ENGLISH LITERATURE
IN THE
SIXTEENTH CENTURY
EXCLUDING DRAMA

BY

C. S. LEWIS

FELLOW OF MAGDALEN COLLEGE, OXFORD

The Completion of

THE CLARK LECTURES

Trinity College, Cambridge

1944

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PREFACE

WHEN I began this book I had the idea—perhaps most literary historians have—of giving each author space in proportion to the value I set on him; but I found it would not do. Things need to be treated at length not in so far as they are great but in so far as they are complicated. Good books which are remote from modern sympathy need to be treated at greater length than good books which everyone already knows and loves. Bad books may be of importance for the history of taste and if they are passed over too briefly the student's picture of a period may be distorted. Finally, if I had worked strictly to scale I should have been forced either to leave out many minor authors altogether (as roads and small rivers could not be made visible in maps unless their width were exaggerated) or else to say more on some great authors not because more needed to be said but for the sake of proportion.

Where I have quoted from neo-Latin authors I have tried to translate them into sixteenth-century English, not simply for the fun of it but to guard the reader from a false impression he might otherwise receive. When passages from Calvin, Scaliger, or Erasmus in modern English jostle passages from vernacular writers with all the flavour of their period about them, it is fatally easy to get the feeling that the Latinists are somehow more enlightened, less remote, less limited by their age, than those who wrote English. It seemed worth some pains to try to remove so serious and so latent a misconception.

As I write 'French' not *Français*, I have also written 'Scotch' not *Scottish*; aware that these great nations do not so call themselves, but claiming the freedom of 'my ain vulgaire'.

It is the rule of this series that the titles of books (with certain exceptions) should be modernized in the text but given exactly in the Bibliography.

I have to thank the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, for allowing me to use this book, in an embryonic state, as the Clark Lectures (1944); Professor F. P. Wilson for such painstaking and skilled help as few authors have ever had from their friends; Mr. Dowling for much help with my Bibliography, and Professor Douglas Bush for submitting to certain

petty pilferings from his; Mr. R. E. Alton for guidance through the labyrinth of our Faculty library; Dr. J. A. W. Bennett and Mr. H. V. D. Dyson for advice and criticism; and Miss Joy Davidman for help with the proofs.

C. S. L.

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INTRODUCTION

New Learning and New Ignorance

THE rough outline of our literary history in the sixteenth century is not very difficult to grasp. At the beginning we find a literature still medieval in form and spirit. In Scotland it shows the highest level of technical brilliance: in England it has for many years been dull, feeble, and incompetent. As the century proceeds, new influences arise: changes in our knowledge of antiquity, new poetry from Italy and France, new theology, new movements in philosophy or science. As these increase, though not necessarily because of them, the Scotch literature is almost completely destroyed. In England the characteristic disease of late medieval poetry, its metrical disorder, is healed: but replaced, for the most part, by a lifeless and laboured regularity to which some ears might prefer the vagaries of Lydgate. There is hardly any sign of a new inspiration. Except for the songs of Wyatt, whose deepest roots are medieval, and the prose of the Prayer Book, which is mostly translation, authors seem to have forgotten the lessons which had been mastered in the Middle Ages and learned little in their stead. Their prose is clumsy, monotonous, garrulous; their verse either astonishingly tame and cold or, if it attempts to rise, the coarsest fustian. In both mediums we come to dread a certain ruthless emphasis; bludgeon-work. Nothing is light, or tender, or fresh. All the authors write like elderly men. The mid-century is an earnest, heavy-handed, commonplace age: a drab age. Then, in the last quarter of the century, the unpredictable happens. With startling suddenness we ascend. Fantasy, conceit, paradox, colour, incantation return. Youth returns. The fine frenzies of ideal love and ideal war are readmitted. Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Hooker—even, in a way, Lyly—display what is almost a new culture: that culture which was to last through most of the seventeenth century and to enrich the very meanings of the words *England* and *Aristocracy*. Nothing in the earlier history of our period would have enabled the sharpest observer to foresee this transformation.

