religion in the nineteenth century as well, noting the "absence from Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol* of any interest in the Incarnation." Lewis comments that even in Sir Walter Scott's work and in that of most of his contemporaries, "only secular and natural values are taken seriously" ("The Decline of Religion," *God in the*

Dock 219). The twentieth century Lewis could only describe as "a culture that has lost its faith." And he did not foresee possibilities of improvement. Noting that "moral collapse follows upon spiritual collapse," Lewis once remarked to an interviewer that he looked upon the "immediate future with great apprehension" ("Cross-Examination," *God in the Dock* 265). Lewis retained this basic skepticism even in the face of an apparent revival of religion among the younger intellectuals of the mid-1940s. While admitting that Christianity was now "on the map" among the young, Lewis regarded the movement as a fashion and classed it with earlier fashions such as Bradley and the idealists and the Vorticists ("The Decline of Religion," *God in the Dock* 222). No doubt Lewis's realistic view of the status of religion helped give his apologetic works much of their energy. Lewis realized the significance of the battle because he refused to underestimate the enemy.

Surprisingly, Lewis often reserved his most vigorous attacks not for atheists and agnostics, but for the liberal theologians of his own and other communions. He reacted against such scholars as Rudolf Bultmann, J. A. T. Robinson, and A. R. Vidler because of their subjective and skeptical approach to scripture and once noted that "missionary to the priests of one's own church is an embarrassing role; though I have a horrid feeling that if such mission work is not soon undertaken the future history of the Church of England is likely to be short" ("Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," *Christian Reflections* 166). The reason for Lewis's opposition to these clergymen becomes clearer when we recognize that the central goal of liberal theologians was to reconcile the Bible and modern thought. As we have seen, Lewis was so fundamentally opposed to most of the tendencies in modern thought that such a reconciliation was inconceivable. In an address to a group of theology students, Lewis detailed four complaints against liberal theologians:

1. Their lack of literary judgment. They are imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading.
2. Their claim that Christ's teachings were misunderstood by his followers and have been recovered by modern scholars.
3. Their bias against and exclusion of the miraculous.
4. Their confident reconstruction of the genesis of texts which are so far removed in time. (*Christian Reflections* 152-66)

To oppose such views, Lewis returned to his stance of the Old Western man who "reads as a native" texts that others must read as foreigners: "The revolu-

tion in thought and sentiment which has occurred in my own lifetime is so great that I belong, mentally, to Shakespeare's world far more than to that of these recent interpreters. I see—I feel it in my bones—I know beyond argument—that most of their interpretations are merely impossible; they involve a way of looking at things which was not known in 1914, much less in the Jacobean period" (*Christian Reflections* 158). Though Lewis recognized that the opposition to Christianity was great, he believed strongly that the ancient faith offered a stability and permanence badly needed by modern man. He once stated that in contrast to moving with the times, in religion "we find something that does not move away" ("Myth Became Fact," *God in the Dock* 65). And in place of the raging controversies within the religious world, Lewis offered the safety of "a standard of plain central Christianity ('mere Christianity' as Baxter called it) which puts the controversies of the moment in proper perspective" ("On the Reading of Old Books," *God in the Dock* 201). As later chapters will argue, Lewis's rhetorical theory and prose style reflect this attitude of simplicity in the face of complexity, certainty in the midst of doubt.

LITERARY CRITICISM

Walter Hooper, in his account of an Oxford literary society of which Lewis was a longtime member, records the following comment by the secretary of the Martlets upon a paper read by Lewis in 1933: "The secretary commented that Lewis's paper was 'erudite and witty, though distinctly reactionary' and recorded that Lewis concluded the paper with 'a virulent but not unamusing attack on modern literature, which he sweepingly dismissed because it had nothing to say. Technique has been exalted above matter and the result was indeed a waste land'" ("To the Martlets" 56). This précis indicates that relatively early in his career as a literary critic Lewis had already assumed a fighting posture with regard to modern literature and literary theory. Hooper comments in another context that a discussion of one of his papers read at a meeting of the Martlets "led Lewis to an early recognition of the fact that others read and judged literature much differently than he. He was thus forced to defend what he loved and believed to be true" (*Essays* xii). The final plank, then, in Lewis's platform of opposition to the modern world involved literature and the judgment of literature—literary criticism. This element is arguably the most important, for Lewis viewed himself first as a literary critic or literary historian, not as a theologian, philosopher, or literary artist. Thus, it is in reading his statements on literature that one sees most clearly his antipathy to modern

thought. And since literature itself is a reflection of the scientific, cultural, social, and religious trends discussed above, Lewis's views on literature serve to highlight many of his points of disagreement with the twentieth century.

