



C. S. LEWIS  
THEN AND NOW

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WESLEY A. KORT

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

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江苏工业学院图书馆  
藏书章

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Oxford New York  
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town  
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw  
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198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kort, Wesley A.

C. S. Lewis then and now / Wesley A. Kort  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-19-514342-6

1. Lewis, C. S. (Clive Staples), 1898-1963. I. Title.  
BX5199.L53 K67 2001  
283'.092—dc21 2001021324

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I completed this project while in residence as a senior fellow in the Erasmus Institute at the University of Notre Dame. While I spent most of my time there on a work that is still in progress, a book on belief and the language of place-relations in modern English fiction, I was able from time to time to turn to this one. I also had opportunities to share parts of it with the other fellows, and I am grateful to them, especially to Roger Lundin, for their encouragement and help. I want to thank the administration of the institute, especially Professor Jim Turner, for providing me the opportunity to work there.

I showed parts of the manuscript to several people: Dr. Mary Smith and her husband, Professor Philip Rolnick, Mr. Brett Patterson, the late Professor Tommy Langford, Dr. Anastasia Gutting, and my daughter, Eva. I am grateful to them all for their interest in my work and for their many helpful responses to it. I am also grateful to Ms. Cynthia Read at Oxford University Press, who read the manuscript with care and offered many helpful suggestions and corrections.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Phyllis, both for her interest in this project and for her help in my attempts to write in a way that would make the book available to a wide audience.

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C. S. LEWIS THEN AND NOW

## INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, a major in our department who had taken a couple of my courses asked me to offer her an independent reading course on C. S. Lewis. I knew of her active involvement in evangelical student groups, and I was not surprised, when I asked about her interest in Lewis, to learn that she was intrigued because he was both a “Christian”—she gave extra force to that word—and a well-positioned academic. She wanted to see how he managed that. She wanted help bringing together two important parts of her own life, her strong religious beliefs and her energetic intellectual pursuits. I suggested that she reconsider, because the course would not give easy answers but rather would raise tough questions and call for difficult choices. When she returned she said that six of her friends wanted to take the course, too. I proposed a seminar to maximize discussion. Due to demand I have been offering the course to large classes ever since.

I am intrigued both by the widespread, serious interest in Lewis among undergraduates and by their parallel desire to explore the relation of religious faith to the world opened up to them by their academic experiences and their intellectual curiosity and energy. Discontent with the prospect of a life divided into personal or internal and intellectual or public compartments seems widespread among students, as is also the willingness both to work at the question of the relation of intellectual inquiry and critique to religious faith and to incur the risks that such work entails. Lewis, I have found, becomes an occasion and guide for students to undertake in their own way and with varying degrees of success, a process of healing breaches in their lives.

I am also intrigued by the pedagogical opportunity their interest in this process and in Lewis offers. Usually an instructor must work hard to engage students in the topic of the course and to sustain that interest over the semester.

Little of that is needed in my Lewis class. Students enter with eager, inquisitive attitudes, and their engagement deepens as it becomes more informed and critical. I welcome this pedagogical opportunity because Lewis, who combines sophisticated and diverse literary and philosophical interests, a complex critique of modern culture, strong religious convictions, and a fascination with difficult theological questions, is worth the attention that the course requires. In addition, I would always rather talk about religion and modern culture in relation to particular case studies than in some general or self-warranting way. Lewis challenges students to examine the relation of cultural to religious studies, to assess the role of moral and religious belief in cultural criticism, and to evaluate the relevance of his work to their own situation as contemporary Americans. Whatever one's opinion of Lewis, there can be no doubt that he brings to attention important, even constitutive aspects of modern culture, and he does so with strong and explicit interest in both moral theology and cultural theory. Religion, moreover, is not for him something external and complete that either clashes with modern culture or stands as a substitute for it. Religion prompts Lewis to raise questions that complicate and enlarge an understanding of what culture could be, and his understanding of religion is affected by the culture he both criticizes and affirms.

The centennial celebration of Lewis's birth—he was born in 1898 and died in 1963—sparked my decision to write on themes in Lewis that seem of particular importance today, especially for Americans working in contemporary academic cultures. The topics I have chosen focus on his imaginative fiction, cultural theory and criticism, and moral and religious thought. These topics do not exhaust Lewis; nor will they answer all the questions readers may have about modern culture, religion, and their relation to one another. Rather, they are topics that mediate a relation between Lewis and the challenge faced by many, especially young people today, to understand their cultural location in ways that engage religious belief. Made conscious of transition by the century's turn, such young people are concerned about relating the traditional to the new, the academic to the moral, and the public to the personal, not despite but because of how troubled one or both parties in each set of contraries may be.

I view this project as a retrieval for several reasons. First, it causes me to go back to the enthusiasms of my own earlier years, finding much there to be treasured and reinvested, especially the belief that religion, if it is mature, should offer what was called back then “a world and life view.” Second, Lewis is dated. There can be no question of simply deploying his work in relation to present challenges. He lived and worked in a world very different from, in-

deed as much worse as it was better than, our own. As I say to my students, I do not think it is possible to move Lewis's construction to this place and time and inhabit it. But in his work there are strategies, critical moves and insights, and large bits of construction worth imitating and using. Third, I call this effort a retrieval because in this country Lewis has largely become the property of a particular set of religious and political interests, and I find that confinement odd, at best. Among several reasons why, the most important is that Lewis above all else wanted and tried to live in a larger, more commodious world than that made available by modern culture. This does not mean that for Lewis anything goes. But his principal interest is in that larger world and one's relations to and within it. Lewis would be more engaged by a non-Christian who lived in a large world and related to its particularities variously and appreciatively than by those Christians who press the world into the shape of their own agendas. I think the company Lewis would prefer to keep, were he working in our culture today, would not be provided mainly by those who claim and treat him now as their own.

