C.S. LEWIS AND THE XVI CENTURY

I

The latest work of C. S. Lewis, on the XVI Century in English Literature¹, is, no doubt, a worthy monument of English scholarship. It fills the gap in the Oxford History of English Literature between the Close of the Middle Ages (Sir E. K. Chambers) and the Earlier XVII Century (D. Bush); and of the four volumes in the series already published it is perhaps the most outstanding contribution. On the whole, Lewis keeps to the main lines laid down by his scholarly predecessors: an exact and detailed treatment of the writings of the period, both major and minor; the relegation of biographical details concerning those writers to summary footnotes; and an exhaustive bibliography at the end of the book, together with a full chronological table of the events of the period, both literary and historical. What distinguishes his contribution from theirs, however, are the remarkable individual qualities which he brings to this immense task of scholarship.

In the first place, one cannot but be impressed by the width of his reading and knowledge of his period, which entitles him to speak with considerable authority—as he invariably does. But of greater importance is the power of mature judgment which he displays in assessing the literary merits of each writer in turn. This power he has acquired not only by his wide reading within his chosen period and his attentive consideration of its authors, but also, and much more, by his extensive knowledge of other literatures—the Classics of Greece and Rome, and the vernacular literatures of France, Italy and England, both mediaeval and modern—which enables him to form interesting comparisons and to give carefully balanced opinions. Further, his mental formation has been not only literary, but also philosophical,


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and so has imparted to his mind a gift of keen critical analysis, which has by no means been blunted by the passing of the years. Finally, this combined literary and philosophical formation has given him an outstanding command of English—not a very common quality in scholars—along with great skill in lucid presentation of his difficult subject-matter.

These qualities of mind, then, Lewis brings to bear upon the mass of XVI Century. Literature, so baffling in its complexity and confusion. Not that he professes to remove the confusion (that is not, in his opinion, the business of the literary historian): his aim is rather to present the writings of his period in all their richness of variety, just as they would have appeared to intelligent contemporaries.

The business of the historian of literature is with the past not as it 'really' was (whatever 'really' may mean in such a context) but with the past as it seemed to be to those who lived in it: for of course men felt and thought and wrote about what seemed to be happening to them. (p. 32)

In fact, he strongly protests against what he regards as the artificial divisions of history into 'periods': for him the reality of human life is too complex and various to admit of such divisions.

'Periods' are largely an invention of the historians. The poets themselves are not conscious of living in any period and refuse to conform to the scheme. (p. 106)

On the other hand, the requirements of mere pedagogy force him not only to accept the limits of the XVI Century for the subject-matter of his book, but also to distinguish within that period three different phases or movements of authorship.

Though periods are a mischievous conception, they are a methodological necessity. The mass of literature which I attempt to study in this book must be divided up somehow. I have accordingly divided it into what I call the Late Mediaeval, the Drab Age and the Golden Age. (p. 64)

The detailed treatment of the literature of the period according to this threefold division is, however, prefaced by a more general account of the mentality of the age and its philosophical and religious background in a masterly Introduction, which is probably the most valuable section of the book and certainly the most interesting for the ordinary reader. Lewis discusses in turn the relevance to literature of the increasing interest in astrology and magic, in connection with
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the Platonism of the Renaissance; of the discoveries of Columbus in geography and of Copernicus in astronomy (less immediately influential than is commonly imagined); of the Humanistic movement, that New Learning which, paradoxically, gave rise to a New Ignorance, and whose influence, in Lewis’s opinion, was by no means wholly beneficent; of the Reformation in England and the coming of the Puritans; of the new political theory, as advocated by Machiavelli, and the new economics, as practised by rapacious landlords and princes. From all this we gain a comprehensive view of the principal thoughts and occurrences affecting the minds of men in that troubled age; and so we are enabled to enter the more readily into the mentality of each individual writer, as he comes up for discussion.