The origin of Lewis's reaction to modern literature can be traced to his early ambition to become a great poet. In 1919, when he was twenty, he published *Spirits in Bondage: A Cycle of Lyrics* and in 1926, *Dymer*, a long narrative poem in rhyme royal. (Both works were published under the pseudonym of Clive Hamilton.) Unfortunately, the literary climate of the early 1920s was not suited to Lewis's romanticism or to his preference for long narrative poetry. In a letter to his father concerning the reception of *Spirits in Bondage*, Lewis noted that "the current literary set is one I could not afford to live in anyway, and though many of them have kindly bought copies of *Spirits in Bondage* their tastes run rather to modernism, *vers libre* and that sort of thing" (qtd. in Green and Hooper 64). In fact, a comment made in Lewis's Oxford history regarding the sixteenth-century poet Robert Southwell applies equally well to Lewis himself: "Southwell," Lewis notes, "modestly but firmly refused to take any notice, as a poet, of the period in which he was living" (*English Literature* 544).

In his literary criticism, however, Lewis did take notice of current trends in poetry—primarily in order to discredit them. He disliked the vogue for *vers libre* and what he called the "hectic theory of poetry as existing in momentary lyrical impressions" (*Essays* xv). Hooper recounts that in 1925, Lewis and a group of friends "conceived the idea of a literary hoax in which they would send a series of mock-Eliotic poems to *The Dial* and *Criterion* under assumed names in hopes of publication and subsequent embarrassment of the editors. Lewis commented that the others were 'in it for pure fun, I from burning indignation'" (*Essays* xvi). This opposition to Eliot's poetic preferences reappeared later in Lewis's career. In a 1939 essay entitled "Shelley, Dryden, and Mr. Eliot," he argues vigorously against Eliot's elevation of Dryden as a poet at Shelley's expense and maintains that Shelley is to be regarded as "a more masterly, more sufficient, and indeed a more classical poet than Dryden" (*Essays* 188).

Nevill Coghill has described Lewis's attitude toward contemporary literature:

He had little sympathy for . . . the New Sensibility of the early twenties, for its flat bleakness, its lawless versification, its unheroic tone, its unintelligible images, its "modernity" in short. It delighted him that he could find no use of the word modern in Shakespeare that did not carry its load of contempt. The new psychology was another of the advances of "modernity" that he regarded with suspicion. None of these things

were a part of the everlasting gospel; they were quirks of fretful foreigners to good sense, sound poetry, and the known stuff of the soul. He did not feel at home in the poetry of Mr. Eliot or in that of the Sitwells; I do not remember ever to have heard him speak of the poetry of D. H. Lawrence or Ezra Pound. (60)

Although Lewis once claimed in an interview that he had read very little of such modern writers as Hemingway, Beckett, and Sartre, it is obvious from his letters and from his comments on the characteristics of modern literature that his opinions were not based on ignorance. In his Cambridge inaugural address, he discusses knowledgeably the qualities that separate modern literature from past literatures, and in his *Experiment in Criticism* he argues that modern poetry has drawn further away from prose than was the case in any earlier period. Lewis goes on to note that to respond to modern poetry, "You must achieve a trance-like condition in which images, associations, and sounds operate without these" logical and narrative connections (97). While he claimed not to have read modernist writers, we do know that Lewis read contemporary literature, for example, science fiction novels, throughout his life (see "On Science Fiction," *Other Worlds* 59–73).

