

2022

## C. S. Lewis and the Historical Imagination

Jamin Metcalf

K. Alan Snyder

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Metcalf, Jamin and Snyder, K. Alan (2022) "C. S. Lewis and the Historical Imagination," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1268>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol16/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal* by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

## C. S. Lewis and the Historical Imagination

JAMIN METCALF AND K. ALAN SNYDER

In 1925, the year that C. S. Lewis was first elected as a fellow and tutor at Magdalen College, Oxford, he went on a Spring holiday in the south of England. On this trip, Lewis took time to visit Salisbury Cathedral—one of the most magnificent examples of early gothic architecture in all of Europe. Though Lewis was still firmly ensconced in his atheism, he recognized a deep historical significance in this thirteenth-century Christian monument. As he noted in a letter to his father after the trip, Salisbury Cathedral was not only a beautiful piece of architecture, but a symbol of a bygone era which saw the world in a fundamentally different way than modern men. As Lewis put it:

What impressed me most—the same thought has come into everyone’s head in such places—was the force of Mind: the thousands of tons of masonry held in place by an idea, a religion: buttress, window, acres of carving, the very lifeblood of men’s work, all piled up there and gloriously USELESS from the side of the base utility for which alone we build now. It really is typical of a change—the medieval town where the shops and houses huddle at the foot of the cathedral, and the modern city where the churches huddle between sky scraping offices and the appalling “stores.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the interesting aspects of this off-hand reflection from Lewis is the imaginative way in which he thinks about this historical monument in

<sup>1</sup> Letter of April 1925, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 1: 639. Hereafter CL.

particular and of medieval history in general. It is indicative of a unique perspective that Lewis developed and maintained later in his work as a literary historian.

What role should the imagination play in historical inquiry? Much has been written about how Lewis's understanding of the imagination influenced both his literary and apologetic work. However, very little has been said about how his view of the imagination influenced his work as a literary historian. Throughout Lewis's career at both Oxford and Cambridge, he argued for a unique approach that privileged the role of the imagination both in the study and composition of history.

Lewis's writings indicate that he thought that historians and lay readers of history alike should cultivate what may here be called a *historical imagination*. This cultivation involved a careful attention to the use of language to convey historical ideas as well as a habitual willingness to see through the eyes of people from the past. In Lewis's own work as a literary historian, he exemplified this principle and concluded that it is through the imagination that history fulfills its primary purpose as a *liberal art*—an art that is conducive to human freedom and human flourishing. This distinct vision of history was grounded in the epistemological conclusions Lewis reached in his early life as a student of philosophy and was later reinforced by his conversion to Christianity. In order fully to understand and appreciate Lewis's vision, it is necessary to (1) reflect on Lewis's understanding of human imagination, (2) demonstrate how this understanding undergirded his work as a literary historian, and (3) describe the various implications of such an approach to historical study.

### Imagination and Epistemology

Those who have studied Lewis's work on human imagination know all too well how difficult it is to pin down a precise definition of what he meant when he used the term. Much of this confusion comes from the ways in which Lewis's understanding of this concept changed throughout his life. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, he describes early experiences in his childhood of an illusory "desire" or "longing for the longing that had just ceased" while reading mythology, fairy stories, and romantic poetry.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 18.

These experiences gave him a keen awareness of a phenomenon that he did not quite know how to articulate until “The Great War” with his friend Owen Barfield.<sup>3</sup> This series of philosophical debates spurred Lewis to consider the subject of human imagination and aesthetic experience more thoroughly.

The principal conflict of “The Great War” was centered on whether or not imagination carried epistemological significance. In other words, can the imagination justly separate truth from falsehood? Did Lewis’s experiences of “desire” while reading poetry reveal some truth or was it simply a pleasing aesthetic experience? Barfield argued for the affirmative in this debate, whereas Lewis (initially) held the negative view. What both men did agree on, however, was that the modern understanding of the imagination was reductionistic at best and woefully misguided at worst. Human imagination and aesthetic experience are not merely fanciful thoughts disconnected from reality. Rather, in their view, imagination is more deeply connected to the essential experiences of being human. Both Lewis and Barfield could see that the modern emphasis on empirical sciences and calculative reason had diminished the importance of the imagination, but they could not agree on what role the imagination should serve in our thinking. In a sense, both men agreed on the diagnosis but not the prognosis.<sup>4</sup>

