

C. S. Lewis, *Preface to Paradise Lost*, chapters 7-8.

As will be the case for other critical reading this semester, these chapters come out of a particular context. Lewis's book originated as a series of undergraduate lectures given at Oxford, and was originally published in 1942. To some extent, we're hearing only one side of a dialogue; Lewis is presenting a set of arguments about Milton and his poem, but these are often responses both to a particular historical setting, and to trends in poetry and criticism germane to that time.

Lewis is writing during the second world war, a time when it would have been normal to feel that a lot of things were in crisis; London was being bombed, for instance. (The war figures peripherally but significantly in both of his novels). In terms of literary history, the preceding decades were ones in which Milton's reputation had suffered quite grievously. During the 19th century, as I mentioned, Milton (not Shakespeare) was generally felt to be the greatest English poet of all time. After the turn of the 20th century, tastes began to change; critics and readers rediscovered other 17th century poets who had been neglected (John Donne, most notably), modernism displaced Victorian conventions in writing, while TS Eliot famously described Milton as a "bad influence" on other poets. (If you know Eliot's poetry, you may have noticed Lewis smacking down the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in Chapter 8; if you don't know it, google that title and read it -- you'll have an immediate understanding of what Lewis is fighting against, aesthetically and morally).

So Milton's style had been attacked -- as pompous, as artificial, as ineffective -- and had to be defended. Lewis makes the case that there is a place for a style that is elevated above the level of ordinary speech, that feels "important." (We don't have so much difficulty with that idea today, I think; what do you think?). He is also making the case for poetry that is less about shockingly new ideas and images (the evening as a patient etherized upon a table, Donne's flea as "marriage bed" because it has bitten two lovers and mingled their blood) than about old ones, ones that he attributes to a kind of race memory. Milton, in other words, is evoking familiar responses to familiar images rather than new responses to new images. I think this is in some ways quite wrong, although interesting.

In the next chapter, Lewis takes up a second "problem" -- the perception of Milton's poetry as calculated ("rhetorical") rather than sincere, naturally expressive, etc.. He does so, rather charmingly, by defending calculation and manipulation as one of poetry's proper jobs. Along with many earlier (e.g., Renaissance) thinkers about poetry, he sees it as concerned with moral education, giving us pleasure so that it can teach us how to be. A moment's reflection on the history of the 20th century at this particular point in time may shed some light on why Lewis feared that modern human beings might, in fact, be in danger of losing their humanity. This fear didn't speak only to the worries we all may have about how changes we see in our life time will change *us*, and our descendents; it is also shaped by Lewis's position in a country at war, and his belief as a Christian convert that what he saw outside him manifested a spiritual struggle for the souls of mankind. So he sees at work not just the forces of change and chance, but aggression by Hitler and Satan that might well succeed and triumph over the forces of (as he saw them) good.

Naomi asked a question about Lewis's idea of "the stock response." So, his comments on "the Stock response to *Pride*" are thinking back to the poetry of Byron, for instance. Byron was famous for making arguably criminal figures into immensely attractive heroes, and I think Lewis blames him (among others, like Blake) for a changed response among Milton's readers to such characters. In other words, we (modern readers) are inclined to find Satan attractive, while a pre-romantic reader in say, 1750 would have found him repellent -- I think that's the argument. What's the problem with that changed response? Check out what Lewis says just below about responses to treachery. "Lord Haw Haw" is the pseudonym for a famous English fascist who broadcast Nazi propaganda to England during the war. Lewis finds it shocking that "a respectable working man" takes this kind of activity in stride, rather than perceiving it as part of a direct threat to his life and liberty. Such a tepid or passive response, he feels, is actually dangerous. To give a contemporary analogy, I find it fascinating that many people respond to the character of Hannibal Lecter (*Silence of the Lambs*, etc.) enormously appealing and attractive. Thomas Harris actually wrote a follow-up in which his heroic female detective has an affair with Lecter, I think as a kind of shameless pandering to this large segment of his audience. Lewis's response would be, what will happen to us if, as a result of reading your responsibly written novels like this one, we all start *liking* sociopathic, cannibal serial killers instead of treating them as an aberration and a menace to society? This would not be a survival-positive response!

Lewis has some great perceptions about Milton, and he also makes some arguments that I would absolutely reject. So as with all the criticism we'll read, you should be judicious readers. These are all learned scholars who know more than we do about many things, but it is not necessary to agree with everything they say for that reason. Use what is useful, and leave the rest!

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