Some have believed, or assumed, that it resulted from what

seemed at the time to be a resurrection, rejuvenescence, or *renascentia*[1]—the recovery of Greek and the substitution of Augustan for medieval Latin. It is, of course, true that the rich vernacular literature of the eighties used the fruits of that event, as it used the Middle Ages and everything else it could lay its hands on. It is also true that many movements of thought which affected our literature would have been impossible without the recovery of Greek. But if there is any closer connexion than that between the *renascentia* and the late sixteenth-century efflorescence of English literature, I must confess that it has escaped me. The more we look into the question, the harder we shall find it to believe that humanism had any power of encouraging, or any wish to encourage, the literature that actually arose. And it may be as well to confess immediately that I have no alternative 'explanation' to offer. I do not claim to know why there were many men of genius at that time. The Elizabethans themselves would have attributed it to Constellation. I must be content with trying to sketch some of the intellectual and imaginative conditions under which they wrote.

It comes naturally to a modern to suppose that the new astronomy made a profound impression on men's minds; but when we look into the literary texts we find it rarely mentioned. The idea that it produced a shock comparable to that which Darwin gave to the Victorians or Freud to our own age is certainly mistaken. Nor are the reasons hard to find. In the first place it must be remembered that the *De Revolutionibus* (1543) of Copernicus put forward only a theory: verification, at the hands of Kepler and Galileo, came only at the end of our period, and general acceptance later still. And secondly, humanism, dominant in mid-sixteenth-century England, tended to be on the whole indifferent, if not hostile, to science. It is an English humanist, a classical pedant, who in Bruno's *Cena delle Cenere* (1584) still thinks that Copernicus can be dismissed with an airy gibe from the *Adagia* of Erasmus. Even where the new theory was accepted, the change which it produced was not of such emotional or imaginative importance as is sometimes supposed. For ages men had believed the earth to be a sphere. For

[1] 'Revertuntur... graeca et latina lingua seu renascuntur verius' (Vives, *De Causis Corruptarum Artium*, I). '(Poesis) tametsi rediviva novam sub Petrarcha pueritiam inchoasse' (Scaliger, *Poet.*, VI. i). 'In veterum lucubrationibus restituendis laborant et ceu a mortuis revocant' (Huldrichus Coccius, *Ep. Ded.* to *Opera Vivis*. Basel, 1555).

ages, as we see in Vincent of Beauvais or Dante or 'John Mandeville', men had realized that movement towards the centre of the earth from whatever direction was downward movement. For ages men had known, and poets had emphasized, the truth that earth, in relation to the universe, is infinitesimally small: to be treated, said Ptolemy, as a mathematical point (*Almagest*, I. v). Nor was it generally felt that earth, or Man, would lose dignity by being shifted from the cosmic centre. The central position had not implied pre-eminence. On the contrary, it had implied, as Montaigne says (*Essais*, II. xii), 'the worst and deadest part of the universe', 'the lowest story of the house', the point at which all the light, heat, and movement descending from the nobler spheres finally died out into darkness, coldness, and passivity. The position which was locally central was dynamically marginal: the rim of being, farthest from the hub. Hence, when any excitement was shown at the new theory, it might be exhilaration. The divine Cusanus (1401–64), who was an early believer (for his own, metaphysical, reasons) in earth's movement, rejoiced in 1440 to find that she also is 'a noble star' with her own light, heat, and influence (*De Docta Ignorantia*, II. xii).

What proved important (and that slowly) about the new astronomy was not the mere alteration in our map of space but the methodological revolution which verified it. This is not sufficiently described as a change from dogmatism to empiricism. Mere empiricists like Telesius or Bacon achieved nothing. What was fruitful in the thought of the new scientists was the bold use of mathematics in the construction of hypotheses, tested not by observation simply but by controlled observation of phenomena that could be precisely measured. On the practical side it was this that delivered Nature into our hands. And on our thoughts and emotions (which concern a literary historian more) it was destined to have profound effects. By reducing Nature to her mathematical elements it substituted a mechanical for a genial or animistic conception of the universe. The world was emptied, first of her indwelling spirits, then of her occult sympathies and antipathies, finally of her colours, smells, and tastes. (Kepler at the beginning of his career explained the motion of the planets by their *animae motrices*; before he died, he explained it mechanically.) The result was dualism rather than materialism. The mind, on

whose ideal constructions the whole method depended, stood over against its object in ever sharper dissimilarity. Man with his new powers became rich like Midas but all that he touched had gone dead and cold. This process, slowly working, ensured during the next century the loss of the old mythical imagination: the conceit, and later the personified abstraction, takes its place. Later still, as a desperate attempt to bridge a gulf which begins to be found intolerable, we have the Nature poetry of the Romantics.