In Barfield’s book, *Poetic Diction*, he attempts to give a fuller philosophical defense of his thoughts on this very issue. At the heart of his defense is a careful analysis of how poets’ use of metaphors and analogies produces a “felt change of consciousness” within their readers.<sup>5</sup> Barfield argues that almost all language has metaphorical origins and that the recognition and absorption of metaphors gives human beings an expanded knowledge of the truth and meaning of things themselves. Though Lewis never fully accepted Barfield’s conclusions, these arguments had a profound influence on his thought.

Interestingly, one of the first revelations that Owen Barfield gave Lewis on the topic of the imagination also influenced the way he thought about history itself. In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis says, “Barfield . . . made short work

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 242.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Thorson, *Joy and the Poetic Imagination* (Hamden, CT: Winged Lion Press, 2015), 12-15.

<sup>5</sup> Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 55.

of what I have called my 'chronological snobbery,' 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 discredited."<sup>6</sup> It was common in the intellectual climate of Lewis's day, as well as our own, to imagine that ideas that have gone out of date are disproved. But that is not always the case. The age of a thought says nothing at all about its truth or falsehood. "From seeing this," Lewis concluded, "one passes to the realization that our own age is also 'a period,' and certainly has, like all periods, its own characteristic illusions. They are likeliest to lurk in those widespread assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them."<sup>7</sup> This critique of "chronological snobbery" stayed with Lewis throughout his life and career—especially as a literary historian. It liberated Lewis from the false assumptions of his age by bringing attention to the ways in which one's imagination determines one's interpretation.

In the end, Lewis came around to the idea that the imagination did indeed have a role to play in epistemology—albeit a limited role with reason itself as the final arbiter. In his 1939 essay, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," Lewis analyzes the ways in which dead metaphors, words and phrases that originally were metaphors but now are used as abstract terms in modern English, color our thought and language. Lewis uses Barfield's *Poetic Diction* as a starting point to address the question, "How far, if at all, is thinking limited by these dead metaphors?"<sup>8</sup> Lewis's answer is characteristically against the modern grain. He argues that whereas scientifically minded men of his day may claim that metaphorical language gets in the way of truth, the exact opposite is the case. He does this by pointing out the fact that much of what scientists call "literal" or "objective" language is actually full of forgotten metaphors.<sup>9</sup> Once this is remembered, the role of the imagination becomes essential. For reason cannot determine the truth or falsehood of any statement until the imagination determines its meaning. As Lewis puts it:

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 242.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 243.

<sup>8</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 252.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," 264-5.

It must not be supposed that I am in any sense putting forward the imagination as the organ of truth. We are not talking of truth, but of meaning: meaning which is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood, whose antithesis is not error but nonsense. I am a rationalist. For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition. It is, I confess, undeniable that such a view indirectly implies a kind of truth or rightness in the imagination itself.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, for Lewis, though the imagination could not justify the truth of any assertion (Barfield's position), it was clear that it played a significant role in epistemology. It is the means by which we grasp meaning—the distinctive power that allows us to use our reason at all.

Lewis offers his most clear defense of what he saw as the imagination's role in epistemology in his famous essay, "Meditation in a Toolshed". In this essay, Lewis describes his experience of a beam of light pouring into a darkened shed. As Lewis looks at the beam and eventually steps into its light, he is able to distinguish two ways of experiencing, or knowing, the beam of light: (1) "looking at" the beam and (2) "looking along" it.<sup>11</sup> In *looking at* the beam, Lewis can see dust particles floating through it and discern the shape and direction of the beam itself. In *looking along* the beam, however, Lewis is able to see the world outside the shed: trees, birds, and the sun. What this image illustrates are two distinct ways of knowing. The first is, according to Lewis, "the whole basis of the specifically 'modern' type of thought."<sup>12</sup> It is the central mode of the scientific method, of data analysis, of objective observation, and of modern historical scholarship.

On the other hand, the second mode of knowing, that of "looking along," is the way of direct experience and of imagination. This is the mode of knowledge that Lewis believed was under attack in the modern world. As he put it, as soon as someone recognized these two modes of experience, a question arises:

<sup>10</sup> Lewis, "Bluspels and Falansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," 265.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 230.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," 232.

