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C. S. Lewis and The Personal Opinion Fallacy

JASON LEPOJÄRVI

“Even today there are those (some of them critics) who believe every novel and even every lyric to be autobiographical.”¹

Introduction

Authors sometimes become targets of critics who mistake the views expressed by their characters, plot, or atmosphere for the views held by the authors themselves. Consequently, as authors begin justifiably to fear that the opinions expressed in their art will be equated with their own real-life opinions, many begin censoring themselves, thus reducing diversity of perspective and diluting vigor of expression. The present essay reflects on this particular form of literary misreading and its contribution to other literary maladies. This form of misreading is closely related to what C. S. Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard called “The Personal Heresy” and what W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley called “The Intentional Fallacy,” but is distinct from both. I wish to position Lewis—or my argument about Lewis—as a potential, albeit partial, solution to it.²

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 213.

² I am extremely grateful to a number of scholars and friends whose thoughtful feedback helped strengthen this essay in both substance and style. Holly Ordway, Michael Ward, Rachel Haliburton, Nathan Schlueter, Brenton Dickieson, Rebecca Sandberg, Simon Howard, and three anonymous readers—thank you.

I begin with a brief account of the epistolary literary disagreement between Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard that took place over the course of three years in the mid-1930s, and which was then published by Oxford University Press as a co-authored book called *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (1939). This backstory, followed by a brief overview of “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), will allow me to delineate and develop the related but distinct form of misreading, which is my main subject. Literary heresies or fallacies are corrected or, better still, avoided by good guiding principles of literary judgment. And so, we must say something about the corresponding form of good reading as well.

These deliberations are followed by a case study in which we observe the literary fallacy and its correction unfold: Lewis’s reading of Milton in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) seems conscious of both the fallacy and the need to follow a corrective principle of literary judgment, without giving a name to either though describing both. Lewis’s example is chosen simply to illustrate an argument, not to pronounce judgement on his overall literary prowess. Finally, to correct a number of possible misunderstandings about *my* argument, I conclude with some thoughts of further clarification. For reasons that relate to both the nature of imaginative literature and to Lewis as a writer, readers and critics of Lewis are particularly susceptible to what in this essay is called The Personal Opinion Fallacy.

The Personal Heresy and The Intentional Fallacy

Let us begin with *The Personal Heresy*. At the time of their literary dispute, C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) was Fellow of English Literature at Magdalen College, Oxford, and E.M.W. Tillyard (1889–1962) was Fellow of English Literature at Jesus College, Cambridge. Both men conducted themselves with thoroughness and charm, taking turns answering letters, three apiece. The first half of the debate played out in the pages of the journal *Essays and Studies* in 1934–1936. *The Personal Heresy* (1939) included three additional essays, a Preface from both authors, and a concluding note from Lewis. The publication was heralded by a live debate in Oxford on 7 February 1939.³

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004–7), 2:248, n. 24. Hereafter abbreviated *CL*.

The name of the heresy was first coined by Lewis in his opening letter which dramatically ends with an invitation “to be free of the personal heresy.”⁴ What was the disagreement about? In Lewis’s words, the personal heresy is the proposition or belief—which he has taken from Tillyard—“that all poetry is *about* the poet’s state of mind”⁵ or, as Lewis says elsewhere, “the assumption that the writer’s psychological state always flows unimpeded and undisguised into the product”⁶ and that the primary task of reading poetry well is about gauging and connecting with *the poet’s personality or state of mind*. This is the personal heresy. Lewis calls it “a serious error.”⁷

Without going into the details of Lewis’s many objections to this proposition or assumption, his objections did have an impact on Tillyard. Lewis’s “probing,” he writes in reply, “reveal what was unsound” and “helped me to mend my thoughts.”⁸ Tillyard’s continued attempts to defend his view by refining the meaning of “personality” more carefully were met with Lewis’s riposte, “glaring *petitio*”⁹: whether personality means the poet’s “state of mind” (86), his “mental pattern,” his “feelings,”¹⁰ or what not, begs the question, exclaimed Lewis. Is poetry really about the poet’s personality?

At several points in their disagreement, Tillyard uses superlatives to describe the profession of poetry. “The great poet” is a “superior person” unfavorably contrasted with “the ordinary man.”¹¹ Lewis objects to this “false exaltation of poetry” or “Poetolatry,”¹² as he calls it. “One of my chief grievances against the Personal Heresy and its inevitable attendant Poetolatry,” he says, “is the disparagement of common things and common men which they induce.”¹³ So, elitism is bad, but the denigration of the ordinary is worse. Lewis bemoans “the arrogance of poets”¹⁴ and lets

⁴ C. S. Lewis and E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 5, 35.

⁵ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 3.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, “On Criticism,” in *C. S. Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, ed. by Lesley Walmsley (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 539–50, here 547.

⁷ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 5.

⁸ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 89.

⁹ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 67.

¹⁰ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 89.

¹¹ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 99, 109.

¹² Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 119, 127–28.

¹³ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 119.