But it must be very clearly understood that these consequences were not felt nor foreseen in the sixteenth century. Behind all the literature studied in this volume lies the older conception of Nature. Davies's *Orchestra* gives us the right picture of the Elizabethan or Henrican universe; tingling with anthropomorphic life, dancing, ceremonial, a festival not a machine. It is very important to grasp this at the outset. If we do not, we shall constantly misread our poets by taking for highly conceited metaphor expressions which are still hardly metaphorical at all. The 'prophetic soul of the wide world' is not a mere personification: it is the veritable *anima mundi*. The 'teeming earth' can almost literally be 'pinch'd' with a kind of colic, as in *Henry IV*, Part I, for is she not a huge animal breathing out *per montium crateres ceu os et nares*? (Fromondus, *Meteor*, IV. iv).[1] Even when hills are praised for not despising lowly plains we have still hardly reached the realm of metaphor pure and simple; the natural and civil hierarchies were felt to be—somehow or other—continuous. There is, of course, in sixteenth-century poetry, as in most poetry, a use of the pathetic fallacy; but it is less than a modern reader is likely at first to suppose.[2]

Historians of science or philosophy, and especially if they hold some theory of progress, are naturally interested in seizing those elements of sixteenth-century thought which were later to alter Man's whole picture of reality. Those other elements which were destined to disappear they tend to treat as mere 'survivals' from some earlier and darker age. The literary historian, on the other hand, is concerned not with those ideas in his period which have since proved fruitful, but with those which seemed

[1] The doctrine is set out more fully in Kepler, *Harmonices*, IV. vii.

[2] Some evidence suggests that the belief in a 'genial universe' was strong enough to produce actual hallucination. Machiavelli (*De Republica*, I. lvi) cannot deny that men see warriors fighting in the clouds. Chapman (*Hero and Leander*, vi. 157) says that people 'sometimes' think they see a face in the sun.

important at the time. He 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. From his point of view it is misleading to call the animistic or genial cosmology of the sixteenth century a 'survival'. For one thing, that word hardly does justice to the fact that it seems to be rather more lively and emphatic at this time than it had been before. For another, it carries the dangerous suggestion that this cosmology was now something alien and intrusive, no longer characteristic of the age. It teaches us to divide the men of that period into two camps, the conservatively superstitious and the progressive or enlightened: even, possibly, to suppose that they would have agreed with our dichotomy. In reality it would leave nearly every one of them a border-line case. The groupings of which they were conscious were quite different from those which our modern conceptions of superstition or enlightenment would impose on them.

Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) attacked astrology. This would seem to be a good reason for placing him among the enlightened. But then Pico also defends both the reality and the lawfulness of magic. It is true that, when attacked, he will distinguish *magia* from *goeteia* and describe the former in terms which make it sound as innocent as chemistry, being an art which 'doth not so much worke wonders as obeyeth Nature in her working of the same' (*Apology*). But he is being disingenuous. Look back at his *Conclusiones Magicae* (especially 15, 19, 22, and 24) and you will find the magical ideal expressed in its sharpest contrast to the scientific.

Pomponatius (1462–1524) is a determinist who attributes all religions to the operation of cosmic laws: including Christianity which, he thinks, has nearly had its day (*De Naturalium Effectuum Causis*, pp. 251–86). This may be called enlightenment if you wish. But the reason why Pomponatius thinks in this way is that he is an astrologer: the determinism he believes in is that of Constellation.

This conflict between the magician and the astrologer seems very surprising to those who want to impose our modern grouping on the men of the past; for by our grouping magic and astrology go together as 'superstitions'. But the moment we drop our grouping (which is from the historical point of view irrelevant and accidental) and try to see these two arts as they appeared to their exponents, the thing becomes perfectly simple.