Which is the “true” or “valid” experience? Which tells you most about the thing? And you can hardly ask that question without noticing that for the last fifty years or so everyone has been taking the answer for granted. It has been assumed without discussion that if you want the true account of religion you must go, not to religious people, but to anthropologists; that if you want the true account of sexual love you must go, not to lovers, but to psychologists; that if you want to understand some “ideology” (such as medieval chivalry or the nineteenth-century idea of a “gentleman”), you must listen not to those who lived inside it, but to sociologists.<sup>13</sup>

As Lewis goes on to assert in the article, there is no rational basis for rejecting the experience of “looking along” in favor of “looking at.” In fact, in many cases it is precisely the former that can yield true knowledge of a thing. In this instance, Lewis is clearly using this argument as a Christian apologist to defend the experiential knowledge of religion. However, the implications for other disciplines, such as history, are not hard to see. Scientists and historians alike “must, on pain of idiocy, deny from the very outset the idea that looking at is, by its own nature, intrinsically truer or better than looking along. One must look both along and at everything.”<sup>14</sup>

### Looking Along History

As Lewis notes in his autobiographical work, *Surprised by Joy*, G.K. Chesterton's work of historical apologetics, *The Everlasting Man*, exercised a profound influence on his development as a scholar.<sup>15</sup> In a section of Chesterton's work where he attempts to describe the ancient Greek and Roman transition from a mythological culture to a philosophical one, he makes a brief remark that seems to indicate the importance of the imagination in historical study. “The psychology of it,” Chesterton says, “is really human enough to anyone who will try that experiment of seeing history from the inside.”<sup>16</sup> This experiment of seeing “from the inside” seems to be very much in line with Lewis's metaphor of “seeing along”—of using the imagination to share in the experiences of others. Not surprisingly,

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” 232.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed,” 232.

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 190-1.

<sup>16</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2007),

when one looks carefully at Lewis's historical writings, it becomes clear that this very experiment was at the heart of his work.

In 1927, Lewis wrote a letter to his brother, Warnie, in which he reflected on his recent study of Edward Gibbon's seminal book, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. "I am almost coming to the conclusion that all histories are bad," Lewis writes.<sup>17</sup> "Whenever one turns from the historian to the writings of the people he deals with there is always such a difference."<sup>18</sup> As Lewis goes on to explain, Gibbon, and other historians like him, write about historical events in such a way that, though factual, do little to communicate the significance and meaning that these events held for the actual people involved in them. Lewis compares Gibbon's account of Germanic warrior culture in the fifth century with those found in *Beowulf* and other medieval accounts of the same period:

What a common measure is there between 'Odoacer had alienated the sympathies of his Italian subjects by seizing a third of the land to reward his veterans' and "Oft Scyld Scefing overthrew the mead benches of many kindred. The dwellers round had to obey him across the whales's way. That was a good king. . . . So shall a young hero *do good* and give lordly gifts, that his retainers may repay him when war comes" [*Beowulf*, 2. 4-24]. The implication (always present) in the first version that Odoacer oughtn't to have given the land to his men, or that any choice in the matter could have occurred to him, as against the perfectly untroubled sincerity with which the other describes the hero as "doing good" in scattering the "lordly gifts" (acquired no doubt at the cost of 'alienating the sympathy' of someone) makes one despair.<sup>19</sup>

What this comparison illustrates quite well is the important role that the imagination and language both play in the discipline of history. What Lewis is pointing out is that one can "see in some sense that the two passages refer to the same sort of fact. But what is left of the 'fact' if you take away both its two 'appearances'?"<sup>20</sup> In other words, Lewis can see that Gibbon lacked a historical imagination. He was able to correctly *look at* a historical event but had not sufficiently *looked along* it.

<sup>17</sup> Letter of 12 December 1927, in Lewis, *CL*, 1:174.

<sup>18</sup> Letter of 12 December 1927, in Lewis, *CL*, 1:174.

<sup>19</sup> Letter of 12 December 1927, in Lewis, *CL*, 1:174.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of 12 December 1927, in Lewis, *CL*, 1:174.