¹⁴ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 129.

loose: “Courtesy to our contemporaries must not forbid us to point out that a poet, an admitted and unmistakable poet, is sometimes (in certain periods, often) a man inferior to the majority in ‘tenderness,’ ‘enthusiasm,’ and ‘knowledge of human nature’—not to speak of information, common-sense, fortitude, and courtesy. . . . Wash their feet, and I will praise your humility: sit at their feet, and you will be a fool.”¹⁵

Most scholars, but not all, score the disagreement in Lewis’s favor. Readers can judge for themselves. Mark Neal and Jerry Root say the problem with the heresy is that it “takes the reader’s attention away from the text itself to focus on the author.”¹⁶ Jerry L. Daniel is thinking of Tillyard’s camp when he says that “Many critics use the text before them as raw material to supply clues to the psychological state of the author.”¹⁷ To identify the poem with the poet, he says, is a kind of “crude biographical correspondence theory.”¹⁸ The reverse heresy, from the author’s point of view, is literary self-expression, something that Lewis also deplored. “Self-expression is the personal heresy through the other end of the telescope.”¹⁹

W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley’s seminal essay “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946) opens with invoking “*The Personal Heresy*, between Professors Lewis and Tillyard,”²⁰ signaling that the fallacy they want to discuss in this essay is relevant to, or perhaps even directly inspired by, Lewis and Tillyard’s disagreement. Wimsatt and Beardsley’s main argument is “that the design or intention of the author is neither *available* nor *desirable* as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art.”²¹ The Intentional Fallacy is to assume the opposite: that the intention of the author *is* available and desirable as a standard of evaluation. And by intention they mean the “design or plan in the author’s mind.”²²

The authors explain the critic’s predicament: “One must ask how

¹⁵ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 130.

¹⁶ Mark Neal and Jerry Root, *The Neglected C. S. Lewis: Exploring the Riches of His Most Overlooked Books* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2020), 34.

¹⁷ Jerry L. Daniel, “The Taste of the Pineapple,” in *The Taste of the Pineapple: Essays on C. S. Lewis as Reader, Critic, and Imaginative Writer*, ed. by Bruce L. Edwards (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 9–27, here 17.

¹⁸ Daniel, “Pineapple,” 31.

¹⁹ Daniel, “Pineapple,” 23.

²⁰ W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *The Sewanee Review*, 53.3 (1946), 468–88, here 468.

²¹ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 468, emphasis added.

²² Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 469.

a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? *If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do.* And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem—for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem.”²³ I have highlighted the sentence that introduces a circular argument, a problem that is not entirely resolved in the remainder of the paper. The important distinction between an author’s “intention” and a poem’s “meaning” also remains somewhat underdeveloped or almost collapses.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no record of Lewis ever reading this essay by his two American colleagues in English Literature. Lewis’s later essay “On Criticism,” however, explicitly discusses an author’s “intention,” which is more carefully delineated from a text’s “meaning.” Lewis explains: “It is the author who *intends*; the book *means*.”²⁴ His working definition of the author’s intention in this essay is “that which, if it is realized, will in his eyes constitute success.”²⁵ And the meaning of a text is “the series or system of emotions, reflections, and attitudes produced by reading it.”²⁶

Of a book’s meaning, in this sense, its author is not necessarily the best, and is never a perfect, judge. One of his intentions usually was that it should have a certain meaning; he cannot be sure that it has. He cannot even be sure that the meaning he intended it to have was in every way, or even at all, better than the meaning which readers find it in. Here, therefore, the critic has great freedom to range without fear of contradiction from the author’s superior knowledge.²⁷

This, the penultimate paragraph of Lewis’s essay, almost reads like a charitable summary of or response to “The Intentional Fallacy.” In any case, whether or not Lewis was aware of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay, together all three inspired a generation of New Critics who contributed to the so-called “death of the author” movement in mid- and late-twentieth century literary criticism.

Readers might wonder about the difference between the conceptions

²³ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 469.

²⁴ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 549.

²⁵ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 549.

²⁶ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 549.

²⁷ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 550.

of “heresy” and “fallacy,” as I have been using them more or less interchangeably. Lewis and Tillyard could have equally titled their book *The Personal Fallacy* and Wimsatt and Beardsley their essay “The Intentional Heresy.” It is largely a matter of taste. But a distinction can be made. “Heresy” concerns a problem with *belief*, while “fallacy” concerns a problem with patterns of *reasoning*. They can be seen as distinct but very closely related aspects of the same problem: the mistaken *belief* leads to the problematic *reasoning*. Lewis and Tillyard and Wimsatt and Beardsley are talking about two different forms of misreading, but both forms pertain at once to *belief* (“heresy”) and *reasoning* (“fallacy”).

Some readers or critics may embody the first aspect, others the second, and some both; but they seem slightly different in orientation and in how we might respond to them. If the source problem is one of mere *reasoning* (“fallacy”), the person making the case ought to be responsive to counterarguments; if the problem is one of *belief* (“heresy”), however, argument may prove less effective. It is easier to counter a deficiency in *reasoning* (for example, “the professor assigned to her students Plato’s *The Republic* that has problematic views about gender, so the professor herself must subscribe to these views”) when it is accidental and not necessarily rooted in *belief* (for example, “professors ought to assign only inoffensive readings they thoroughly agree with”).