In the first period, which he terms Late Mediaeval, Lewis deals with the survival of medieval poetry and prose (mainly poetry) into the XVI Century. Its representation in England, indeed, is most disappointing; and the nonsense poetry of Skelton stands out refreshingly against a mass of serious rubbish. On the other hand, in the Scottish poetry of the time, the Middle Ages attained an Indian summer in the work of Dunbar, Douglas and Lindsay, before both the poetry and the religion of the former age were extinguished by the controversial floods of the Reformation. Among the best pages of the book are those in which Lewis discusses the poetical genius of Gavin Douglas, particularly in his celebrated version of the Aeneid.

The next period, the ‘Drab Age’, is marked by a new simplicity of style and exactness of metre, as opposed to the excessively aureate style and looseness of metre common among the late mediaeval poets. Lewis warns us indeed against the depreciative suggestion contained in the term ‘Drab’:

‘Drab’ is not used as a dyslogistic term. It marks a period in which, for good or ill, poetry has little richness either of sound or images. The good work is neat and temperate, the bad flat and dry. There is more bad than good. (p. 64)

Drab poetry is well represented in the collection known as Tottel’s Miscellany (1557): reaching the heights of poetic genius in the songs of Wyatt, and more occasionally in the poems of Surrey (whose translation of the Aeneid, however, is shown to be distinctly inferior to that of Douglas); but more often remaining dully mediocre and content with trite moralisation. The literary genius of this age is revealed more in the prose, especially in the religious controversy which dates
from that time and whose principal expression is found in the writings of Thomas More (for the old religion) and of William Tyndale (for the new reform).

The third period, that termed 'Golden', is perhaps for the majority of readers the only part of XVI Century literature worth consideration, when a new style of verse and prose appeared in the latter years of Elizabeth's reign befitting a 'Golden Age' of literature. Again, however, Lewis warns us against the appreciative suggestion contained in the term 'Golden':

The epithet 'Golden' is not eulogistic. By Golden poetry I mean not simply good poetry, but poetry which is, so to speak, innocent or ingenuous. In a Golden Age the right thing to do is obvious: 'good is as visible as green'. (p. 64)

Whereas Drab poetry had suggested the seriousness of elderly men, this new Golden poetry reflects the liveliness and exuberance of youth; and this freshness of outlook provided the requisite condition for the flowering of the English genius, as in other departments of life, so too in literature. The new spirit is seen most of all in the romantic poetry of Sidney and Spenser, the forerunners of a whole galaxy of Elizabethan poets who appear in the final decade of the Century. The climax of the age is reached in prose by Hooker's 'Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity', which rise above the bitterness of religious controversy and present the new Elizabethan ideal in a harmonious synthesis of thought and melodious expression. In poetry, of course, Shakespeare stands supreme, and his Sonnets, while they scale new peaks of love poetry, are also the most truly Golden of all the poems of this age. The discussion of his dramatic work is, however, omitted, as it belongs to another volume of the series. (Vol. IV: 'The Secular Drama to 1642')

This treatment of the XVI Century is concluded by an Epilogue, in which Lewis dwells on those tendencies in Elizabethan poetry whose fruition properly comes later on in the following century. On the one hand, there is what he terms the 'sprechgesang' of Sylvester, in his translation of Du Bartas, which lies behind much of the irregularity in metre and conception of the so-called Metaphysical Poets; and on the other, there is the counterpoint of Campion, which is further developed by the metrical and musical genius of Milton. It is in this chapter that the poetry of the Jesuit, Robert Southwell, receives honour-
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able mention, as the precursor in many ways not only of the Metaphysicals, but also of the Augustans—if indeed he can be associated with any school or fashion of poetry.

He was not in the least 'contemporary': his work sometimes recalls the past, sometimes anticipates the immediate future which he was unconsciously helping to create, and often seems to belong to no period at all. (p. 544)

II

Such in brief outline are the qualities of the author and the ground which he covers in his book—outstanding qualities and a gigantic undertaking, whose result we cannot but admire for width of erudition, soundness of scholarship, exactness of analysis and individual criticism. But just as Lewis himself criticises the writings of even the greatest authors (not excluding Shakespeare), impartially noting their faults along with their virtues; so—however ungracious and even impertinent it may seem on our part—he must also in his turn be subjected to criticism, wherever he reveals defects (and in such a vast undertaking as his, some defects are humanly inevitable). These defects, however, are to be found not so much in matters of fact, in which he is usually fortified by the authority of superior learning—though here too particular errors may be noted, especially his repeated but quite unsubstantiated assertion of More's anti-scholasticism; but rather in his general treatment of the material at his disposal, where excessive learning too often proves a hindrance, and above all in matters of principle, the basic assumptions and prejudices which sway the interpretation of knowledge even in the most learned of men.