Lewis's critique of Gibbon is two-pronged in nature. On the one hand, Lewis is demonstrating how Gibbon's interpretation of Odoacer's actions is fundamentally conditioned by his modern outlook. On the other hand, Lewis is showing how language itself can give such vastly different senses of the same event. He does this by comparing Gibbon's words with those of the ninth-century poem, *Beowulf*, and the difference is dramatic. Gibbon gets the historical facts right, but his understanding of their significance—of their meaning—is questionable at best. This calls to mind Lewis's conclusions about the imagination in "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare." In history, just as in other disciplines, the imagination serves as the "organ of meaning" and meaning "is the antecedent condition both of truth and falsehood."<sup>21</sup> Without the imagination and without attention to the way in which language engages the imagination, it is easy to fall into the same trap that Gibbon did.

So, how did Lewis avoid this trap in his own historical work? On the theoretical front, it seems that Lewis thought that disciplining his imagination to understand each historical era on its own terms was essential. In an essay aptly titled "De Audiendus Poetis," which roughly translates to "Listening to the Poets," Lewis wrote, "In so far as we are historians, there is no question. When our aim is knowledge we must go as far as all available means—including the most intense, yet at the same time most sternly disciplined, exercise of our imaginations—can possibly take us."<sup>22</sup> By "discipline," Lewis seems to mean that the historian must deliberately train his imagination to attend to the experience of those who lived the history itself. In other words, the historian must strive to gain "the experience of men long dead. . . . We must clean the lens and remove the stain so that the real past can be seen better."<sup>23</sup> Lewis compares this process to traveling in a foreign land. One may bring one's own culture into a foreign country as a tourist, or one can do all that he can to enjoy the country as an inhabitant might. The latter can transform and expand one's understanding, whereas the former leaves one unchanged.

There really is no great mystery as to how Lewis himself disciplined his imagination. In 1934, an American scholar, Sister Madeleva, wrote

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, "Bluspels and Flalansferes: A Semantic Nightmare," 265.

<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, "De Audiendus Poetis," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, "De Audiendus Poetis," 2.

to Lewis and asked him to describe his method for writing his famous “Prolegomena” lectures (which were later published in *The Discarded Image*). As Lewis explained:

The process is inductive for the most part of my lecture: tho’ on allegory, courtly love, and (sometimes) in philosophy, it is deductive —i.e. I *start* from the authors I quote. I elaborate this point because, if you are thinking of doing the same kind of thing (i.e. telling people what they ought to know as the *prius* of a study of medieval vernacular poets) I think you would be wise to work in the same way—starting *from* the texts you want to explain. You will soon find of course that you are working the other way at the same time, that you can correct current explanations, or see things to explain where the ordinary editors see nothing.<sup>24</sup>

By steeping himself in the literature of the era he was studying, Lewis not only collected facts but learned to see the world through the eyes of those bygone authors. He looked to primary sources first and allowed the experiences, attitudes, mores, and expressions found in them to shape his understanding of the past. As he said himself in his seminal work, *An Experiment in Criticism*, “My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through the eyes of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented.”<sup>25</sup>

The fruit of this discipline can be seen in Lewis’s two most famous historical works: *The Discarded Image* and *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. The former is almost exclusively dedicated to helping students of medieval literature gain this disciplined imagination. The primary thesis of the book is that “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.”<sup>26</sup> Lewis describes this “backcloth” upon which medieval literature was written in magnificent detail and in doing so, often takes time to head off modern assumptions that might get in the way of understanding medieval literature on its own terms.

For example, near the beginning of the book, Lewis sets out to

<sup>24</sup> Letter of 7 June 1934, in Lewis, *CL*, 2:141-2.

<sup>25</sup> C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 140.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.

correct the all-too-common assumption that medieval beliefs about the supernatural were a sign of their savageness. On the contrary, as Lewis points out, "the English poet knew nothing about that. . . . He believes in these daemons because he has read about them in a book; just as most of us believe in the Solar System or in the anthropologists' accounts of early man."<sup>27</sup> In this short passage, Lewis draws the reader's attention to the contingencies surrounding the medieval worldview, while also pointing out the contingencies of his own. This double-edged effect is a common trope in Lewis's historical work and is very much the result of his imaginative approach to history.