Before we move on to The Personal Opinion Fallacy (or Heresy) in the next section, we must make another porous distinction, that between two kinds of literature. Explicitly, both pairs of authors (Lewis and Tillyard, and Wimsatt and Beardsley) based their arguments almost exclusively on poetry. But it is clear that they believe the disagreement is about much more than this. It is about all “imaginative literature,” as Lewis calls it, that is, “about poetry, drama, and the novel.”²⁸ Elsewhere Lewis tells us that in the sixteenth century “poet” always “meant all imaginative writers”²⁹ and we can safely assume that Lewis retained some of this discarded broad use of the term. For our purposes, we may call this kind or form of writing *imaginative literature*. In Lewis’s mind, this includes “verse or prose, short story, novel, play or what not.”³⁰

²⁸ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 73.

²⁹ C. S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What’s To Be Said,” in *Lewis: Essay Collection and Other Pieces*, ed. by Lesley Walmsley, 526–8, here 526.

³⁰ Lewis, “Fairy Stories,” 526.

In *The Personal Heresy* Lewis explains that the “most characteristic contents of [such] literary utterances are stories—accounts of events that did not take place.”³¹ In his essay “On Stories” (1947), which is basically the seed that would later grow into his book *An Experiment in Criticism* (1961), he distinguishes between the “fairy-tale” and the “realistic novel”³² but both belong to the same genus of imaginative literature. This type of literature is not, he thinks, valuable for any impressions or expressions of the writer’s personality, however defined.

The second type or form of literature, however, is different. This type of literature *is* more valuable for such purposes and beyond. This is implicit in what Lewis calls “truly personal writings.”³³ We may call them *biographical literature* in contrast to imaginative literature. What, then, does biographical literature consist of? We may agree with Lewis that “[p]rivate letters are obviously in this class: and many essays,” as he writes.³⁴ In short, everything that falls under what Lewis calls “historical data.”³⁵ Similarly, Wimsatt and Beardsley speak of “biographical evidence.”³⁶ This includes “journals, for example, or letters or reported conversations” and “notes.”³⁷ The poet’s own commentary about specific lines might be “taken more seriously . . . when off guard in a note.”³⁸

Of course, there are “borderline cases,” as Lewis admits.³⁹ But this should not trouble us. The border between the *hill* and the *dale* is not easily categorized, but the categories of hill and dale remain distinct and comprehensible. Upon closer inspection some hills turn out to be mole-hills, just as some personal histories are shown to be imaginative fabrications, and vice versa. When this happens, when there is doubt about which is which, the solution, Lewis says in *An Experiment in Criticism*, is not the total abandonment of either but to “seek information from more

³¹ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 146.

³² C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 99.

³³ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 73.

³⁴ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 73.

³⁵ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 76.

³⁶ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 478.

³⁷ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 478, 483.

³⁸ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 485.

³⁹ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 73.

reliable sources.”⁴⁰ More will be said about this approach below.

With these preliminary thoughts in place, we may now begin to define the outlines of The Personal Opinion Fallacy and distinguish it from The Personal Heresy and The Intentional Fallacy. Lewis goes a long way toward describing it in various sources, but neither names it nor defines it.

The Personal Opinion Fallacy

The Personal Heresy, The Intentional Fallacy, and The Personal Opinion Fallacy, I propose, are three *species* of the same *genus* of misreading, which could be called Autobiographical Fallacies (or Heresies). This family of misreadings includes forms of misreading that treat “fictions as sources of knowledge”⁴¹ in a wrong or incomplete way. They confuse life with art in some manner.

As noted above, The Personal Heresy uses imaginative literature primarily as raw material for clues to the author’s *personality*. Perhaps it should have been called “The Personality Heresy” to make this clear. An example of this is when Lewis speaks of “the assumed, and [usually] concealed, major premise that the cynicism or disillusionment put into the mouths of some Shakespearian characters are Shakespeare’s.”⁴² Cynicism is a personality trait. Personality traits, combined, a personality make. “It is sometimes asked,” Lewis says, “whether Shakespeare was like this or that character in his plays.”⁴³ He replies: “I do not know the answer.”⁴⁴ Why not? We will get to this.

The Personal Opinion Fallacy, however, concerns specifically the author’s *opinions*, not their personality. It is a parallel form of misreading, of gleaning biography from fiction in a somewhat deficient way. In its crudest form, The Personal Opinion Fallacy says in effect: “Because the story’s character says this-or-that, or the plot or atmosphere or passage suggests this-or-that, the author must also personally think this-or-that.” Such a disastrous interpretative premise cannot lead to valuable conclusions except by chance.

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Experiment*, 75.

⁴¹ Lewis, *Experiment*, 75.

⁴² Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 4.

⁴³ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 74.

⁴⁴ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 74.

The Intentional Fallacy, in slight contrast, concerns neither the personality nor the opinions of the *author* per se, but rather judgments about the meaning of *the text of imaginative literature*. Whereas The Personal Heresy and The Personal Opinion Fallacy argue from text to author, The Intentional Fallacy argues from author to text. Wimsatt and Beardsley argue that one should not interpret an imaginative text through the lens of non-textual authorial information; The Intentional Fallacy violates this principle. Lewis argues that one should be careful not to attribute to an author psychological states that are found in an imaginative text; The Personal Heresy violates this principle. Replace *psychological states* with *opinions*, and the same dynamic applies to The Personal Opinion Fallacy, too.