Firstly, then, in reading through this book we become increasingly aware that great learning can indeed be a hindrance, as well as a help, particularly to lucidity of thought and clarity of presentation—qualities which his other writings show him undoubtedly to possess in a high degree. But here he cannot see the wood for the trees. Both in the Introduction and in the general triple division of his period, Lewis preserves a certain clarity and perspective; but within that triple division (apart from the sections which deal with religious controversy) all order seems to disappear. His method is for the most part chronological (though the chronology itself is not always certain); and he proceeds from author to author and from book to book, apparently with no other plan than that of examining each in turn and of passing
critical judgment on them. Important authors are dealt with fairly adequately; but their comparative importance is too often obscured by the mass of minor writers (specially in the Drab Age), most of them hardly worth mentioning and few of them serving more than to create as much tedium in the discussion of their writings as in those writings themselves. In this, no doubt, Lewis is communicating to the reader something of his own boredom in wading through the originals; and so we can at least pity him for the arduousness of his task, which quite appals the spirit considering the amount of rubbish it condemned him to read.

Thus up to a point we can sympathise with Lewis, in view of the vast extent of the material he had to put into shape, so that to criticise the book for defect of form would seem to be to criticise the author for want of supreme genius. In fact, as we may gather from his other writings, Lewis does possess something at least of this supreme genius; but he is prevented from making full use of this genius, not by sloth (the book is itself a monument of incredible industry), but by what Dr. Johnson would call “a pedantic and perverse principle”, which is outlined at the end of the Introduction and stands as a kind of barrier between the admirable exposition of the Introduction itself and the pages of unenlightened scholarship which follow.

Some think it the historians’ business to penetrate beyond this apparent confusion and heterogeneity, and to grasp in a single intuition the spirit and meaning of his period. With some hesitation, and with much respect for the great men who have thought otherwise, I submit that this is exactly what we must refrain from doing, I cannot convince myself that such spirits or meanings have much more reality than the pictures we see in the fire. (p. 63)

Hence he sets out, as it seems, deliberately to confuse the mind and to produce a state of boredom, as though required to do so by an ‘objective’ ideal of presentation; with the result that the reader is shown not so much a rich variety in the XVI Century writings, as a bewildering chaos, in which the major authors suffer along with the minor. Fortunately, this erroneous principle is not pursued consistently, and we gain occasional glimpses of a deeper order in the literature of the period; but it does serve to remove half the real value the book might otherwise have possessed—and all we are given is a knowledge, without a true understanding, of the period.

Further, this lack of a proper proportion in disposing his material
as a whole (by what might be termed a certain materialistic bias) enters also into the discussion of the individual authors and their writings. What his task required was a general survey not only of the whole period, but of the individual authors of some importance—in such a manner as to bring into relief the main characteristics of each, both in themselves and in comparison with their contemporaries. For this purpose some rational selection and generalisation is desirable and, more or less, inevitable; but Lewis shows an excessive distrust of generalisation and an inadequate grasp of the principle of selection, so that he is too often sidetracked into a minute analysis of the metre and diction of a poem, or of the rhetorical devices of a passage in prose, without any real necessity. Moreover, in his judgment of poetry, he attends more to the ‘good things’ in phrase and verse than to the poetical conception as a whole—more to the adornments than to the thing itself; so that it is not surprising when he is led to utter the literary heresy:

If a poem seems beautiful, it is beautiful.

which is the quintessence of literary materialism.

