

PART I

REFLECTIONS ON LITERATURE



*C. S. Lewis's pre-eminence as an author, academic and apologist is such that we often forget he was, for the most part, a teacher. At Oxford, every term, for eight weeks, he lectured and gave tutorials in English literature to undergraduates, aside from fulfilling other duties, decanal or administrative, on behalf of the University and the residents of his College. The first two long essays here, from the collection *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (1939) reveal how important this facet of his life was to him. In both, he discusses the importance of academic rigour and intellectual exploration, not only in universities, but also in schools. The third long essay, 'Image and imagination' appears here for the first time. It is a philosophical analysis of the way an 'image' may inspire 'imagination' and vice versa. In a way, 'Image and imagination' is analogous to Tolkien's famous story 'Leaf by niggel'. Both are conceptual treatments of what is happening when an author creates an imaginary world. The other articles display the range of Lewis's literary interests, casting light on the smallest matters of bibliography, as well as more weighty problems of translation and interpretation.*

I

The idea of an ‘English School’



Non leve quiddam interest inter humanae mentis idola et divinae mentis ideas, hoc est inter placita quaedam inania et veras signaturas atque impressiones factas in creaturis, prout inveniuntur.¹

Bacon, *Novum Organum*, i.23

The title of this paper is unfortunate in recalling that of Newman’s best book.² It is doubly unfortunate in so far as it not only suggests, on my part, an arrogant intention of pitting myself against so great a writer, but also carries with it an omen of failure on the practical side; for none of the things which Newman advised has come to pass. Yet some such title is unavoidable. I intend, it is true, to talk a good deal about the Final Honour School of English as it actually exists at Oxford. But I am concerned with that School not as an historical fact but as an approximation to an ideal. What we are doing at Oxford is of universal interest only as an indication of what, on my view, we are trying to do or ought to do. We are doubtless full of faults and do not shun criticism, provided such criticism is based on an understanding of our aims. You may not agree with these aims – though I hope that you will – but do not

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blame a man for making slow progress to the North when he is trying to get to the East.

We are under no illusions as to our reputation in the outer world. What our enemies think of us is vigorously enough, if not always very lucidly, conveyed by the expressions they use – by their references to ‘the Germanic jungle’, ‘all this philology’, ‘Verner’s law’, ‘Anglo-Saxon’, and (most damning of all) ‘Gothic’. When we listen attentively to this buzz of condemnation, we think that we can distinguish two strains in it. The confusion between ‘Germanic’ or ‘Anglo-Saxon’ on the one hand and ‘philology’ or ‘Verner’s law’ on the other, is made, we believe, by two classes of people. In the first class we find the man who is still living in the Renaissance, the belated Ascham,³ who is quite sure that literature he cannot translate must be bad literature – must be ‘Gothic’ in the classical sense of the word. He does not like the poetry of the Dark, and Middle Ages (*ignoti nulla cupido*)⁴ and he uses ‘philology’ simply as a term of abuse. He is not really thinking of philology at all. In the second class we find a much more respectable opponent, probably a real scholar who knows that he does not know any medieval language. His objection is not to the unknown literatures – in such a man it could not be – but to comparative philology. He has in his mind the picture of a promising academic discipline, in which the young might have been guided to a systematic study of our English classics, not without some subsidiary Greek and Latin to steady their judgement, perverted and thwarted by irrelevant excursions into Germanic philology; he sees the interest which ought to have been concentrated on Shakespeare and Johnson dissipated on mere comparisons between English and cognate languages; and he wonders

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why English should have been selected to carry this purely scientific and unliterary burden which might, with equal propriety or impropriety, have been bound on the back of several other subjects.

To this second, and reasonable, type of critic, our reply is a simple one. His information is out of date. No undergraduate at Oxford is obliged to know a single word of Gothic, old High German, or Old Norse, or to study the relations between these languages and his own. The English student can choose between three alternative courses, all of which can conduct him to the highest honours. One of these is frankly medieval, and if a student chooses it he does so because he is interested in early English and its immediate relatives. The second is a half-way house – a complicated affair that need not now concern us. The third is the literary course proper, which the vast majority of our students take.