Fiction in particular is vulnerable to The Personal Opinion Fallacy by its very nature. This is chiefly because, as Lewis says, “[m]ost of the imaginative literature in the world is story-telling”⁴⁵ and, as we know, story-telling includes a lot of dialogue—that is, the exchange of literary utterances including opinions. So, no wonder that we are often drawn to consider these opinions. Fiction is also vulnerable to the fallacy because fiction is a mix of information, misinformation, and disinformation—or truth, mistakes, and lies. Lewis confessed to having learnt from novels in particular “a great deal of information” but also “plenty of misinformation.”⁴⁶

Lewis’s own fiction is especially vulnerable. Much of his writing—on criticism, theology, and fiction alike—as one of his former students has said, “emerge from his pen not as distinct categories but as themselves mixed genres.”⁴⁷ This is not a complaint. On the contrary, it speaks to what Owen Barfield has called Lewis’s “presence of mind,” by which he meant that “somehow what Lewis thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything.”⁴⁸ This quality, said Barfield, “transcended all diversities of topic.”⁴⁹ What, for example, is “the theme” of *Till We Have*

⁴⁵ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 162 n. 2.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Experiment*, 75.

⁴⁷ Stephen Prickett, “It Makes No Difference: Lewis’s Criticism, Fiction, and Theology,” in *C. S. Lewis at Poets’ Corner*, ed. Michael Ward and Peter S. Williams (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 186–97, here 189.

⁴⁸ Owen Barfield, “Preface,” in *The Taste of the Pineapple*, ed. by Bruce L. Edwards, 1–6, here 2.

⁴⁹ Barfield, “Preface,” *Pineapple*, 2.

Faces, my favorite novel by Lewis? A dozen suitable candidates come to mind. If I had to choose only one, I would place my money on love. What is the theme of *The Cosmic Trilogy*? Is it perhaps science, morality, lust for power, or gender?

Lewis's "presence of mind" and his evocative prose seduce the reader to treat everything as equally valuable source material for personal exploration but at the expense of a legion of possible misreadings and misunderstandings. In Lewis's books, continues this former student, "perceptions just jostle against each other, and are so interconnected that it is almost impossible to separate one strand from the next."⁵⁰ The philosopher Martin D'Arcy, a contemporary of Lewis at Oxford, said that so "absorbing" is Lewis's prose sometimes that "one's critical faculties are lulled to sleep."⁵¹ The themes or strands of Lewis's fiction especially are numerous, interconnected, compound, organic, overlapping, diffusive; choose your metaphor.

As readers of imaginative literature, why should we avoid The Personal Opinion Fallacy? Why should we care in first place? Why bother at all?

Besides the peril of *authorial self-censorship* (in which the author might censor herself for fear of being interpreted incorrectly), another rather obvious but perhaps tautologous reason is that too often we end up falsely attributing to authors opinions that they perhaps did not in reality share. And this is an *injustice*, even if the opinions are "good," politically correct ones, but especially if they are not. Indeed, it is important to recognize that *both* prejudice *and* favoritism make us susceptible to this fallacy.

Lewis's unfinished and largely unknown essay "On Criticism," which made the helpful distinction between intention and meaning, is remarkable and relevant also because it concerns itself with "good" and "bad" reading of imaginative works specifically.⁵² Lewis is speaking for all writers when he says that you can be "blamed and praised for saying what you never said and for not saying what you have said."⁵³ Undeserved approval is also "a

⁵⁰ Prickett, "It Makes No Difference," 192.

⁵¹ Martin D'Arcy, "These Things Called Love," in *The New York Times*, 31 July 1960 (page unknown).

⁵² "On Criticism" (see note footnote 5 above) was first published in its original draft form in *Of This and Other Worlds* in 1966. The text was probably meant as an address. It begins with "I want to talk about . . ." (Lewis, "On Criticism," 539).

⁵³ Lewis, "On Criticism," 542.

critical fault” just as much as undeserved blame, both being “critical vices.”⁵⁴ Negative interpretations are, he says, “of course particularly dangerous for the lazy or hurried reviewer.”⁵⁵ But apparently, “laudatory critics often show an equal ignorance of the text.”⁵⁶ As exegesis, both are equally wrong.

But surely, we may ask, are not negative misreadings *morally* worse than positive ones? It is interesting that Lewis seems to disagree. He suggests that “fatuous praise from a manifest fool may hurt more than any deprecation.”⁵⁷ I am reminded, for example, of his response to one of the few entirely positive reviews of *The Four Loves*, penned by one Anglican clergyman. It was, Lewis sighed in a private letter, “a prime example of the favourable review which exasperates an author *more* than the most spiteful censure could do. He misunderstands so deeply.”⁵⁸ This is rather amusing, but I suspect this is hyperbolic. Certainly, as a rule, it is very doubtful. Rather, negative misreadings, I would suggest, are on average morally more problematic because of their possible ill effects—ill effects on ordinary mortal authors’ feelings, reputations, and even livelihoods. Praise culture is not a serious malady; cancel culture is. But it is also a problem for the critic or canceler’s own heart. Better to err in charity. We should avoid The Personal Opinion Fallacy because we care about justice. We want to be good people.