Lewis located himself within a specific cultural context, and he was fully aware of that context. I take my attempt at retrieval as consistent with his theoretical point, namely, that cultures, like characters, are always particular. What is arresting and useful in his work lies not so much in its theological content, which by his own admission is rather standard and minimal. Rather, it lies in what he does to create suitable cultural and personal conditions as a context or ground for talking about religion and morality effectively and truthfully. And that task is made ongoing and particularized by differing and changing historical and cultural locations.

To put it somewhat differently and, perhaps, more forcefully: Lewis avoids two mistakes that are pervasive in contemporary American Christianity. The first is to read modern culture as inevitable and irremediable. Lewis, by not reading modern culture as human culture that has come to fruition, does not accept modern culture's self-assessment. Modern culture must be redressed, made, that is, more complex and human. Indeed, that is for him a primary objective. The second mistake that Lewis avoids is thinking that religion can be self-enclosed, that it can separate itself from its cultural context. He agrees that Christian spokespersons and church leaders have often been too influenced by modern culture and have consequently compromised or distorted Christianity. But he believes that this is not because they have failed to separate Christianity from culture but because they have accepted modernity as an adequate form of human culture. The task is not to eschew culture, as though that were possible, but to affirm another, more adequate way of understanding

human beings in their relations to one another and to the world they receive and are creating. Indeed, for Lewis one cannot begin to understand Christianity without major distortions unless that task is first undertaken.

Americans also tend to misunderstand or misappropriate Lewis because they are conditioned by modern culture's habits of abstraction. Just as they shop in malls without an interest in where and under what conditions products were produced, so they want answers, especially religious answers, without an interest in the problems to which those answers are responses. Furthermore, American Christians are, like their nonreligious neighbors, conditioned by the culture to establish their identities by difference, by standing out or standing apart. Religious identity becomes yet another culturally inspired form of taking exception to or being noticeable in the culture. Lewis cannot be conscripted into supporting either of these tendencies and habits. For him, the question, problem, or mystery is always primary; the response, especially when it takes the form of an answer or solution, remains to a degree inadequate and provisional. And Lewis, while prizing particularity, did not use religion as a way of standing out. He was in a number of ways an ordinary man. His dress and personal demeanor as well as his intellectual goals were designed not to be off-putting but to heal, not to champion the eccentric but to restore the everyday. While he was always ready to provoke, debate, and, if necessary, criticize sharply, he always acted with a sense that there were more important things to worry about than standing out. The challenges and joys of living for Lewis lie first of all not in the extraordinary but in the commonplace, not in conflict but in relationship.

I find Lewis's ordinary and practical way of proceeding to be one of the reasons he appeals to students. It allows him to articulate credible understandings of the relations between persons and between them and what they encounter in their worlds. If anything is to count for him as cultural criticism, moral philosophy, or religious belief and practice, it must do so in a way directly relevant to the everyday life of ordinary people. His principal task was to find a language that would help people to make sense of their world and their experience of it. The implied invitation to the reader is to give a religious account of things a try, to compare it with other options. This very practical approach appeals to American readers, especially students. This is because many Americans take it as a matter of course that it is up to them to develop "personally tailored religious worldviews." They tend to see religion not first of all as something final to which they conform but, rather, as "a way to make sense out of ordinary experience." They are intensely interested in religion when and because it helps "in creating and maintaining worldviews that

permit them to give meaning to life."<sup>1</sup> Students entertain Lewis's views because what he says is offered as something suitable, not forced onto their lives. If his work arose from and required institutional or dogmatic conformity, it would provoke from students equally assertive exceptions and rebuttals. To use a market metaphor, Lewis can be read as one who has confidence in his product, and he simply puts it out there for the reader to try. He talks up its value when he compares it with secular competitors. As R. Laurence Moore points out in *Selling God*, Americans are accustomed to having religion presented to them as an option placed alongside other options.<sup>2</sup> American students, I am not surprised to learn, find Lewis's approach congenial. They are willing to sample options, to try things on for size.

Lewis's account of the world and of human deportment in it comes with an invitation to fill in the blanks or to engage in constructing a similar account of one's own. His work appeals because he presents his account as consistent and applicable but not as complete and rigid. He reveals his way of doing things, but the reader is set free to finish it off or to turn it toward his or her own situation and sense of things. The account is flexible, and the reader is invited to get the hang of it, to alter it, and to go beyond it. Lewis, in other words, empowers the reader. He has no interest in devotees or in carbon copies of himself. He could hardly have been more emphatic or inventive in emphasizing the particularity of a person's life, especially of a Christian's life. Christians should differ not only from other people but also from other Christians. He would have agreed with Nicholas Wolterstorff that "authentic Christian commitment as a whole, but also the belief content thereof, is relative to persons and times. One might insist that there are certain propositions which belong to the belief-content of all authentic Christian commitment whatever. Probably so. But certainly they will be few and simple."<sup>3</sup>

Lewis also appeals to American readers because his work is expansive and inclusive. Lewis tries to bring into focus not only the complexities of personal life and relationships but also the relation of people both to culture and to the natural context of their lives.<sup>4</sup> Students are intrigued by a thinker who, rather than being intimidated by a complex world and retreating from it toward private communities and internal awareness as locations and objects for religious reflection, engages and even affirms that large and complex world, especially because of its largeness and complexity.