But here comes the rub. This third and literary course, I must confess, contains three papers which the enemy will be tempted to describe as ‘philological’. The first is on Modern English, and deals mainly with the history of meaning, whether in syntax or vocabulary. The second is on Anglo-Saxon texts, and the third on Middle English texts. I do not imagine that the critic I have in view will object very strongly to the first of these. If he does, the official voice of our English School will reply with the very pertinent question, ‘Do you wish students to understand what they read or not?’ For the fact is that those who have had no experience in the teaching of English are living a fool’s paradise as regards the ability of the average undergraduate to *construe* his mother tongue. Again and again curious statements in the essays of our pupils can be

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traced back to an original failure to make out the sense of Milton or Johnson or Coleridge, as a schoolboy fails to make out the sense of Caesar or Xenophon. And with this answer I expect that the critics will be satisfied. But the other two papers – the Anglo-Saxon and Middle English texts – I fear he will regard as *vestigial*, as relics of that philological period in which, admittedly, English studies at Oxford began – *ein Theil des Theils, der anfangs alles war*.⁵ He will be in danger of looking upon them as a rearguard which has not yet been defeated but whose defeat may be hourly expected. His hopes are vain; and it is at this point that I must join issue with him. If any of the three papers is really vestigial, it is the paper on Modern English. I have just stated the official defence for it; but it would be disingenuous not to confess that this paper is a subject of dispute among ourselves. I am, in fact, one of those who disapprove of it. But that is not our present concern. I mention it only to emphasize the fact that this paper is incomparably the most philological of the three, and that the other two, so far from being vestigial, are essential to the idea of an English School as I see it.

Before I attempt to explain why, I must remove two possible misconceptions. One is the belief that Anglo-Saxon is a language other than English, or even, as used to be said, that English is a third language born from the union of two earlier languages, Anglo-Saxon and French. This is an error so gross that six weeks' study would remove it from the minds of the most prejudiced. You might as well say that Latin was a new language born from the union of Roman and Greek. Anglo-Saxon is simply early English. Norman-French is simply one of the foreign languages which, from time to time, have enriched our vocabulary.

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Most of the changes which separate what we call Anglo-Saxon from what we call Middle English had begun before the Normans landed, and would have followed much the same course if no Conquest had ever occurred. Brevity compels me to be dogmatic; but it is not really a subject that admits of discussion.

The second misconception turns on our old friend ‘philology’. There is no philology in the papers on Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. They are papers on texts, consisting of a core of passages for translation surrounded by questions on archaeological, textual, cultural, or historical matters relevant to the texts. The student is asked to know about *Beowulf* or *Pearl* just those things which the classical examiner demands that he should know about Virgil or Sophocles. Philology is absent, unless you call grammar philology. Before some audiences I should feel it my duty to insist rather strongly on the value of grammar. I am told that there have been critics of Chaucer who perpetrated serious blunders in translation, and built up formidable aesthetic superstructures on a purely intuitive, and sometimes erroneous, conception of their author’s meaning. But I presume that every one present agrees that if you are going to read a book at all, it is desirable to be able to tell which words are in the Nominative and which are in the Accusative.

We are now, at last, in a position to come to grips with the main question. Granted that these old books are written in what is unmistakably English, and granted that we do not set philological questions on them, still, it will be asked, why should we read them? What relevance has the study of *Beowulf* for the man who wants to read modern English literature? If we are looking for sheer

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poetical merit, are there not many poems greater than *Beowulf* and no more difficult? Why not the *Iliad*, or the *Aeneid*? If, on the other hand, we are looking for the origins of Modern literature, shall we not find them in Rome and Greece? None of our great poets could read Anglo-Saxon: nearly all of them could and did read Latin, and some knew Greek.

I will take the second question first, and before I attempt to answer it, let me protest that I am no enemy of the classics. I have read the *Aeneid* through more often than I have read any long poem; I have just finished re-reading the *Iliad*; to lose what I owe to Plato and Aristotle would be like the amputation of a limb. Hardly any lawful price would seem to me too high for what I have gained by being made to learn Latin and Greek. If any question of the value of classical studies were before us, you would find me on the extreme right. I do not know where the last ditch in our educational war may be at the moment; but point it out to me on the trench-map and I will go to it. At present, however, we are only asking whether it is true that the origins of English literature are to be found in the classics. And perhaps if 'the origins' here means 'all the origins' no one, however, ignorant, would answer Yes. At most our critics can only mean that of the innumerable debts which our literary tradition owes, the debt to Rome and Greece is the greatest and most important. I do not think this is true.