Always present in Lewis's criticism is his awareness of modern literary theories and preferences that conflict with his own. Often Lewis noted how these modern opinions kept readers from appreciating older literature. For example, in the 1940s he noted that Tasso's English readers were few because of the "violent counter-romanticism" of the modern age (*Medieval and Renaissance Literature* 115). Lewis also attributed the twentieth-century neglect of the Bible as a literary document to the counter-romantic movement ("The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version," *Essays* 142). Similarly, in discussing Spenser, Lewis praises him for his handling of the poetry of escape or recreation and adds that such poetry is "(for some reason or other) . . . intensely hated at present" (*Allegory* 358). In an essay on Sir Walter Scott, Lewis finds that he must almost apologize for Scott's "sense," for "there is a widespread opinion that genius is never free from neurosis, and unless we can find *Angst* in an author's soul he will hardly be taken seriously" (*Essays* 210). Elsewhere in the same essay, Lewis defends two traits of Scott that he believes moderns find unacceptable: his avoidance of unhappy endings and his failure to make the novel a "comment on life" (212–13).

Lewis's reaction against modern views is also evidenced in his attitudes toward literary history. One of the chief tenets of Lewis's work is that readers often misinterpret older literature because of their modern assumptions.

Thus, Lewis's *modus operandi* in his criticism of older literature was always to ask "what furniture our ancestors' minds contained and how they felt about it—always with a view to the better understanding of what they wrote" (*Discarded Image* 126). According to Lewis, the business of the literary historian is "with the past not as it 'really' was . . . but with the past as it seemed to be to those who lived in it" (*English Literature* 32). Another danger (which Lewis classed as an instance of chronological snobbery) was the tendency of modern critics to be concerned only with those "ideas in his period which have since proved fruitful." Instead, Lewis chose to emphasize the ideas that seemed important at the time and recommended that the critic try "to forget his knowledge of what comes after, and see the egg as if he did not know it was going to become a bird" (*English Literature* 4–5). Without this emphasis, Lewis believed that the only older artists who would be esteemed were those whose work was congenial to a modern sensibility. As an example, he attributes the twentieth-century popularity of John Donne's poetry to its obscurity, dandyism, and seriousness and notes that "we want just what Donne can give us—something stern and tough, though not necessarily virtuous, something that does not conciliate" ("Donne and the Love Poetry of the Seventeenth Century," *Essays* 112–13).

Almost all of Lewis's major works of literary criticism reflect this concern with rescuing the literature of the past from modern misinterpretation. This he accomplished by placing literary works in their original social and literary contexts. Thus, Lewis rejected the anti-historical approach of the New Criticism, which emphasized the text as an organic unit to such an extent that questions of social context and audience were virtually ignored. For example, in his earliest major work, *The Allegory of Love* (1936), Lewis demonstrates his ability to reconstruct cultural and literary history, his attention to genre (allegory), and his fondness for resurrecting forgotten authors like Capalanus, Guillaume de Lorris, and Jean de Meung. Similarly, the title of his 1939 collection of essays (*Rehabilitations*) indicates his purpose: to defend writers who had fallen out of favor under the attack of modern critics. Thus, he defends Shelley against Eliot's charges and attempts to overcome modernist objections to the romance and simplicity of William Morris. *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) again shows his resurrection of an unpopular literary genre (epic) and his defense of Milton against charges that his religious views were heretical and his Satan was the true hero of the poem.

A few random quotations from Lewis's *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (1954) will illustrate Lewis's call throughout the work for readers to deny their modern reactions in order to appreciate older litera-

ture: "We must sever the modern association which connects extreme indecency with technical coarseness of form and with low social rank, and must think ourselves back into a world where great professional poets . . . lavished their skill on humours now confined to the preparatory school or the barrack-room" (94). In discussing old books, Lewis refers to the idea of "quaintness" and notes that we must distinguish between authors who "were really quaint in their own day and authors who seem quaint to us solely by the accident of our position—this is the very *pons asinorum* of literary history" (82). Lewis even points out that modern understanding can be hindered by the improper definition of a single word. He notes that the connotations of the words *humanism* and *puritanism* have changed since the sixteenth century so that *puritan* now means little more than "rigorist" or "ascetic" and *humanist* little more than "the opposite of puritan." Lewis suggests that "the more completely we can banish these modern senses from our minds while studying the sixteenth century the better we shall understand it" (17).