We also want to be *good readers*. No true lover of fiction often commits this fallacy. When we do commit it, it is as likely to reveal something about ourselves as it is about the writer. We might betray our own prejudices and biases, which we project onto others. Fiction is further vulnerable because “to a determined critic,” as Lewis says in *An Experiment in Criticism*, almost “everything can be a symbol, or an irony, or an ambiguity,”⁵⁹ open to the most fantastical interpretations. “Thus increasingly we meet only ourselves.”⁶⁰ This misreading is important because it interferes with our ability to judge and appreciate the literary work in and of itself and even because it moves us away from enjoyment and literary analysis into

⁵⁴ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 542.

⁵⁵ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 542.

⁵⁶ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 542.

⁵⁷ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 540.

⁵⁸ Letter of 3 June 1960, in Lewis, *CL*, 3:1156, emphasis added.

⁵⁹ Lewis, *Experiment*, 85.

⁶⁰ Lewis, *Experiment*, 85.

something like half-baked psychoanalysis. Identity politics applied to imaginative literature profoundly misunderstands the whole enterprise and damages or ruins imaginative literature and the moral imagination.

The Personal Opinion Fallacy is also a *disfavor to scholarship*, resulting in a colossal loss of academic energy. If left unchecked, false trails are blazed that might take generations to correct. In literary criticism, as Lewis says, “ideas still circulate from one critic to another which have obviously not been verified by actual reading.”⁶¹ This of course applies to all disciplines. When these ideas are damaging, their correction might feel (to the corrected critic or their admirers) like defensiveness or partisanship.

So much for what The Personal Opinion Fallacy is and for some reasons why we should avoid it. Next, I will turn to *how* we can avoid it. We can then look at how the fallacy and its correction unfold in a real example of applied literary criticism.

The Principle of Biographical Verification

Hints about the correction to The Personal Opinion Fallacy, the literary antibody to the virus, have been dropped throughout our reflections. But it will help to spell it out in more detail and give it a name.

We remember the question about whether Shakespeare was like this or that of his characters. Lewis said he did not know the answer. Why not? Because, he explained, “to decide that question we must *start investigating historical data* and moral principles.”⁶² In other words, if biography is what interests us, we must turn from imaginative literature to biographical literature (and, in this case, to ethics). We must ground our biographical speculations in biographical literature. Let history inform, and if necessary, tether theory.

This Principle of Biographical Verification, as we might call it, is an effective curative to The Personal Opinion Fallacy but also to many other forms of bad reading. In reading poetry, Wimsatt and Beardsley put it this way: “We ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to the dramatic *speaker*, and if to the author at all, only by a biographical act of inference.”⁶³

⁶¹ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 543.

⁶² Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 76, emphasis added.

⁶³ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “Fallacy,” 470.

An analogy might help to explain both the problem and the principle. Imagine a *black and white painting*, which represents an imaginative literary artefact, such as a novel. You see several hearts in either black or white. Both colors represent opinions. But only one color represents the personal opinions of the author. The other represents opinions expressed or suggested by the characters, plot, atmosphere, or specific passages, which the author may not personally agree with. Now, if we were asked to say which is which, we could not answer, could we? Why not? Because we lack contrast. We lack a *backdrop* against which to evaluate the content. In short, we lack what we have called *biographical literature*. Once we do our homework—once we read essays, letters, notes, memoirs, and so on—represented analogously, say, by a *black wall* on which the painting hangs, we will be in a much better position to sift through the personal and the fictional and to avoid The Personal Opinion Fallacy. We will then realize that the black hearts, and not the white, correspond more closely to the author's personal views. We might even begin to see some shades of grey.

Want to know which theory of atonement Lewis subscribed to, if any? Put down, for a moment, your copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*—yes, despite Aslan's sacrifice—and pick up *Mere Christianity* or, even better, a copy of his collected letters.⁶⁴ Want to know how Lewis felt about teenage girls, about budding female sexuality? Put down *The Last Battle*—yes, despite Susan—and read his pre-conversion diary *All My Road Before Me* for his younger immature view or his later biographical writings for his more mature one. Or read memoirs of Lewis by women who knew him. We may then return to his fiction with clearer vision for thematic insight but immunized against reading too much into it.

Almost absurdly, Tillyard recognizes the merits of *The Principle of Biographical Verification* but regards it as a form of cheating. "Biography," he admits, "may substantially help our understanding of the mental pattern as revealed in his [the poet's] art."⁶⁵ But he likens "the mixture of biography and criticism" to "looking up the answer to a problem when tired of trying

⁶⁴ Even *Mere Christianity* has to be read carefully in this respect. It is not meant to be a window into Lewis's own theology, but an introductory overview of the Christian faith in general: getting people into the "hallway," as Lewis says, not into his preferred room labeled "Anglicanism."

⁶⁵ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 52.

to solve it.”⁶⁶ Lewis’s proposal of turning to “historical data” if the author’s personal information is what we seek from imaginative literature, he thinks, is actually the critic’s “besetting sin” better avoided: biography is “an illegitimate short cut.”⁶⁷ Far from cheating, I believe, it is the most basic and necessary work we must do if we are to be good readers, let alone good critics.