The first step in an inquiry into its truth is to rule out the greatest Greek poets and philosophers. Except on a few isolated writers such as Milton and Gray,⁶ these have no influence worth talking about before the nineteenth century. Chapman's Homer, and even Pope's,⁷ might almost

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have been written to prove that Homer was invisible to Englishmen until the Romantic Revival had cleared their eyes. In drama, Seneca is of far more importance than all the Greek tragedians put together. The real Plato counts for less in our tradition than that strange theosophy which Ficino⁸ and others called ‘Platonic theology’. Aristotle, I admit, in a slightly Thomized form, bit deeply into the minds of the Middle Ages; but where are the literary results of this? On seventeenth-century criticism we can trace his influence at every step, but it is an influence almost wholly mischievous.

Having got rid of these august but irrelevant names, it may be well to remind ourselves of the authors who have really affected us deeply and over long periods. Of the Romans those naturally come first who enjoyed the same degree and nearly the same kind of prestige both before and after the Renaissance – the great Kings whose reign had begun before *Beowulf* was written and has not ended yet. I mean, of course Boethius, Ovid, and Virgil – and I would put them roughly in that order of importance. Immediately below these, in length and security of reign, we might put Juvenal, the moral works of Cicero and Seneca, Horace, Statius, Claudian, and a few others. Apuleius and the elder Pliny would come a good deal higher than they do in our modern scholastic tradition. Of the Greeks, the great gossiping authors, the repositories of anecdote, like Plutarch and Diogenes Laertius, would stand at the top of the list. Second to these we should find, indistinguishably blended, the joint influence of Theocritus and the novelists – Longus, Heliodorus, and the like; and perhaps – but I am doubtful about my facts here – the influence of the *Anthology*.⁹

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Having identified the influential authors it remains to consider what their influence really was. It is clear, in the first place, that our literature is not greatly indebted to them for its forms. We are apt to forget that Milton's classical epic and classical tragedy are lonely exceptions. Most attempts to transplant an ancient form into English literature have failed. Milton is the single survivor in a forlorn hope where Cowley, Blackmore, and Glover fell: *Samson* lives, but *Gorboduc*, *Cato*, and *Caratacus* do not. A list of our best narrative poems would contain *Troilus*, *The Faerie Queene*, *The Prelude*, *Don Juan*, and *Endymion*, and would leave out all our classical epics save one. A list of our greatest dramas would give an even more striking result. Our lyric poetry is, no doubt, richly decorated in certain periods with borrowings from ancient Latin and Greek, though they are not more numerous than its borrowings from medieval Latin, from Italian, and from old and modern French. Its chief serious attempt to adopt an ancient form, however, has left behind it only one or two successes by Gray amidst a ruinous waste of 'Pindarique Odes'; and in the very nature of things formal similarities between quantitative lyric and rhymed accentual lyric must be very superficial. Already in *Summer is icumen in* we are basing our lyrical poetry on discoveries in music which the Greeks never made. The novel, born from the marriage of the periodical essay and the romance, or the sonnet, descending from the Provençals, are even farther removed from ancient literature. The Satire and the Pastoral are more instructive, for in them we can see side by side the unhappy attempts to adhere to the classical form and the happy departures from it. The Roman model – the static, rambling diatribe – is preserved by Donne, Hall, Marston,

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and Churchill, and by Pope in his inferior works; our great satires, deserting this in favour of extravagant satiric fiction and owing something, perhaps, to Lucian and the *Margites*, but much more to Rabelais and Cervantes, have given us *Hudibras*, *Absalom*, *The Rape*, *The Dunciad*, *Gulliver*, *Don Juan*, *Erewhon*, and *Brave New World*. In the Pastoral we can trace both developments in the same writer (and that, not only in English) as we gratefully lay aside Sannazaro's tedious *Piscatory Eclogues* and open his *Arcadia* or turn from the fussy futility of the *Shepherd's Calendar* to the sixth book of *The Faerie Queene*. The little drop of Theocritus properly mixed with northern romance and Provençal love poetry improves the drink: offer it neat, and our stomachs turn. We can read Sidney and William Browne, but who, unbribed, would open the pastorals of Mantuan, Barclay, or Googe?

But perhaps I have argued too long on a point that is obvious. No one can really be maintaining that the best and most characteristic English work is deeply indebted to the classics for its form. We are more likely to be told that something subtler than a form – a spirit or temper or attitude – has been transferred. And, of course, I have no wish to deny that many individual English authors have in this way been deeply affected by their classical reading. We cannot even imagine Chapman without the Stoics, Burke without Cicero, or Tennyson without Virgil. It is equally true, however, that we cannot imagine Chaucer without Guillaume de Lorris, or Spenser without Ariosto, or Morris without Froissart and the *Edda*. Of tracing such individual affinities there would be no end. What the argument requires is to show that the spirit of our literature, or our best literature, or most of our best literature, is closer