Lewis's last major critical work, *The Discarded Image* (published posthumously in 1964), best illustrates his allegiance to seeing the past as our ancestors saw it. His aim is to reconstruct and perhaps to rehabilitate an entire worldview—or model of the universe. Again, Lewis demonstrates his conviction that before one can understand past literature, one must first understand how and why the people thought as they did. And, as always, Lewis warns modern readers against judging too quickly the assumptions of their ancestors. In particular, Lewis refused to believe that modern interpretations of literature were automatically superior to those of critics contemporary with the work. "The Elizabethans," he felt, understood Machiavelli "much better than the subtle moderns" (*English Literature* 51).

Just as Lewis was out of step with the modern world in his poetry and his literary tastes, so his theory of literature was opposed to most of the critical assumptions of his own day. Lewis did most of his work during a period generally regarded as the high point of modern criticism, 1930–1950. During this era, critics loomed large in relation to the cultural scene and literature was more closely tied than ever to prevailing critical theories, largely because so many of the best-known critics were literary artists as well (e.g., Eliot, Pound, William Empson, Edmund Wilson, Yvor Winters, R. P. Blackmur).

While Eliot and others heralded this combination of critic and artist as a great advance, Lewis saw the development as yet another symptom of an elitist attitude toward culture. In his *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis devotes an entire chapter to a refutation of Eliot's claim that poets are the only qualified judges of poetry. Similarly, in discussing the high regard of twentieth-century

poet-critics for John Skelton's sixteenth-century verse, Lewis says that when these writers rank Skelton so highly, "they are being poets, not critics. The things that Mr. Graves gets out of Skelton's work are much better than anything that Skelton put in" (*English Literature* 142-43). Elsewhere Lewis voices his concern that the "Intelligentsia (scientists apart) are losing all touch with, and all influence over, nearly the whole human race. Our most esteemed critics and poets are read by our most esteemed critics and poets . . . and nobody else takes any notice" ("Revival or Decay," *God in the Dock* 251).

This last comment reflects Lewis's regret at the passing of the old relationship between artist and audience. As Peter Faulkner notes, "Modernism is part of the historical process by which the arts have dissociated themselves from nineteenth-century assumptions, which had come in the course of time to seem like dead conventions. These assumptions about literary forms were closely related to a particular relationship between the writer and his readers—on the whole a stable relationship in which the writer could assume a community of attitudes, a shared sense of reality" (1). Lewis believed that this change could be traced to the modern conception of the "poet as the sole source of his poetry" (*Allegory* 209). More troubling for Lewis was that, given such an assumption, we no longer hear of the artist's duty to society. Rather, "it is taken as basic by all the culture of our age that whenever artists and audience lose touch, the fault must be wholly on the side of the audience. (I have never come across the great work in which this important doctrine is proved.)" ("Lilies That Fester," *Last Night* 45).

Characteristically, Lewis preferred the older medieval view in which not the poets but their subjects had the fame. For Chaucer, Lewis remarks, poets are "not people who receive fame but people who give it. To read Virgil sets you thinking not about Virgil but about Aeneas, Dido, and Mezentius" (*English Literature* 27). By contrast, Lewis saw many dangers in the modern preference for author over subject: "It may well be that the author who claims to write neither for patron nor public but for himself has done our art incalculable harm and bred up infinite charlatans by teaching us to emphasize the public's duty of 'recognition' instead of the artist's duty to teach and delight. Things may have been better when you could order your ode from Pindar as you ordered your wine from the wine merchant" (*English Literature* 529).