Finally, Lewis's work appeals to students because it is deeply relational in its thrust. Indeed, his implied theory of internal relations is, I think, one of its most crucial and useful components. This emphasis speaks strongly to American students. They are presented with many analyses of the world around

them, both social/political and physical, and many analyses of the self. These analyses tend not only to break things down into parts but also to define parts as distinct from and even in opposition to one another. It is left to the student to put the pieces together again. I think that they find it refreshing to encounter a critic who works with a basic belief in substantial, primary relations between aspects of the self, between the self and other selves, and between the self and the larger world. This emphasis is healing for those whose lives otherwise are sundered by great gaps or constant conflicts, especially between desires, feelings, and ideas "in here" and what exists "out there."

Young people, raised on an academic diet of difference and opposition, are easily intimidated as they contemplate our complex society. They become uncertain about their own resources and question if there is a place in society where they can fit. One of the most unnerving questions you can ask an undergraduate is what he or she plans to do after college. This question is always before them, and it carries a kind of apocalyptic thrust. This anxiety is produced by an underdeveloped sense of the relation of self to others and the world. Lewis would argue that it arises from a tacit recognition that the kinds of analyses and criticism students learn in their classes are inadequate and problematic because they make external relations, that is, difference, competition, and conflict, central. One appeal of Lewis for undergraduates, it seems to me, lies in his sustained and complex attack on the culturally orthodox doctrine of external, negative relations. He posits the primacy of relations that students have been otherwise led to think of as secondary and insecure.

I think these characteristics of Lewis are also suggestive in the larger context of American religious and cultural studies. In a situation in which religion and morality are regularly relegated to internal states or separated communities and academic interest in religion is limited largely to psychological, social-political, and historical descriptions of it, it is challenging to be reminded that religious beliefs and moral convictions have a positive, public potential. In a culture such as our own in which religion easily becomes a form of group- or self-preoccupation, it is refreshing to encounter Lewis's robust and morally muscular sense of the person's place in the world. He refuses to relegate religion and morality to private feelings and behaviors, and he refuses to define the larger culture that we conspire to make for ourselves as wholly evil or irremediable. He does not allow his strong sense of the separation between good and evil or the creative and destructive in human living to carry over into other kinds of separations, such as between religion and culture, faith and reason, or daily life and religious discipline. And that is what I find in his work most encouraging to my own: his sense that the positive and the negative, the

continuous and the dissonant, and the familiar and the unexpected are always found together. The engaging uncertainty of living arises from not knowing how much of which there will be and how each will manifest itself. His overriding affirmation is that these contraries do not only militate against one another but also are complementary or mutually revealing.

This book is intended, then, to take the reader into what I think of as the most useful aspects of Lewis's work for people attempting to articulate "world and life views" that are both relevant to our current location and informed by religious beliefs. I have placed the chapters in their present order for two reasons. First, they progress toward the middle chapter, the one on culture, and then away from it, the first three being less and the latter three more religious in emphasis. The second reason is that this arrangement is intended to move the reader from first to final considerations, from beginning to completion. The Conclusion is really an introduction, a gambit for opening a conversation about the role of belief in contemporary American culture.

The direction of this book is primarily outward. Its emphasis is construction. In these ways it stands in contrast to the book that immediately precedes it.<sup>5</sup> The direction of that book was primarily inward. Its emphasis was deconstructive, and its tone, suited, perhaps, to a century's ending, was negative. It moved the reader away from the world and from his or her relations to and within it. It was a study of the religious discipline of reading a text as scripture. The main point of that book was that reading a text as scripture involves world and self-rejection. The primary focus was on exit from the culture, abandoning the world, and divesting the self. In this book things are turned around. The tone here is primarily positive, suited, perhaps, to a century's beginning. The goal now is to reinstate and affirm relations.

A positive attitude toward the world and human culture carries two beliefs. The first is that a person cannot live only at the exit or only in rejection of the culture. It is fashionable among current cultural critics, both religious and secular, to think that one can live with no affirmative attitudes toward culture, no sense of the whole, and no positive relations with others. Attempts to live that way, in both their religious and secular forms, assume that human living is basically alienated and nomadic. While I believe that cultural divestment and personal abjection are indispensable to a healthy life, especially for a religious person, I also believe that they are not the whole story. Reentry, affirmation, and relations are just as important and just as difficult.

The second belief implied by the direction and tone of this book is that understanding the world and one's relations to and within it is not simply there, granted by reality, institution, or creed. It has also to be constructed,

and that construction is ongoing. It is not as though a person, by exiting the culture or divesting the self, enters a more real world, whether, in its religious form, a church or body of truth or, in its secular form, the material reality that supports society or the unconscious desires that underlie the self. Living in a world and in relations to and within it are the consequence of trusting, acting, and reflecting. To paraphrase one of Lewis's comments, it is like living in a house while also engaged in its construction, inspection, and renovation.