In a similar fashion, Lewis describes how "Medieval historians dealt hardly at all with the impersonal. Social or economic conditions and national characteristics come in only by accident or when they are required to explain something in the narrative."<sup>28</sup> Lewis puts this tendency of medieval authors in tension with the modern propensity to use impersonal forces and '-isms' to explain historical events. As Lewis half-jokingly observes, "Perhaps past or future ages might wonder at the predominance of the impersonal in some modern histories; might even ask, 'But were there no *people* at that time?'"<sup>29</sup> What Lewis is doing here is training his readers to use their imagination to attend to the context of medieval authors, while also drawing their attention to the literary nature of history itself. "Historians," Lewis goes on to explain, "even in dealing with contemporary events, will pick out those elements which the habitual bent of their imagination has conditioned them to notice."<sup>30</sup> Lewis does not say that their *reason* has conditioned them, but rather that their *imagination* has conditioned them. This is wholly consistent with his understanding of the human imagination and the essential role that it plays in the discipline of history.

Lewis devotes several pages of *The Discarded Image* to a detailed explanation of one book from the medieval period: Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. Lewis does so because this one work of philosophical inquiry was so influential on medieval thought that "to acquire a taste for it is almost

<sup>27</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 2-3.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 182.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 182.

to become naturalized in the Middle Ages.”<sup>31</sup> For example, in Book II of the *Consolation*, Boethius offers an apologia for *Fortuna*—a personified picture of fortune, or the forces that determine human wellbeing and failure. In these passages, Boethius offers “one of the most vigorous defenses against the view . . . which ‘comforts cruel men’ by interpreting variations of human prosperity as divine rewards or punishments.”<sup>32</sup> As Lewis goes on to explain, this argument was hugely influential on the culture, art, philosophy, and people’s understanding of history in the Middle Ages. It taught them not to interpret historical outcomes as moral judgments. It also stands as a foil to many modern philosophies of history, such as “the Whig interpretation of history” and . . . the philosophy of Carlyle.”<sup>33</sup> The Whig interpretation is an approach to historiography that presents history as a journey from an oppressive and benighted past to a “glorious present,” and Thomas Carlyle was a nineteenth century philosopher who postulated what is now known as the “Great Man Theory” of history, which contends that human history progresses through the influence of exceptional individuals. Both of these philosophies dismiss the warnings of Boethius.

By studying Boethius, Lewis was able simultaneously to demonstrate how medieval interpretations of history were conditioned by the imagination and how modern interpretations of history have been conditioned by the imagination. The tendency to interpret historical outcomes as moral judgments is endemic in modern philosophies of history, such as Marxism and Hegelianism, which interpret human history as a progressive movement toward liberation. Both of these schools of thought draw conclusions from history that go beyond the scope of true historical inquiry. In Lewis’s essay, “Historicism,” he makes a clear distinction between historians and historicists. The former use imagination in their writings in an acceptable way; the latter, though, tend to allow imagination to take an unearned preeminence. What he means by this is that the historicist always looks for an “inner meaning” in history. He believes that “events fell out as they did because of some ultimate, transcendent necessity in the ground of things.”<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 82.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Historicism,” in *The Seeing Eye* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967),

The historicist also believes that the future can be predicted since he knows the inner meaning of the historical process. This differs from the genuine historian. "A historian, without becoming a Historicist, may certainly infer unknown events from known ones. He may even infer future events from past ones; prediction may be a folly, but it is not Historicism."<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he sees nothing inimical to the historical profession when one tries to interpret history by attempting to imaginatively place oneself in the position of a person living in an earlier era. Making the past more real is an understandable and acceptable goal for historians. In fact, it is precisely this method of historical inquiry that gives one the ability to see the flaws in historicism, as Lewis demonstrates in *The Discarded Image*.

Lewis does similar historical work in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*. At the outset of the book, Lewis says that his primary aim is "to sketch some of the intellectual and imaginative conditions under which [Elizabethan authors] wrote."<sup>36</sup> As he proceeds with this work, he attempts to prune modern assumptions in order to orient his readers' imaginations for the task. For example, in a section discussing the changing cosmologies of the sixteenth century, Lewis argues that "the literary historian . . . must even 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."<sup>37</sup> A failure to do so, Lewis warns, will impose a modern dichotomy on the men of that age and distort the real significance that the shifting notions of cosmology at that time had on them.