In his style, moreover, he is much too judicial for a self-professed ‘literary historian’: he writes too often as a literary critic, which is by no means the same thing, though their provinces may on occasion overlap. The ideal of the literary historian is surely to present the several authors in such a manner that it becomes almost unnecessary for him to pass judgment on them—in that the judgment will be implicit in the presentation itself: he is more concerned with the individuality of the authors and their place in the period as a whole, than with a minute analysis and critical evaluation of their writings. But Lewis too often replaces the required description of the authors with a dogmatic judgment which we must needs accept on his sole authority. In this procedure the major writers suffer along with the minor; for so many minor writers are passed in review and dismissed as bad, that the reader’s mind easily grows unappreciative of the good qualities in the major writers—while even with the latter, attention is often paid to particular defects and merits are passed over with words of mere general praise. The prose of Thomas More suffers particularly from this unfair treatment.

Another serious fault is that the discussion of the major writers suffers from the apparent inability of Lewis to give a calm and dispassionate
appraisal of their merits. Instead his tone is invariably controversial (or 'axe-grinding'), with a view to dispelling various mistaken notions which he assumes to be lurkingly present in the reader's mind. One even wonders at times if he would have anything positive to say at all, but for the fact that some positive assertion is implied in every opposition. Certain literary terms, for instance, are condemned much too sweepingly, though they have been consecrated by traditional usage and have much in solid reason for their justification. Such are: the 'Renaissance' as applied to XVI Century literature; the 'Chaucerians' among the Scottish poets of the later Middle Ages; the 'quaintness' of Douglas's version of the Aeneid; and the 'metaphysical' quality of certain early XVII Century poets. So too with individual authors, he is too definite in his rejection of Wyatt's influence on the later Elizabethan sonnet (his evidence is unconvincing), in his denial of More's important position in English prose (subordinating him to Tyndale), in his condemnation of Spenser's pastoral poetry and in his commendation of the Faery Queene from the point of view of structure. In all these points he goes against the traditional interpretation, without allowing at least some element of truth in that interpretation. Not that tradition is at all infallible, but there is usually something to be said for it in justice; whereas, though Lewis's opinion may often be the right one, his proofs are not always convincing, while he irritates by unnecessary dogmatism and an intolerance for the views of others.

Above all, he consistently attacks, and with no little bitterness, what he regards as the two cardinal literary 'heresies'. In the first of these, which elsewhere (in a published controversy with Professor E.M. Tillyard) he terms the 'Personal Heresy', he carries his opposition to extreme lengths, so that he obstinately refuses to see the personality of the author in his work, preferring to regard all literary production as the expression of an impersonal art. Hence he is almost rude to the poet Daniel, whom he quotes as saying (what many, if not all, the great poets have thought and said) that he "must continue to do the thing he feels himself born to do":

I am not at all sure that these thoughts have proved healthy to literature. It may well be that the author who claims to write neither for patron nor public but for himself has done our art incalculable harm and bred up infinite charlatans by teaching us to emphasise the public's duty of recognition instead of the artist's duty to teach and delight, (p. 529)

So he turns from the personalist to the materialist interpretation of
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literature, and in avoiding personal ideas he intricates himself in minute
discussions of style and metre, attending more to form than to content.
Perhaps it is this prejudice which explains why he fails to give an adequate
description of the essential features of the different authors; for he
cannot do so, without taking into account the personality which is
progressively manifested in their various works.
The other 'heresy' which he opposes is that which elsewhere (in
an article in the 'Month' for October, 1950) he refers to as 'Historicism.' His argument is that we can never know the details of any age,
not even the present, and that therefore we are not justified in finding
any order or pattern of events which might give some meaning to the
period as a whole.

The greater part of the life actually lived in any century, any week, or any day,
consists of minute particulars and uncommunicated, even incommunicable, ex-
periences which escape all record. What survives, survives largely by chance.
On such a basis it seems to me impossible to reach the sort of knowledge which
is implied in the very idea of a philosophy of history. (p. 64)

But we need not know all the facts in any given period in order to
discover some order in them: the important ones stand out for all
to see who have an acquaintance with the period; and the more of
them we know, and the more we ponder over them, the more we find
them assuming an order not imposed by our own minds but objectively
present in them,—unless, of course, our study is merely mechanical.
Had Lewis not been hampered by this rooted prejudice, his book would
have been far more readable, more interesting, and more faithful to
objective reality. Besides, as a Platonist, he should have realised that
objective truth is to be found not just in brute, material facts, but much
more in the spiritual qualities latent within them.