Magic and astrology, though of course often mixed in practice, are in tendency opposed. The magician asserts human omnipotence; the astrologer, human impotence. The common emotion (whether of repulsion or whimsical curiosity) which unites them in our minds is modern: something on the lens of the glass we look through, not something in the historical object. The thorough-going astrologer is a determinist. He holds the creed (in William James's words) of the 'tough-minded'. He shatters the illusions and despises the exciting hopes of the magician. Those temperaments that are attracted by modern forms of determinism in our own day would have been attracted by astrological determinism in the sixteenth century.

Telesius (1509–88) opens his *De Rerum Natura* with an attack on those 'who trusted ouer much in their owne witte and forgat to looke vpon the things themselues' (*Prooemium*). He means chiefly Aristotle, of whose physics and cosmology he is a stern critic. All knowledge, he insists, must be grounded in the senses. Even the human soul, whatever we accept about her from the Christian faith, as actually known to us is *corporea quadantenus* (v. xl). It is a passage to delight an historian of progress: here, surely, is the road to enlightenment beginning. But in Campanella (1568–1639), who develops the sensationalism of Telesius, the road takes a most unexpected turn. In his *De Rerum Sensu et Magia* he maintains that the senses are more certain than any intellectual knowledge (II. xxx). But then, striving after monism, he argues that sense, which we share with the brutes, cannot have come *ex nihilo*. It must unite us with the whole universe. We must conclude that 'the elements and all things' are sentient. But if so, it must be possible to awake their sleeping sense (*sopitus sensus*) by *magia divina*. If we and Nature are all one, there must be some nearer way of controlling her than by mechanics; some direct way, 'as when one man commandeth another who is in his power' (IV. ii).

This last example, in which we see new empiricism leading to a new conception of magic, should make it clear how inadequate the term 'medieval survival' is for all that we count superstitious in the sixteenth century. We might reasonably call eighteenth-century magic, if there is any, a 'survival' from the seventeenth century: but to talk in that way about the sixteenth is to antedate the real change and to misconceive the period we are studying. A vigorous efflorescence of forbidden or phantasmal

arts is not an anomaly in that period, but one of its characteristic traits: quite as characteristic as exploration, Ciceronianism, or the birth of secular drama. Nor did they appear simply as the prolongation of a movement whose impulse was derived from the medieval past. On the contrary, they appeared to themselves to be striking new roots, to be having, like Latinity, their own *renascentia*. They are in fact the extreme exemplification of a common tendency, or a common mood, which can be traced in many other departments of sixteenth-century life.

By magic I do not here mean mere witchcraft—traditional, perhaps Satanistic, rites practised by the poor, the ignorant, or the perverted. When I first approached this part of my subject I was tempted to regard the witch scare, beginning roughly, I thought, with the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1497, as a useful confirmation of the view forced on me by the other evidence. Two considerations deter me from doing so now. In the first place M. Brouette (in *Satan*) has raised a doubt lest the witch-trials appear more numerous between certain dates only because they are better recorded. And secondly, it appears to me impossible to be sure that much witchcraft—I had almost said that any—was really going on. Most of the evidence was gossip: nearly all the confessions were made in answer to leading questions and under torture. Judges who examine in that way will infallibly find confirmation of whatever theory the prosecution was holding before the trial began. The witch scare, therefore, concerns us at the moment, if at all, not as evidence of the things practised by common people but as evidence of the views, and (implicitly) the whole world picture, accepted by learned and respectable people in positions of authority. And with that I drop the subject of witchcraft altogether: and I must ask the reader to dismiss from his mind Gilles de Retz, Black Mass, Hieronymus Bosch, and Mr. Crowley. My concern is with high magic: not concealed but avowed and vindicated by eloquent scholars who draw much of their strength from the New Learning. Of course in this high magic there is no Satanism and no Faustian compact. Equally, of course, critics of the high magic (like King James in his *Demonology* of 1597) maintained that it was all a snare and would lead you into the goetic sort in the end. Whether it was as dangerous to the soul as King James (and probably most contemporaries) thought, is not for me to judge: but there seems reasonable ground for thinking that it

affected the general imagination more strongly and widely than medieval magic had done.