It is not clear to me which side of this double story, the negative half of divestment or the positive half of affirmation, is the more important and with which half one ought to begin. While some people identify themselves more with one side than with the other, excluding either side results in a partial and eventually distorted understanding of both religion and life. Indeed, each side implies the other, and one without the other is incomplete. A religious life without the negative side, without cultural exit and self-abjection, becomes calcified, and a religious life without world affirmation and construction becomes self-preoccupied. Consequently, the two sides of the story should not divide the religious world, as though the one side, the negative, is conservative and the other side, the positive, is liberal. Indeed, I have tried to undercut this knee-jerk judgment by using theorists for the negative, more "conservative" project who are hardly conservative, who are not theologians or even known for their religious beliefs: Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva. And now, for the positive, more "liberal" project of world and culture affirmation I have chosen to work primarily with C. S. Lewis, a person who is widely thought of as "conservative."

This book differs from the one that precedes it not only in direction, emphasis, and tone but also in style. It seemed incongruous to write a book dealing with the work of C. S. Lewis that would not be available to a rather wide range of people. Accessibility is a distinguishing feature of his work, and I have tried to emulate it. I am always distressed when intelligent and motivated readers find my work difficult to read. This happened again with my previous book. A church group composed of able people read it and invited me to talk with them about it. They all, to my surprise, found the book tough going. I tried to keep this audience in mind while writing this book. A book on Lewis should not exclude the many intelligent readers outside academic walls who find him in many ways helpful in assessing the world in which they find themselves. Lewis, by writing in an accessible way, does not simplify complex issues or attempt to gain popularity. Writing that way is a feature, I believe, of his relational view of his audience. His style affirms rather than distances the reader. In addition, he wrote clearly because he wanted to draw attention neither to

the style nor to himself but to the topic at hand, primarily the intriguing and problematic world in which we find ourselves. His style, in other words, was consistent with his belief about relations, consistent, in a word, with love. I could not hope for anything more than that this book would have a share, however slight, in these characteristics.

The reader will notice at times that I have run the risk of speaking for Lewis. There are expositions of his work in my book, but there are also interpretations, reformulations, and extensions. I think that these liberties are in line with his approach to things. The greatest sign of appreciation or indebtedness is the attempt not only to see the world as another sees it but to build on that person's sense of things and to direct that person's insights toward new potentials and challenges.

I do not pretend to address or represent the whole of Lewis. There are parts of him that have a more specialized interest. There are also parts that are less useful to us here and now. And, it is important to add, there are parts that will or should put the reader off. For example, racism appears in his work. The most troubling instance is his depiction of the evil Calormenes in *The Last Battle* in terms consistent with the longstanding English disdain toward darker-skinned Mediterranean peoples. Lewis seems unaware of his racism, and it is particularly troubling that it appears in one of the Narnia Chronicles, a book intended for children. The sexism in his work seems to moderate over time. This may be due to the positive effects on Lewis of the abilities of Joy Davidman, and it is especially true of his last novel, *Till We Have Faces*. But even some of his later work carries sexist traces. Homophobia seems to increase as Lewis matures. He takes a charitable stance toward homosexual activity in his *Surprised by Joy*, which may reflect an earlier attitude, but in *That Hideous Strength* homosexuality seems tied to the culmination of evil. Homosexual people in *The Four Loves* are dealt a particularly condescending and dismissive swipe. I do not take these moments in Lewis as incidental, random blips. They indicate serious structural flaws. But I also do not think that they constitute reasons to reject the whole, as though all the construction is a concealment or justification of these personal and political beliefs. Nor do I think that we are free of equally damaging assumptions, however unconscious of them or of their implications we may be. One always must ask questions. Additional questions should be asked of Lewis: What in his work is simply English? What is upper middle class or culturally elitist? What, for all the breadth and orientation to the future, is still marked by nostalgia for a world long gone? To what degree, for all its cultural criticism, does it still carry some of modern culture's negative traces? Questionable parts of Lewis only lend force to the point that

his project cannot be uncritically extended to our own place and time. His work, rather, should provoke the reader to take what is instructive and useful and to “try it for yourself.”

More than that, this book is an attempt to challenge both religious tendencies to live increasingly in rejection of culture and the tendencies of cultural theory and criticism to discount or distrust religion. For this challenge to be effective, more than Lewis is required. Even more is required than a study that attempts critically to select from Lewis those parts of his work that seem most relevant to the present situation and to deploy them within it. What is called for is a rigorous refusal to allow well-entrenched distinctions to determine thought on the relation of religion and modern culture to one another, distinctions like religious and secular, private and public, internal and external, values and facts, liberal and conservative, and reality and ideology. These terms, rather than markers, have become magnets that draw people into differing camps and that allow difference to be the defining and justifying basis for identity. All of that should be relegated to a previous century. What Lewis does most of all is to allow us to recognize that resources for alternative ways of thinking are also available in that century. Lewis provides an occasion to go back in order to recover routes not taken, routes that indicate positive possibilities for the future, possibilities that do not dissolve, sever, and repress human potentials and relationships but call for their healing and release.

## I

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## RETRIEVAL

The recent centennial of C. S. Lewis's birth marked a time not of decline but of increase in the potential importance of his work for American readers, especially in academic settings. Some of the earlier academic neglect is traceable to the diversity of his oeuvre, its cultural engagements, rhetorical style, and contributions to popular culture, especially science fiction and children's literature. But the academic climate, especially in literary studies, has changed. The formalism and disciplinary orthodoxy characteristic of English departments a few years ago kept them from accommodating the full range of Lewis's work. But now literary studies are interdisciplinary and take into account matters of theory and practice that also engaged Lewis. These include education and curricula, the consequences of bureaucracies for social space, value theory, the continuities between high and popular culture,<sup>1</sup> the relation of power and ideology to beliefs and ideas, and what are taken to be the moral consequences of intellectual and technological imperialism.