Sometimes, of course, even *The Principle of Biographical Verification* yields no definitive answer. When that happens, we may speculate and conjecture. But we must be honest. Again, Lewis offers a helpful supporting principle: “[I]f I hazard a conjecture, it must be with full knowledge and with a clear warning to my reader that it is a long shot, far more likely to be wrong than right.”⁶⁸ Especially, I would add, if the writer or artist is dead and not around to refute us, or even if they are. This is also what erring in charity looks like.

Critical judgement is a difficult undertaking for both trained and untrained readers. This should instill in us humility and moderation. “How can we be confident,” ask Neal and Root, “that we have understood the motives and intentions of others?”⁶⁹ This is a great question. Charles Williams, who made a living by reviewing books, wrote that “not one mind in a thousand can be trusted to state accurately what its opponent says, much less what he thinks.”⁷⁰ The more significant or sensitive the questions or values being speculated about, the more unwise forgetting this guiding principle is. A responsible reader or scholar would not *too hastily* draw conclusions about any author’s views on, say, sex, race, or religion, and so on. But to speculate about other matters might be less dubious. It is precisely when serious allegations are made that standards of probity should rise, not fall. Otherwise, we risk becoming tedious heresy-hunters of the latest shibboleth, taboo or sin; so eager to catch authors “off guard” that we only drop our own.

A perfect example of this is the way J. K. Rowling’s feminist views on

⁶⁶ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 52, 53.

⁶⁷ Lewis and Tillyard, *Heresy*, 52.

⁶⁸ Lewis, “On Criticism,” 544.

⁶⁹ Neal and Root, *Neglected*, 49.

⁷⁰ Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 112.

transgenderism led some activists to attack her latest mystery *Troubled Blood* (2020) on the grounds that her “transphobia” was on full display because the villain sometimes dressed as a woman to lull his victims into a state of complacency. A rather standard murder mystery trope (how does the murderer overpower his victims) was then misread as a sign of the author’s other beliefs. Similarly, John Goldthwaite cites the exchange in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* between Caspian and Lucy about the girl who squints and has freckles as an example of Lewis’s “smug” and “snide” disparagement of girls.⁷¹ Goldthwaite not only falls into the trap of equating characters’ views with authorial views, but he also mistakenly extrapolates from the particular to the general. He would benefit from reading Lewis’s letter to a young reader, Laurence Krieg, on 24 October 1955: “I don’t dislike Panthers at all, I think they are one of the loveliest animals there are. I don’t remember that I have put any *bad* panthers in the books (there are some good ones fighting against Rabadash in [*The Horse and His Boy*] aren’t there?) and even if I had that wouldn’t mean that I thought all Panthers bad, any more than I think all men bad because of Uncle Andrew, or all boys bad because Edmund was once a traitor.”⁷²

In the next section, I look more carefully at a case study in which we observe the literary fallacy and its correction play out. The book that had originally sparked the literary disagreement between Lewis and Tillyard was the latter’s study *Milton* (1930). A few years after the closure of their “controversy,” Lewis published his own study of Milton called *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). In my view, Lewis’s *Preface* is conscious of both the peril of The Personal Opinion Fallacy and the need to steer his deliberations according to The Principle of Biographical Verification, albeit without naming either the fallacy or the principle.

Case Study: Lewis on Milton

The opening sentence of *A Preface to Paradise Lost* invokes the intention of an author and the function of a literary artefact. “The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to

⁷¹ John Goldthwaite, *The Natural History of Make-Believe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 227–9.

⁷² Letter of 24 October 1955, in Lewis, *CL*, 3:666.

a cathedral is to know *what* it is—what it was intended to do and how it is meant to be used.⁷³ The answer to the first, “what Milton meant it to be,”⁷⁴ is that Milton intended to write in the genre of epic poetry. The form determines much of the resulting artistic decisions. At the outset, Lewis draws a distinction between *logos* and *poiema*: “Every poem can be considered in two ways—as what the poet has to say, and as a *thing* which he *makes*.”⁷⁵ As *logos* or something said a poem “is an expression of opinions and emotions,”⁷⁶ the owner of which is left undetermined.

Lewis also draws a distinction between a poem’s Mother and Father. Every poem has “two parents—its mother being the mass of experience, thought, and the like, inside the poet, and its father the pre-existing Form (epic, tragedy, the novel, and what not).”⁷⁷ He would later elsewhere speak of the Man and the Author, respectively.⁷⁸ Lewis wants to focus on the Father (the literary Form) because, he says, perhaps with a nod to Tillyard, “excellent helps to the study of the raw material inside the poet—the experiences, character, and opinions of the man Milton—already exist.”⁷⁹ Opinions belong to the study of the Mother (the author’s “mass of experience,” and so on). Interestingly, despite his professed paternal focus, Lewis has quite a bit to say about her, as well. Chapter XII on “The Theology of *Paradise Lost*” is particularly relevant and revealing.⁸⁰

In this chapter, Lewis divides the doctrines or theological teachings in *Paradise Lost* into four groups: “(1) those which really occur in *Paradise Lost*, but which, so far from being heretical, are the commonplaces of Christian theology; (2) those which are heretical, but do not occur in Milton; (3) those which are heretical and occur in Milton’s *De Doctrina*, but not in *Paradise Lost*; (4) those which are heretical and do really occur in *Paradise Lost*.”⁸¹ For clarification of the second set, Lewis means those which are heretical but do not occur in Milton’s theological study *De Doctrina*: in

⁷³ C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 2.