Only an obstinate prejudice about this period (which I will presently try to account for) could blind us to a certain change which comes over the merely literary texts as we pass from the Middle Ages to the sixteenth century. In medieval story there is, in one sense, plenty of 'magic'. Merlin does this or that 'by his subtilty', Bercilak resumes his severed head. But all these passages have unmistakably the note of 'faerie' about them. They could arouse a practical or quasi-scientific interest in no reader's mind. To ask *how* they were done would show a misunderstanding of literary kinds. And when magic occurs in the more realistic setting of the *Franklin's Tale*, it is quite clearly an art of mere illusion which does not change Nature but only makes her appear changed 'to mannes sighte' (F. 1158), in 'an apparence' (1265) so that people will 'wene and seiye' (1267) what is not true. But in Spenser, Marlowe, Chapman, and Shakespeare the subject is treated quite differently. 'He to his studie goes'; books are opened, terrible words pronounced, souls imperilled. The medieval author seems to write for a public to whom magic, like knight-errantry, is part of the furniture of romance: the Elizabethan, for a public who feel that it might be going on in the next street. Neglect of this has produced strange readings of the *Tempest*, which is in reality no fantasy (like the *Midsummer Night's Dream*) and no allegory, but Shakespeare's play on *magia* as *Macbeth* is his play on *goeteia* or the *Merchant* on usury. Shakespeare's audience believed (and the burden of proof lies on those who say Shakespeare disbelieved) that magicians not very unlike Prospero might exist. His speech of renunciation, sometimes taken as an autobiographical confidence by the poet, was to them necessary in order that the ending might be unambiguously happy. The epilogue, cunningly written so that it suits equally the penitent magician and the actor whose part is ended, underlined the point. Nor could anyone at that date hear the soft and timely 'I'll drown my book' without remembering that earlier magician who had screamed too late 'I'll burn my books'. All the difference between fire and water is there.

This high magic can be studied in Pico, Ficino (1433–99), Paracelsus (1493–1541), Agrippa (1486–1535), or our own Dr. Dee. It can even be studied in the *Philosophical Works* of

Henry More which appeared as late as 1662: a book to which Dr. Johnson referred Boswell. This supposedly 'medieval survival' in fact survived the Elizabethan type of lyric, the Elizabethan type of play, the Elizabethan type of monarchy, and the older English music. Its exponents quite clearly regard themselves not as continuing an existing movement but as reviving something that had been lost during the ignorant Middle Ages. 'Once,' says Agrippa, 'by the iudgment of all olde philosophers Magick held the hyest place of honour', but from the first days of the Church (*a principio nascentis ecclesiae catholice*) it has been forbidden and denounced: most unjustly, for it is 'a hye holy learning', *sublimis sacraque disciplina* (*De Occulta Philosophia, Ep. Ded.*). Medieval contributions to the subject he tosses aside as frivolous: authors like Roger Bacon and Arnold of the New Town wrote *deliramenta* and *superstitiones* (ibid.). What permits his own magic to be 'high' (I have not found the term 'white' till later) is the belief that there are many potent spirits besides the angels and devils of Christianity. As no one doubts (and anyway Psellus had told us) that evil spirits can be called to us by profane arts, so by proper means the *mundana numina* can be called: or at the very least the daemons (not demons) who are their attendants. But not, of course, the angels (*supercelestes*), not even the inferior sorts: only the aereals (*aëreos daemones*). Trismegistus is quoted in support (ibid. I. xxxix). But there seems to be another road to power which carries you farther. The Arabs say that men can rise above their corporeal and their sensitive powers and in that state receive into themselves 'the perfection of heaven and of the diuine intelligences', for 'all spirits do obey perfected souls'. That way even the resuscitation of the dead may be possible (ibid. I. liii).

The points to notice here are, first, the link with Greek and the New Learning (and indeed Agrippa mentions Pliny, the Hermetica, the Orphic books, and 'the Platonists' among his authorities); secondly, the belief that the invisible population of the universe includes a whole crowd of beings who might almost be called theologically neutral. Both these connect the high magic with the 'Platonic theology' of the Florentines Pico and Ficino, which is, in a sense, the characteristic 'philosophy' of the time.