The deification of the artist, however, Lewis saw as only one element in a larger problem: the tendency of moderns to overvalue art. Here Lewis was recognizing the self-conscious quality of modernist art. But he saw the origins of this attitude in much older literature. As he comments in *The Discarded Image*, "Between Chaucer's time and [Pope's] the arts had become conscious

of what is now regarded as their true status. Since his time they have become even more so. One almost foresees the day where they may be conscious of little else" (214). In an essay on Sir Walter Scott, Lewis remarks that "if we overvalue art, then art itself will be the greatest sufferer; when second things are put first, they are corrupted." He goes on to contrast his own age with the preceding century: "I . . . cannot conceive how the exuberance, the elbow-room, the heart-easing quality of Dickens, or Chaucer, or Cervantes, could co-exist with that self-probing literary conscience we find in Pater or Henry James. We may be coming to a period when there will be no room for authors who [enjoy rather than exert] their genius" (*Essays* 215).

At this particular point, Lewis's theory of literature was obviously influenced by his theology. In an essay entitled "Christianity and Literature," Lewis applied Christian principles to literature and concluded that at the "basis of all critical theory" was the "maxim that 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" (*Christian Reflections* 7). He states that this view would "have affinities with the . . . Homeric theory in which the poet is the mere pensioner of the Muse," as well as affinities with the Platonic doctrine of forms. "Above all," Lewis asserts, "it would be opposed to the idea that literature is self-expression" (7). Stating that he "found a disquieting contrast between the whole circle of ideas used in modern criticism and certain ideas recurrent in the New Testament," Lewis illustrates by noting some key words in modern criticism: "*Creative*, with its opposite *derivative*; *spontaneity*, with its opposite *convention*; *freedom*, contrasted with *rules*" (3). The end result of this theological approach to literature for Lewis is to rescue the critic from overvaluing art and putting second things first. He concludes the essay by noting that the "Christian will take literature a little less seriously than the cultured Pagan. . . . The unbeliever is always apt to make a kind of religion of his aesthetic experiences." By contrast, "The Christian knows from the outset that the salvation of a single soul is more important than the production or preservation of all the epics and tragedies in the world" (10).

One of Lewis's chief complaints against modern writers was that they tended to ignore their audience. In one of his more virulent attacks, Lewis claims that "many modern novels, poems, and pictures, which we are brow-beaten into appreciating, are not good work because they are not work at all. They are mere puddles of spilled sensibility or reflection. When an artist is in a strict sense working, he of course takes into account the existing taste, interests, and capacity of his audience. Haughty indifference to them is not

genius nor integrity; it is laziness and incompetence. You have not learned your job" ("Good Work and Good Works," *Last Night* 80). Using this definition of good literature, Lewis felt that the real art of his day was to be found in "low-brow art," such as film, the detective story, and the children's story—not in the "high-brow productions" of a Joyce, Eliot, or Pound. Here Lewis was taking one side in a literary battle that raged throughout the twentieth century. The two conflicting views are summed up neatly in a letter, early in the century, from H. G. Wells to Henry James: "To you literature like painting is an end, to me literature like architecture is a means, it has a use. . . . I had rather be called a journalist than an artist, that is the essence of it" (qtd. in Gillie 1). Lewis's view of language and literature was essentially rhetorical; therefore, it is natural that he would agree with Wells regarding the communicative nature of literature.

In an essay on the poem *Hero and Leander*, Lewis comments in passing on the "whole temper of modern criticism, which loves to treat a work of art as the expression of an artist's personality and perhaps values that personality chiefly for its difference from others" (*Essays* 58). Lewis's conviction that such an approach to literature was unhealthy led him to engage in an extended dispute with Professor E. M. W. Tillyard. The dispute, which consisted of a series of essays published in the journal *Essays and Studies*, was apparently touched off by Tillyard's work *Milton*. As Chad Walsh explains, in this book "Tillyard contended that the only critics approaching Milton properly were those who studied Satan as the embodiment of Milton's most intense feelings and values. Such an attempt to double-guess an author was anathema to Lewis, who assumed that Milton knew what he was doing. He also disagreed with Tillyard's conviction that one purpose of poetry is to reveal the personality of the poet and even offer him as a model for life. To Lewis, the poet was mainly a person with unusual linguistic skills" (*Apostle* 183). The essays were collected and published in 1939 under the title *The Personal Heresy*. The title indicates Lewis's belief that the critical approach was one of the symptoms of the modern world's loss of belief in objective values in all areas of experience.