The combination of literary with historical, theoretical, cultural, critical, and moral/religious ingredients normalizes Lewis's work in current literary studies. Literary studies increasingly are marked by intersections where literary and cultural interests, questions of belief and value, and awareness of popular culture, rhetoric, and social/economic power meet and interact. C. S. Lewis sounds at times like Stanley Fish, a major mover in recent changes within academic literary studies. At one point Lewis writes, “I do not think that Rhetoric and Poetry are distinguished by manipulation of an audience in

the one and, in the other, a pure self-expression, regarded as its own end, and indifferent to any audience. Both these acts, in my opinion, definitely aim at doing something to an audience and both do it by using language to control what already exists in our minds."<sup>2</sup> One could stitch that statement into one of Fish's essays on rhetoric in literary-critical work without leaving a seam.

Half a century ago literary environments were inhospitable to such collapsing of distinctions and such diversity of interest and genre. Academic attention to Lewis was primarily established and sustained by people drawn to the specifically religious aspects of his work. Lewis encouraged conservative Protestant literary scholars to relate their intellectual interests to their own Christian identities and beliefs. During the decades immediately following the Second World War, faculty in evangelical colleges and religiously conservative literary scholars in other institutions turned to Lewis as someone who articulated traditional Christian beliefs and values to academic culture. Lewis provided a model for those who wanted to maintain the role of Christian faith in intellectual life or were unwilling to let an increasingly secular academic culture marginalize the religious aspects of English and American literature and declare religious beliefs irrelevant to literary-critical tasks.

At the same time, there were other models for increasing the role of moral and religious interests in academic work. While Lewis appealed primarily to conservative Protestant intellectuals, scholars like Jacques Maritain provided a similar model for their Catholic counterparts. Like Lewis, Maritain received his education in an increasingly non- or even anti-religious academic environment that he also finally found personally unsatisfying and philosophically vulnerable. Maritain searched for alternatives to secular and materialist assumptions, converted to Catholicism, and worked out of a general Thomist philosophical orientation. Coming to the United States at the beginning of the war to teach philosophy first at Columbia and then at Princeton University, Maritain was able, along with others, to promote Thomist philosophy in secular settings. He extended the interests of Christian faith not only into moral philosophy but also into wider areas such as political and aesthetic theory. Lewis, while not so fully Thomist as Maritain, also drew heavily on medieval texts of Christian literature and philosophy, criticized modern culture for its neglect of traditional values, and articulated religious interests in scholarship and an intellectually examined religious account of the world. Both, in their differing ways and for differing audiences, were crucial figures for the changing climate of postwar American academic culture, which increasingly allowed for the articulation of moral and religious beliefs within literary, philosophical, and cultural studies.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, academic culture underwent a gradual reversal of the tendency during the first half to marginalize or exclude religion and religious interests in or from intellectual work. The increasingly confident secularism of the prewar decades was replaced by greater uncertainty and by an appreciation for the religious life of different cultures, particularly Asian. The traumas of war, rapid social change, and the internationalization of American culture have all contributed to an increased incorporation of religion into academic life. This new academic interest in religion joins the increasingly complex character of literary and cultural studies to presage a relevance of Lewis's work to academic, particularly literary, culture today.

Academic interest in Lewis has all along been paralleled by the continuing interest in Lewis among intelligent Christian readers in America outside the academy. It is perhaps more difficult to account for this broader admiration. Lewis, a smoking, alcohol-drinking British academic without strong doctrines of biblical authority or the Holy Spirit, seems exotic in relation to American evangelical culture and theology. His appeal very likely lay in the combination of his readable style with certain characteristics of his theological views. We should note that Lewis, like evangelicals, did not position himself primarily within or in defense of the church but spoke from and to a more personally oriented and construed faith. He was also sharply at odds with the main currents of modernity, as were readers of a conservative Protestant orientation. It was very likely helpful, too, that Lewis could be read as politically and socially conservative. This was possible not only because of his focus on personal faith rather than on a social gospel or political theology but also because he desired not to subvert public institutions but instead to realign them with their traditional sources. Finally, Lewis gave encouragement to intelligent lay readers in the face of disconcerting and popular theological currents of the postwar period such as the aggressively marketed "death of God" movement.

Academics and laity who admired Lewis and used his work as a resource and model for the redeployment of Christian belief in the context of modern culture came together to create centers of Lewis study such as that located at Wheaton College in Illinois. An evangelical institution of high academic standards, Wheaton melded the scholarly interest of some of its faculty in the work of Lewis with the popularity of his books among its intelligent constituency, and that combination has characterized similar institutions throughout the country.

Americans' interest in Lewis was not confined to such circles, however. The *Narnia Chronicles* found their way into public and school libraries

throughout the country. Some of his work also had a recognized academic standing, although not on a level equal to other major English influences on American literary and philosophical studies during the period. Several of his books were standard in bibliographies of medieval and Renaissance literature and on Milton, and some of his writings on theodicy, miracles, and religious experience found their ways into anthologies and college textbooks on philosophy of religion. This broader interest, both popular and academic, was exploited, if that is not too harsh a word, by the Hollywood filming of *Shadowlands*. More sentimental than the BBC filming of the stage play, it constructed a relation between Lewis and themes dear to Americans, such as the inadequacy of intellectual, particularly theological, formulations in relation to experience, especially suffering, and the healing resources of the natural context of human life. However, it is fair to say that although the work of Lewis has had a wider currency in the culture, its appeal remains concentrated in the homes, offices, and institutions of conservative Protestant Americans, academic and lay.