Lewis treats the religious violence of the sixteenth century with a similar cautiousness. He warns against heedlessly imposing anachronistic notions on the men of the sixteenth century. Again, Lewis contrasts modern assumptions with those of past in order to accomplish this:

A modern, ordered to profess or recant a religious belief under pain of death, knows that he is being tempted and that the government which so tempts him is a government of villains. But this background was lacking when the period of religious revolution began. No man claimed for himself or allowed to another the right of believing as he

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, "Historicism," 131.

<sup>36</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 5.

chose. All parties inherited from the Middle Ages the assumption that Christian man could live only in a theocratic polity which had both the right and the duty of enforcing true religion by persecution. Those who resisted its authority did so not because they thought it had no right to impose doctrines but because they thought it was imposing the wrong ones.<sup>38</sup>

Again, Lewis invites his readers to not just *look at* the experiences of past people, but to *look along* their experiences—to train their imagination to see history from *the inside*, and in so doing gain a fuller and more accurate understanding of it. Accomplishing this, Lewis seemed to believe, not only gave readers a better understanding of historical eras but also allowed them to experience history as a truly liberal, and liberating, art.

### History as a Liberal Art

As Lewis knew very well, higher education in the Middle Ages was not primarily focused on vocational training but on the liberal arts.<sup>39</sup> A liberal arts education, traditionally understood, means an education designed to form a free and virtuous person. Through studying a wide array of arts for their own sake, students learned not only how to succeed in a particular vocation, but how to think and live well. This view of education stands in contrast to more modern notions that prioritize the utilitarian, or practical, aspects of education. In studying Lewis's work in history, it is clear that he thought history, when studied in the imaginative mode previously mentioned, is a liberal art in the truest sense of the term. Two very important implications can be drawn from this view. The first is that history, imaginatively understood, has a liberating effect on one's mind. The second is that developing a historical imagination is something that all students, not just historians, should learn to do.

In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis quotes G. K. Chesterton as he attempts to help his readers understand the significance and meaning behind Milton's great English epic. "Any man who is cut off from the past," Lewis quotes, "is a man most unjustly disinherited."<sup>40</sup> This is a uniquely

<sup>38</sup> Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> G. K. Chesterton, "On Man: The Heir of All Ages," in *Avowals and Denials* (London: Methuen, 1934) 83.

high view of history. Far from viewing history as a catalogue for practical use, or an interest to be pursued by a few bookish scholars, both Chesterton and Lewis lift it to the level of “inheritance”—of a gift to be received and bestowed by all. Using several quotations from Chesterton’s “On Man: The Heir of All Ages,” Lewis goes on to explain:

To enjoy our full humanity we ought, so far as is possible, to contain within us potentially at all times, and on occasions to actualize, all the modes of feeling and thinking through which man has passed. You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an eighteenth century Londoner while reading Johnson. Only thus will you be able to judge the work “in the same spirit that its author writ” and to avoid chimerical criticism.<sup>41</sup>

What becomes quite clear in this passage is the heavy emphasis Lewis places on the imaginative nature of history. For Lewis, the inheritance of history is not merely a collection of facts or dates but a kaleidoscope of worldviews that can enrich our lives and give us greater wisdom. This is a view that, as Lewis bemoans, has fallen out of fashion in modern education.

In Lewis’s essay, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thoughts,” he describes the consequences of modern education’s shift away from the liberal arts and toward vocational training. “Education” Lewis argues, “was formerly based throughout Europe, on the Ancients.”<sup>42</sup> This meant that men generally were trained to “believe that valuable truth could still be found in an ancient book. It was natural to them to reverence tradition. Values quite different from those of modern industrial civilization were constantly present to their minds.”<sup>43</sup> The main consequence of losing this type of education “has been to isolate the mind in its own age; to give it, in relation to time, that disease which, in relation to space, we call Provincialism.”<sup>44</sup> This *historical provincialism* is precisely what Lewis’s work in history sought to combat. By engaging the imagination and seeing through the eyes of people from past ages, the student of imaginative history is liberated

<sup>41</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022), 64.

<sup>42</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thought,” in *Present Concerns*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2017) 62.