⁷⁴ Lewis, *Preface*, 1.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Preface*, 2. The words *logos* and *poiema* do not appear in this work.

⁷⁶ Lewis, *Preface*, 2–3.

⁷⁷ Lewis, *Preface*, 3.

⁷⁸ Lewis, “Fairy Stories.”

⁷⁹ Lewis, *Preface*, 3.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Preface*, 82–93.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Preface*, 83.

other words, doctrines that Milton did not subscribe to personally. As for *Paradise Lost*, Lewis believes that heretical elements do, in fact, “exist in it, but are only discoverable by search,”⁸² that is, by looking very carefully. The key words here seem to be ‘in it,’ as opposed to ‘in him.’ This leaves the question open: are the elements Milton’s own?

In answering *this* question, Lewis turns from the poem to the theological study, from imaginative literature to more biographical literature. He is, in fact, following what we called The Principle of Biographical Verification. In doing so, sometimes his verdict is “I see no evidence that Milton believed in anything of the sort.”⁸³ At other times, suspicions are confirmed, but “we should not from this passage, nor from any passage in the whole poem, have discovered the poet’s Arianism without the aid of external evidence.”⁸⁴ Such things are detected “only by the aid of external evidence from the *De Doctrina*.”⁸⁵ Did Milton reject the doctrine of *ex nihilo*? This too is confirmed by turning to biographical sources.⁸⁶ “We know from his prose works that Milton believed. . . .”⁸⁷ An example of the third category (something subscribed to by Milton but absent in *Paradise Lost*) is Milton’s genuine private political stance in favor of Republicanism. Lewis thinks critics who detect in *Paradise Lost* a private sympathy for Satan’s anti-monarchical rebellion are mistaken for *literary* reasons. This is not a perfect example of The Personal Opinion Fallacy and almost its reverse mistake. Such critics begin by *already* knowing the author’s genuine opinion and mistakenly detect it in fiction as well, as opposed to supposedly inferring a contested opinion from fiction.

At one point, Lewis seems to anticipate the charge that *he himself* might have committed The Personal Opinion Fallacy. He writes: “It may be objected that I have been treating the poem as a legal document, finding out what Milton’s words strictly hold him to, and thrusting aside the evidence of his other works which shows us what he ‘really meant’ by them. And certainly if we were in pursuit of Milton’s private thoughts and were valuing

⁸² Lewis, *Preface*, 82.

⁸³ Lewis, *Preface*, 84.

⁸⁴ Lewis, *Preface*, 86–7.

⁸⁵ Lewis, *Preface*, 90.

⁸⁶ Lewis, *Preface*, 89.

⁸⁷ Lewis, *Preface*, 95.

the poem simply for the light it threw on those, my method would be very perverse.”⁸⁸ Here perverse means lopsided, putting the cart before the horse; or, worse still, asking the cart about the horse while ignoring the horse! Perverse means neglecting The Principle of Biographical Verification.

Lewis goes even further than this. “Even the poet, when he appears in the first person within his own poem, is not to be taken as the private individual John Milton.”⁸⁹ This would be “a gross error indeed.”⁹⁰ This statement takes The Personal Opinion Fallacy to a further level of complexity and would of course apply to Lewis himself in such works as *The Pilgrim’s Regress* or *The Great Divorce*—just as some philosophers have argued it applies to Plato *in persona* of Socrates and to the other characters in the dialogues who might have had real-life counterparts in Plato’s circle of friends.⁹¹ But why would it be an error?

Lewis seems to think that the answer is more or less obvious. Because “the real man, of course, being a man, felt more things, and less interesting things, about it [i.e. any given subject] than are expressed. . . . From that total experience the author selects, for his epic and for his tragedy, what is proper to each.”⁹² In short, no literary work can express the “total thought about all the subjects mentioned in it.”⁹³ Experience and opinion can never be comprehensively squeezed into literature, least of all fiction. The error to guard against is the declaration: “Ah, so *this* is what Milton or Lewis or Plato ‘really’ believed about our subject.”

Conclusion: “Things That Records Do Not Record”

I began these reflections with brief overviews of *The Personal Heresy* and “The Intentional Fallacy,” and I proposed a distinction between imaginative and biographical literature. I introduced a related but distinct form of literary misreading called The Personal Opinion Fallacy. I discussed reasons why fiction in particular might be vulnerable to this fallacy and

⁸⁸ Lewis, *Preface*, 91.

⁸⁹ Lewis, *Preface*, 59.

⁹⁰ Lewis, *Preface*, 59.

⁹¹ See, for example, Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹² Lewis, *Preface*, 59.

⁹³ Lewis, *Preface*, 91.

suggested some motives why readers of fiction might want to avoid it. The Principle of Biographical Verification helps steer the responsible reader away from seeing too much in literary works of imagination. Finally, I analyzed Lewis's reading of Milton in light of both the fallacy and its correction. Before closing, I wish to guard the reader against some possible misunderstandings of my argument.