It would be unfortunate if that limited concentration continued. In my opinion Lewis is increasingly relevant to the culture of American literary studies. At century's end, literary studies resemble hardly at all what was dominant a half century ago, and the change is such that it produces a far more fertile ground for the dissemination of his work. It is possible now to retrieve Lewis's work from the quarters in which during the past decades it has been largely confined, while also fortunately guarded and admired.

The attempt to position Lewis's work more fully within the interests of current literary academia involves a two-part effort. It must first demonstrate that Lewis should not be confined to parochial religious and cultural interests. It must then challenge an academic, literary culture that, due to the loss of certainty, is governed increasingly by the dynamics of distrust and the vagaries of personal, professional, and institutional power.<sup>3</sup>

Mention of some negative strains in current literary culture should not send us in search of more receptive academic terrain in departments of religion or theological faculties. Those settings are presently structured by two contrary movements both inhospitable to Lewis. The first is sponsored by the ongoing attempt to subordinate religion to other ends, either to account for it in social scientific or historical terms or to harness it to political or psychological interests. The second movement is one that, rather than account for religion in other terms or subordinate it to something else, allows religion to be an account of the world and of people's relation to and in it but only in the

context of specific religious traditions, communities, and institutions. Lewis can be aligned with neither of these two contrary and mutually aggravating campaigns. He does not subject religion, either in its origin or in its consequences, to other interests or terms, and he wants the account of things that religion can provide to be tested in and related to public culture.

Lewis, as I understand him, thus finds more potential appreciation and use in departments of literature than in departments of religious studies or theological schools. His diverse interests in cultural theory and criticism, rhetoric and power, in institutions, moral theory, popular culture, and even children's literature suit today's literature departments. While it would not do to call Lewis a postmodernist, it is nonetheless true that the interests that drive and shape his work (and that alienated him from mid-century academic culture) conform with those that mark current literary studies. However, Lewis also represents a potential challenge to current literary culture. That challenge asks whether the breakdown of traditional barriers, authorities, and distinctions in literary studies commits departments of literature to anti-religious and amoral ideologies. While Lewis shares much with the present ethos of literary and cultural studies, he does not share their present obsession with and deference to power, especially to power governed by nothing more than a market economy, the boundaries and directives of the profession or institution, and the self-interests of those who count themselves among the academic stars.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, close parallels between the interests and style of Lewis and those of current literature faculties. They share a penchant for autobiography and personal reference, an intense but critical interest in culture, including popular culture, a skepticism toward the prevailing centers of academic and social power, and a strongly polemical style. But Lewis reveals that these interests and styles are not necessarily wedded to skeptical or self-serving motives and results but can also serve positive, public moral and spiritual ends.

It is helpful to notice that Lewis did not advocate religion and morality as something extraneous to literary scholarship and imparted to it from some other source. Religious and moral interests were integral to the material he studied and the critical work in which he engaged. As he points out in his autobiography, he was led to Christianity because it allowed him to take more fully into account what was important to many philosophical and literary texts and also to those intellectual and aesthetic experiences that he found to be significant and engaging.<sup>5</sup> No source or authority, institutional or textual, needed to be invoked other than those already operative in and for his work: literary texts, their cultural contexts and consequences, and the tools of

literary and cultural theory and criticism. A moral and religious disposition, he believed, provides a more adequate or appropriate setting or context for critical, interpretive, and constructive literary and cultural work than its modern, skeptical alternatives. Lewis could speak from religious belief and moral concern without alienating himself from or disenfranchising himself within English literary, humanistic academic culture.

The challenge to current literary studies that lies in Lewis's practice should not be missed. He did not have to pursue the moral and spiritual aspects of literary texts by bringing something to them from the outside. But literary studies unable or unwilling to take such matters into account and, *a fortiori*, those that actively discount them or reduce them to something less or other, must do so by deferring to something extrinsic to the reading of texts.

Finally, it is important to note that Lewis stressed those elements of religious faith and practice commodious and flexible enough to take the moral and religious aspects of literary and cultural studies into account and to provide critiques of them. He was unfettered by ecclesiastical authority, theological dogmatism, or religious controversy. He employed moral inquiry and religious categories within a cultural tradition largely supplied by the texts that, as a philosopher turned literary historian and critic, he studied and taught. These materials needed only to be retrieved, selected, and redeployed. Understanding and appreciating literary and philosophical texts require taking them seriously as accounts of the world and of people's relations to and within it. It is necessary to imagine oneself into the worlds they make available. In analyzing a particular textual account, it is not extraneous or gratuitous to ask what is and is not illuminating or satisfying, particularly when compared to other accounts. This inevitably raises and addresses questions of moral and religious belief.

American literary academic culture has recently seen a thawing of the secular certainties that for decades sustained a repression or occlusion of the moral and religious language of literary texts or of their relation to the moral and spiritual needs and potentials of the culture. We find ourselves today in a situation in which Lewis's project should receive fuller hearing. Indeed, his project contains potential value for efforts now either beginning or called for to explore the relation of religion and ethics to cultural studies and critiques that have changed the nature of literary scholarship in America. The centennial observance of Lewis's birth coincided with the emergence of a literary culture suited to his broadly catholic and intellectually complex religious orientations and convictions. My attempt to retrieve Lewis is largely a response to these new cultural conditions.