<sup>43</sup> Lewis, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thought,” 62.

<sup>44</sup> Lewis, “Modern Man and His Categories of Thought,” 62.

from a narrow set of assumptions particular to his or her historical era.

How exactly can an imaginative approach to history liberate one's mind? Lewis's argument, which he made in one form or another in several different works throughout his career, runs as follows. All people reason within the imaginative parameters of the culture they grew up in, and people in modern culture are no exception. This means that if one seeks the truth, it is vital that he expand his imaginative framework and consider the viewpoints of those who grew up in epochs vastly different from his own. One of the most effective ways that people can do this is by studying primary sources in an imaginative way; that is, by acquainting themselves with the imaginative frameworks of past ages through their writings and art. The more that one cultivates this historical imagination, the more perspective and imaginative space one gains to assess the accepted truths of one's own age.

Perhaps one of the most telling examples of this argument was articulated by Lewis in his inaugural lecture as the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University in 1954. In the lecture, Lewis warns that in individual lives and in society as a whole, "it is the forgotten past that enslaves us."<sup>45</sup> The only remedy, Lewis goes on to say, is an intimate and imaginative knowledge of history. As he argues, "to study the past does indeed liberate us from the present, from the idols of our own market-place. But I think it liberates us from the past too. I think no class of men are less enslaved to the past than historians" for the "unhistorical are usually, without knowing it, enslaved to a fairly recent past."<sup>46</sup> In other words, all people think and live within some imaginative framework or tradition. It cannot be escaped. The only option left to us is to decide how deep of a framework or tradition we choose to think and live within.

This same argument comes up in several other works by Lewis. In his essay, "On The Reading of Old Books," he points out that "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. And that means the

<sup>45</sup> C. S. Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," 12.



old books.”<sup>47</sup> In another essay, “Is English Doomed?” he again argues that the main purpose of literary studies, including history, “is to lift the student out of his provincialism by making him ‘the spectator,’ if not of all, yet of much, ‘time and existence’ . . . to meet the past where alone the past still lives, [to be] taken out of the narrowness of his own age and class into a more public world.”<sup>48</sup> In a sermon Lewis gave in 1939, “Learning in War-time,” he again makes the same claim—this time with even more serious concern:

Most of all, perhaps, we need intimate knowledge of the past . . . to remind us that the basic assumptions have been quite different in different periods and that much which seems certain to the uneducated is merely temporary fashion. A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village; the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age.<sup>49</sup>

Lewis's phrase “intimate knowledge of the past” seems to indicate a deep sense of knowledge that goes beyond the realm of reason itself. This intimate knowledge can only be reached by way of a “most sternly disciplined exercise of our imaginations.”<sup>50</sup> The result, as Lewis says, is a liberation of the mind. It gives the mind an immunity from the narrowness and blindness of the present age.

## Conclusion

What role, then, does the imagination play in historical inquiry? According to C. S. Lewis, the imagination is nothing less than foundational. By cultivating a historical imagination, students of history can come not only to *look at* the facts of history but *look along* them—to see history from the inside and, in so doing, gain a deeper wisdom, insight, and enjoyment

<sup>47</sup> C. S. Lewis, “On the Reading of Old Books,” in *God in the Dock*, ed. by Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 219.

<sup>48</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Is English Doomed?” in *Present Concerns*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2017) 29.

<sup>49</sup> C. S. Lewis, “Learning in War-Time” in *The Weight of Glory*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 58-59.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, “De Audiendus Poetis,” 2.

of it. As Lewis himself said, “being human, I am inquisitive, I want to know as well as to enjoy,” and through the imaginative study of history “I should hope to be led by it to newer and fresher enjoyments, things I could never have met in my own period, modes of feeling, flavours, atmospheres, nowhere accessible but by a mental journey into the real past.”<sup>51</sup> History is the just inheritance of mankind, and studying and teaching it in the same manner as C. S. Lewis may open up the opportunity to receive this inheritance as it was always meant to be.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Lewis, “De Audiendus Poetis,” 4.

<sup>52</sup> Dr. K. Alan Snyder was awarded the 2022 Clyde Kilby Research Grant by the Marion E. Wade Center at Wheaton College for his research into Lewis’s views on history.