I am not saying that imaginative literature, let alone Lewis's fiction, is free from personal opinions. On the contrary, it is often replete with them. Even in *The Personal Heresy* Lewis acknowledged that sometimes authors *deliberately* cloak their opinions and "put on the disguise of verse."⁹⁴ Certainly, *something* of the author's personality and opinions may be in evidence in their creation. I doubt anyone would deny this. In his short piece in *The New York Times Book Review* "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's To Be Said,"⁹⁵ Lewis admits that *part* of his "motive" or "intention" in writing *The Chronicles of Narnia* was indeed to smuggle in theology, or, more precisely, the "taste" or "potency" or "meaning" of the reality behind Christian doctrines that he thinks have gone flat, like the teaching on forgiveness. My claim is not that writers never try to educate or influence their readers. Of course they do.

Further, I entertain no assumption that interpreting so-called biographical literature is always straightforward and unproblematic. It is not. Biography has to be read carefully, as well, that is, not always at face value. This is for several reasons. Authors misremember things. They change their mind. They dramatize. They conceal. They lie. Lewis was well aware of this aspect of biographical writing. Stephen Medcalf noted how in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy* "Lewis carried self-dramatization far beyond [ordinary] license" and "wonderfully mythicized his memory of his life."⁹⁶ Alister McGrath has said basically the same in his essay "The Enigma of Autobiography: Critical Reflections on *Surprised by Joy*."⁹⁷ If reading is

⁹⁴ Lewis, *Heresy*, 73.

⁹⁵ Nov. 18, 1956, 310. Lewis, "Fairy Stories," 527–8.

⁹⁶ Stephen Medcalf, "Language and Self-Consciousness: The Making and Breaking of Lewis's Personae," in *Word and Story in C. S. Lewis: Language and Narrative in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Peter J. Schakel and Charles A. Huttar (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, Year, 2007 [1991]), 109–44, here 113.

⁹⁷ Alister McGrath, "The Enigma of Autobiography: Critical Reflections on *Surprised by Joy*," in Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis* (London:

difficult, so are introspection and retrospection. But all this belongs to a different set of literary problems. It is not the subject of this essay.

Finally, I am not saying that psychological theories are unhelpful in interpreting an author's life or letters. There are several decent examples of good, careful, and responsible ways to glean biography from fiction—or, I should say, in conjunction with fiction, back and forth between imaginary and biographical literature, with measured analysis of both. Medcalf's own essay is one of these examples.⁹⁸ Even when nothing in the biographical literature explicitly demonstrates or supports what we see, or think we have seen, in fiction, we just *might* be right, however improbable. But *proving* this is quite another matter and full of dangers. Lewis's essay "Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism" is essentially an examination of these dangers.

An even better example of "good" psychological interpretations is Stephen Logan's essay "The Soul of C. S. Lewis" published in *C. S. Lewis at Poets' Corner*.⁹⁹ I mention it because it is daring yet responsible, and it so well illustrates some of the things we have been talking about. Logan proposes a theory that cannot be evaluated on the present "historical data." It is that Lewis might have found his relationship with his mother "disappointing to him."¹⁰⁰ And that Lewis possibly remained unconscious of this. "Did he feel securely and lovingly held by his mother," Logan asks. "Was he welcomed into the world?"¹⁰¹ These are terrific questions. How would one evaluate them? Even Logan, who is a professional psychiatrist, sends us to biography: "We would need to know a lot more about Flora Hamilton, and her feelings towards her son, in order to be able even to speculate with any confidence."¹⁰²

Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 7–29.

⁹⁸ Compare Medcalf's responsible carefulness with Prickett's assumption that a character flaw or vice, such as "consumerism," when "presented as through the eyes of a woman [is] perhaps illustrative of misogyny" (Prickett, "It Makes No Difference," 192). This weak presupposition leads Prickett to commit Personal Opinion Fallacies about Lewis's views on gender (for example, 191: "women being the natural location [for Lewis] of all that is trivial and worthless—recall the unexpected fate of Susan in the Narnia stories").

⁹⁹ Stephen Logan, "The Soul of C. S. Lewis," in *C. S. Lewis at Poets' Corner*, ed. by Michael Ward and Peter S. Williams (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 166–85.

¹⁰⁰ Logan, *Soul*, 179.

¹⁰¹ Logan, *Soul*, 180.

¹⁰² Logan, *Soul*, 180.

I will end with this. Tolkien exhibits a similar maturity. After his wife Edith's death, Tolkien wrote a beautiful letter to his son Christopher. Christopher had asked about the inscription Tolkien had chosen for Edith's tombstone: "Lúthien," the name of a central heroine in Tolkien's invented mythology. Tolkien explains: "[Your mother] was (and knew she was) my Lúthien. . . . I will say no more now. But I should like ere long to have a long talk with *you*. For if as seems probable I shall never write any ordered biography—it is against my nature, which expresses itself about things deepest felt in tales and myths—someone close in heart to me should know something about things that records do not record."¹⁰³ Tolkien's tales and myths are pregnant, so to speak, with "things deepest felt." But to safeguard real history, and to avoid future misunderstanding, he wants to . . . *talk* with his son, so that other, more personal, accounts might record what was imaginatively recorded in myth and tale.

¹⁰³ Letter of 11 July 1972, in J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*, ed. by Humphrey Carpenter (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 420–1.