## I

It is helpful to recall the historical context in which Lewis prepared for and entered his vocation. It was a context in which cultural retrieval had convincing voices and a ready audience. Lewis engaged English studies at just the time when they became legitimate fields of academic inquiry at Oxford and Cambridge. An academic field newly institutionalized, English rapidly gained visibility and prestige. Perhaps the British literary critic and theorist Terry Eagleton exaggerates when he writes, "In the early 1920s it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all. In the early 1930s it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else." He contends that in a very short time, one during which, we should keep in mind, Lewis entered the field as a student and as a teacher, English became the central subject, "immeasurably superior to law, science, politics, philosophy or history."<sup>6</sup> But several factors give at least some credence to Eagleton's claims.

English, when Lewis entered it, had very much what we would now call a "cultural studies" shape. One reason for this is that literature was the chief source of England's cultural capital. In addition, the legitimacy and popularity of English studies were assured by the social concerns of young scholars who took it up. English provided the cultural content for an emerging academic population of middle-class sons among whom Lewis can be included.<sup>7</sup> It provided a canon that both was subversive to the cultural authority of aristocrats and countered the emerging radical force of a political and social left.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to such matters of cultural capital and authority and more to the point of our interests here, the rise of English studies also carried strong moral aims. English studies brought scholars in touch with the nineteenth-century affirmation of literature as a unifying and morally rectifying resource. Indeed, identification of literature and criticism with the moral and spiritual prospects of society was a constant in the nineteenth century, reaching its fullest statement in the work of Matthew Arnold. The retrieval or continuation of this agenda was undertaken both despite the consequences of the First World War and because of them. In the period immediately following the war, sharp discontinuities were felt between the post- and prewar societies. Radical changes in behavior and values, accompanied by greater mobility and rapidly increasing urbanization, created moral uncertainty and a diminished sense of shared values and norms. The rise of English as an academic discipline offered a counter-thrust to these radical changes by retrieving the moral content of the literary tradition and critical vocation, redeploying them in postwar culture. English studies created continuity with

the literary tradition and warranted the role of the literary scholar as cultural critic and moral theorist.

Powerful philosophical currents also supported the emergence of English literary studies as a dominant intellectual force in Oxford. Idealism, with its stress on human reason, morality, and spirit, was very much a part of the academic climate of Oxford in the years of Lewis's development as a scholar.<sup>9</sup> This encouraged him to bring classical and modern idealist perspectives to his literary work. They helped to shape his understanding of the imagination, to support his interest in the comprehensive range and unifying force of myth, to sustain his attention to essences and universals, to substantiate his confidence in human rationality, and to give relevance to medieval philosophy and literature and to such particular writers as Spenser, Milton, and the Romantics. Indeed, Lewis's philosophical and literary canon can be seen as strung on an idealist line from Plato to William Morris.

Retrieval, then, was a primary scholarly, cultural, and moral project for Lewis. But retrieval was never for him simply a matter of return. It could be argued that Lewis was infected with the kind of nostalgia that marked the Romantics he so much admired. I believe, however, that Lewis was as much a forward-looking person, both as scholar and as believer, as he was a retriever of the past. He looked for yet unheard-of advances in human development, and in this way he participated very much in the spirit of modernity.<sup>10</sup> But he was also convinced that these advances would go awry if not steadied and directed by relations with the past. Respect and appreciation for the past does not mean control by or limitation to its achievements. It is a modern caricature of retrieval that sees it only as reactionary. The past is neither irrelevant to the present nor a repository of answers to the questions raised in and by present time.<sup>11</sup>

Our own retrieval of Lewis also will be neither only a return to him nor an attempt to install his views as fully adequate to the needs of our present cultural location. We will walk a path between advocates of the present literary culture who see Lewis as hopelessly bound to and by his own culture and those opponents of current academic culture who are willing to see Lewis as adequate in the present time for recovering relations between religious/moral interests and literary/cultural studies. This work is aligned with his by its opposition to both these options. Lewis had a strong sense of historical change, and he understood that religion and morality are articulated and practiced in and for specific cultural situations.<sup>12</sup> His own views and methods are both relevant to us now because some aspects of his culture persist today and not relevant to the extent that his situation as a mid-century Englishman differs from ours as Americans beginning a new century. Indeed, Lewis contends that ap-

preciation of the past is necessary if a person is to recognize the present as also a distinct period and as having, therefore, its own limitations and "characteristic illusions."<sup>13</sup> Given both the continuities and the contrasts between our cultural location and his, our retrieval of his work must be as selective, as relevant to the present situation, and as forward-looking as was his own.<sup>14</sup> It is in the spirit of his retrievals, in other words, that this one is undertaken.

## II

English academic culture is only one of the factors that help us to understand the development of Lewis's vocation. His own life experience, drifting away from his Christian upbringing and experimenting with a variety of belief options, also shaped his sense of vocation and academic identity. The post- or anti-Christian views he adopted as a young man were those he would later attack. Indeed, it is fair to say that he saw his own life as an epitome of a larger pattern that English culture could be seen as following.<sup>15</sup> As he in his own life drifted away from Christian moorings into improvised and eclectic spiritualities and popular materialism and narcissism, so English culture neglected its ties to the past and its sense of shared morality and spiritual aspiration. He could address competing ideologies and orientations as one who knew them from within and had found them wanting. As he felt compelled to retrieve a relation to his religious past, so he also believed that the culture required a comparable change of orientation. It would be greatly impoverished if it did not and foreboded a severely limited and morally distorted future for English people. His analysis of the culture of the twenties and early thirties led him to see his own conversion and identity change as needed as well for those around him, especially in academic culture. It led him to attempts to compel them also to retrieve.