This Platonic theology, under the name of Platonism, is too often treated only in relation to its effect on love poetry. From

that point of view its importance has possibly been overstressed. At first sight we feel that it ought to have been immensely fruitful. Centuries of courtly love had prepared a place for lofty erotic mysticism: it might be supposed that Plato's doctrine, which in its own day had found no better soil than Greek pederasty, would now find the very soil it required. But on a deeper level this is not so. The thought of the *Symposium*, like all Plato's thought, is ruthless, and the more fervid, the more ruthless. The lowest rung of his ladder is perversion; the intermediate rungs are increasing degrees of asceticism and scientific clarity; the topmost rung is mystical contemplation. A man who reaches it has, by hypothesis, left behind for ever the original human object of desire and affection. Any preference for one beautiful person over others was among the earliest obstacles he overcame in his ascent. There is no possibility of adapting this scheme in its full rigour to a heterosexual love which promises fidelity and perhaps even hopes to be blessed by marriage. Hence the so-called Platonism of the love poets often amounts to little more than an admission that the lady's soul is even more beautiful than her person and that both are images of the First Fair.

But however the value of this erotic Platonism is assessed, it was not of this that an Englishman of that period thought exclusively, or even thought first, when Platonism was mentioned. If he had, he would have been puzzled when Drayton said (*Polyolbion*, v. 178) that he would not 'play the humorous Platonist' by maintaining that Merlin's father was an *incubus daemon*: for the loves of such a creature are by definition not 'Platonic'. Drayton writes thus, as the following lines make clear, because Platonism primarily means to him the doctrine that the region between earth and moon is crowded with airy creatures who are capable of fertile unions with our own species. Platonism, in fact, is for him a system of daemonology. And Drayton's view, though incomplete, is not very far wrong.

I have called this system, as Ficino himself calls it, 'Platonic theology', to distinguish it from the Platonism on which lectures are given in a modern university. It is not sufficiently distinguished even by the term 'neo-Platonism'. It is a deliberate syncretism based on the conviction that all the sages of antiquity shared a common wisdom and that this wisdom can be reconciled with Christianity. If Plato alone had been in question the Florentines would in fact have been attempting to 'baptise' him

as Aquinas had 'baptised' Aristotle. But since for them Plato was merely the greatest and most eloquent of the consenting sages, since Pythagoras, the Hermetic Books, the Sibylline Books, the Orphic Books, Apuleius, Plotinus, Psellus, Iamblichus, and the Cabbala all meant the same, their task was hardly distinguishable from that of reconciling paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in general. It is significant that Ficino hazarded the suggestion that the diversity of religions might have been ordained by God as conducive to 'a certain beauty', *decorem quendam*; assuming, as such men do, that the main difference between religions is in their ritual, *ritus adorationis* (*De Christiana Religione*, iv).

Hence, paradoxically, it comes about that though the Florentine Platonists were wholly pious in intention, their work deserves the epithet *pagan* more than any other movement in that age. That their conscious purpose was Christian we need not doubt. Ficino, at a sign from heaven, burnt his commentary on Lucretius: he was a priest, and apparently a good one, for the last twenty-four years of his life; all his doctrines were submitted to the judgement of the Church. So, indeed, were those of Agrippa (*De Occult. Phil.* I. i). Yet the actual trend of Ficino's thought is always away from the centre of Christianity. One has the suspicion that though he and Pico doubtless believed Christianity to be true, they valued it even more for being lofty, edifying, and useful. They have the air of men rallying the forces of 'religion' or even of 'idealism' in general against the danger of naturalistic philosophies that deprive man of his dignity and freedom; a danger represented for them not by the new real sciences but by astrological determinism. The title of Pico's *De Dignitate Hominis* would really have served as the title for all their works. In their readiness to accept from whatever source all that seemed to them elevated, or spiritual, or even exciting, we sometimes seem to catch the first faint suggestion of what came, centuries later, to be called 'higher thought'.

In their task of defending what they thought a spiritual cosmology they raked together all that the late pagan sources (some of which they believed to be not late but primeval) could tell them about the invisible population of the universe. They readmitted all those 'middle spirits . . . betwixt th' Angelical and Human kinde', which St. Augustine is labouring to expel all through the eighth and ninth books of the *De Civitate Dei*. Even