The personal heresy was, for Lewis, one example of the way in which modern criticism was often diverted from the text itself to peripheral considerations. Psychoanalytic criticism was another. In his essay "Psycho-analysis and Literary Criticism," he argues against many of Freud's assumptions about readers' enjoyment of literature, particularly the idea that enjoyment was increased by the identification of Freudian symbolism in literature (*Essays* 286–300). Similarly, in a 1962 essay, he questioned the necessity of the then fashionable anthropological approach to medieval romance literature, sug-

gesting that anthropology was a poor substitute for true literary appreciation of the text ("The Anthropological Approach," *Essays* 301–11).

In spite of his belief in the centrality of the text, however, Lewis, in his own criticism, rarely engaged in the detailed explication de texte approach of the New Critics. Rather, as Chad Walsh remarks, he "seems to stand off a bit, exploring a book or poem with sufficient depth to increase [the reader's] enjoyment of it, but not investigating every last ambiguity, level of meaning, and rhetorical device" (*Apostle* 198). Walsh goes on to describe Lewis as "the appreciative critic," whose "great gift is to whet a reader's appetite for a particular book and to give him just enough practical guidance so he can find his way through it" (247). Lewis himself saw this as the proper function of the critic. In a revealing passage in *The Allegory of Love*, he notes: "Oddly as it may sound, I conceive that it is the chief duty of the interpreter to begin analyses and to leave them unfinished. They are not meant as substitutes for the imaginative apprehension of the poem. Their only use is to awaken, first of all, the reader's conscious knowledge of life and books in so far as it is relevant, and then to stir those less conscious elements in him which alone can fully respond to the poem" (345).

Thus, while the New Critics gave detailed explications of texts and claimed that poems "should not mean, but be," Lewis longed for writers like Chaucer who approached their work as poets of "doctryne and sentence" ("What Chaucer Really Did to 'Il Filostrato,'" *Essays* 33). While I. A. Richards and others objected to literature that invited stock responses, Lewis noted that the older poetry, by dealing with stock themes (e.g., love is sweet, death bitter, virtue lovely), performed the necessary function of instructing each generation to make these good responses (*Preface* 57). It is perhaps fortunate that Lewis did not live to see the advent of deconstruction and reader-response theories in modern criticism. In a footnote to his lecture "De Descriptione Temporum," Lewis makes a prophetic comment about the state of literary criticism. After discussing the difficulty of modern poetry, he notes: "In music we have pieces which demand more talent in the performer than in the composer. Why should there not come a period when the art of writing poetry stands lower than the art of reading it? Of course rival readings would then cease to be 'right' or 'wrong' and become more and less brilliant 'performances'" (*Essays* 9). Even in his own day, however, Lewis found ample opportunity to oppose trends in literary criticism.

It is beyond the scope of this study to give a comprehensive description of C. S. Lewis's literary theory. Enough has been said to support the idea that

Lewis's views were fundamentally opposed to most of the trends of twentieth-century literature and literary theory. His strong statements against modern theory again exemplify the stance that he chose to adopt in relation to the modern world.

Given his consistent criticism of things modern, it would be easy to portray Lewis as a reactionary crank who (as one critic has written of G. K. Chesterton) "used the term modern to depict anyone with whom he disagreed" (Corrin 7). Lewis's opinions, however, were not based on ignorance. As Bruce Edwards comments, a survey of Lewis's letters "reveals that he was eminently well-read and informed; he spoke from a first-hand acquaintance with the texts he opposed" ("Rehabilitating Reading" 29).

Lewis was attracted both by his own temperament and by his attitudes toward modern thought to a particular rhetorical stance, that of a last survivor. Not only do these elements establish a strong ethos for Lewis as writer, but they give his works a well-defined purpose and audience. And it is the interaction of these elements (speaker, subject, audience—in short, his rhetorical situation) that generates the peculiar energy of Lewis's nonfiction prose. The next chapter will explore Lewis's basic attitudes toward rhetoric, views that led him to develop a style uniquely suited to his modern audience.