Lewis, like many others in the society, had given himself gradually to a popular, uncritical materialism. His conversion or return to Christianity by way of idealism led first to a recognition of the inadequacy of materialism's account of the mind and imagination. Idealism also allowed for an orientation to the Absolute, which Lewis understood as personal and active. Lewis, with his strong interest in moral theory, then recognized the moral identity of God and finally God's intrusion into human life. As he put it, "my own progress had been from 'popular realism' to Philosophical Idealism; from Idealism to Pantheism; from Pantheism to Theism; and from Theism to Christianity."<sup>16</sup>

This sequence of events suggests the distance between his cultural location and our own. We live in a culture in which philosophical idealism does

not provide, as it did for Lewis, a culturally available bridge to religious belief. Nor can attention to the moral and spiritual language of literary texts be defended, as it once was, by idealist philosophical beliefs. The decline and eventual disappearance of shared cultural idealism constitutes a major challenge today for any attempt to take the moral and religious significance of literary culture into account.

Can the moral and religious languages of literature and their relevance to the culture be taken adequately into account without first attempting to reinstate some form of idealism? This question will shadow this work throughout. The objections most common to the materialist and power-oriented stances of current literary studies appeal implicitly or explicitly to idealist vestiges in American literary culture. I contend, however, that it is not necessary to restructure literary culture according to idealist beliefs in order to address the moral and religious potential of literature. If we take literary discourses as primary, we need only clarify, develop, and reformulate their recognizable moral and religious language or bring to the surface the norms by which they positively or negatively depict or judge aspects of human life.

We can understand the relation in Lewis between his literary, cultural work and his religious faith more clearly if we look at some details of his conversion to Christianity. We will ask, what was his conversion, and, in particular, what was it not? First of all, it would not be appropriate to say, in a phrase one often hears, that Lewis "accepted Christ into his life." The language of acceptance, appropriation, and possession is contrary to what is basic for Lewis. For him it is essential that the Christian not think of belief as a way of bringing something into his or her life but, rather, as a way of being brought out into a larger world or sense of the world. As he puts it, "This, I say, is the first and deadly error, which appears on every level of life and is equally deadly on all, turning religion into a self-caressing luxury."<sup>17</sup> Lewis militates constantly against self-preoccupation and especially against narcissism. An interest in Christianity that would amount to accepting something into one's life would be only another form of self-expansion.<sup>18</sup> The direction of conversion for Lewis is very much the opposite, of moving outward into something larger and more important than the self. A religious person, for Lewis, lives in a very different world from that of his or her modern, secular neighbor when that neighbor has been conditioned by modern culture to be self-preoccupied, to limit interest to the boundaries of a private world. To put it another way, a non-Christian who is genuinely engaged by and concerned about the larger world is closer to Lewis than the professed Christian who is self-preoccupied.

Lewis's conversion, second, was not characterized primarily by a desire for heaven or fear of hell. Convictions about things eternal do have their place in Lewis, but by extension. To be a Christian primarily because of desires for and fears of the eternal again fashion religion from the stuff of self-preoccupation. As he says, "happiness or misery beyond death, simply in themselves, are not even religious subjects at all. A man who believes in them will of course be prudent to seek one and avoid the other. But that seems to have no more to do with religion than looking after one's health or saving for one's old age. . . . They are hopes for oneself, anxieties for oneself."<sup>19</sup> Or again, "Until a certain spiritual level has been reached, the promise of immortality will always operate as a bribe which vitiates the whole religion and infinitely inflames those very self-regards which religion must cut down and uproot."<sup>20</sup> In addition, orientation to the eternal implies disregard for and evasion of the immediate and real, the everyday world and a person's place within it. Christianity leads to things eternal, but it does so for Lewis through things temporal and of this world. When Christianity is seen as a way by which people are linked immediately with the eternal, it can easily reinforce the tendency to discount what lies outside a person in the surrounding world, a tendency to which moderns in their self-preoccupation are already deeply habituated. Christianity for Lewis leads to the eternal and teleological, but they are extensions of the everyday world and a person's orientation toward it, not a substitute for them. For Lewis, becoming a Christian cannot be a way of rejecting the everyday for the sake of the eternal.

Lewis's conversion equally does not focus on the church, its authority, sacraments, or communal life. He does not, as one might expect, offer an escape from the distortions of modern culture by exchanging it for a culture defined by a religious institution or community. As one of his closest friends at Cambridge put it, "neither in conversation nor in his works did he show much interest in organized religion. He was orthodox in belief but seemed to have little sense of the Church."<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that he is antichurch; rather, Lewis the convert locates himself not first of all in an institution or community but, rather, in a world differently constituted and differently understood. Conversion did not call him out of the culture and into the church but to work at the complex relation of Christian beliefs, values, and norms to the culture. This is why, in the last novel of his space trilogy, the normative community and the source of judgment on a secular and wholly self-possessed society is not the church but St. Anne's, a place that houses crucial moral and spiritual resources of English cultural history.<sup>22</sup>