Finally, the most serious criticism of the book—at least from the
Catholic point of view—is that it reveals extreme Protestant bias. Some
bias is pardonable up to a point in the discussion of a period which is
notoriously difficult to treat impartially—especially as impartiality itself
is too often a sign of superficiality or indifference. The whole period
was one of religious controversy, and even modern historians cannot
describe it without taking sides to some extent; and as Lewis is him-
self an Anglican, he understandably takes the Protestant side in the
controversy. He begins indeed by setting himself the ideal of im-
partiality, while admitting the difficulty, and hopes at least to avoid
giving offence.

We are to consider what men wrote, and our judgment on it must, of course, attempt to be literary, not theological. This does not mean that we are to confine ourselves rigidly to questions of style. Though we must not judge our authors' doctrine as doctrine, we must certainly attempt to disengage the spirit and temper of their writings to see what particular insights or sensibilities went with the varying beliefs, what kinds of sentiment and imagination they unwittingly encouraged. It will not be easy to do so without giving offence: I ask my readers to believe that I have at least intended to be impartial. (p. 157)

His ideal is a noble one and does credit to him; but in the pages which follow he lamentably fails to live up to it. He is naturally sympathetic with the position of the reformers and tends to see all events and ideas connected with the controversy through their eyes, while he presents their opinions in an attractive manner and at some length. But he shows no corresponding sympathy for the Catholic position, which he allows no opportunity to speak for itself but represents in the unfavourable light under which it appeared to the reformers. His attitude is too often that of the Protestant apologist, rather than that of the literary historian; and in this he contradicts his own principle:

To judge between one ethos and another, it is necessary to have got inside both, and if literary history does not help us to do so it is a great waste of labour. (p. 351)

This Protestant bias comes out most noticeably in three places, where the Reformation controversies have to be dealt with according to their different phases. First, in his introductory discussion of the Puritan influence on English literature, Lewis gives a glowing account of the original Protestant experience, with emphasis on its accompanying feeling of relief and buoyancy in contrast to the sourness and gloom which he attributes by strong implication to the Catholic position. He goes on to suggest that the Reformation gained hold of England by a natural process of development, and "with less of an upheaval than we should have expected"—regardless of the fact that its triumph was only secured by continual pressure from the government and an elaborate spy-system, in the teeth of widespread popular hostility and open resistance. Here is his naïve account of the whole Reformation in England:

Henry VIII . . . accidentally created a situation in which Protestantism, sometimes exploited and sometimes repressed by government, can become important
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in England. Not till the reign of Edward VI was there a seriously Protestant government. It went too far for the people and provoked a strong reaction. Mary availed herself of that reaction but grossly misjudged what it would bear. Then came the accession of Elizabeth, the new settlement, and the return of Protestant refugees from the continent. During this series of ecclesiastical revolutions and counter-revolutions England as a whole somehow changed her religion. (p. 38)

In the first stage of the religious controversy under Henry VIII, particularly in the dispute between More and Tyndale, the case for Tyndale is presented fully and attractively; whereas More is hardly given a chance of stating the Catholic position (which was, after all, that of the majority of Christendom), and is instead criticised for cheap scurrility, while being deposed from his place of eminence in the history of English prose style in favour of his more obscure opponent. What is particularly annoying, however, is that while Lewis consents to criticise Tyndale for ignorance and arrogance in his attitude to scholasticism—a criticism which is only too well justified—he associates him with More, on the bare evidence of a jesting reference in 'Utopia' to "second intentions" (a jest which even the most ardent pro-scholastic might well have made in similar circumstances). In the case of More, Lewis fails to make the obvious distinction between adherence to the main scholastic doctrines, which More certainly professed, and ridicule of contemporary scholastic decadence, in which he occasionally indulged.

Then, in the second stage of controversy under Elizabeth, he chooses another pair for contrast, though not so directly and explicitly opposed as More and Tyndale. The Catholic side is represented by Cardinal Allen, whose prose style is commended in general terms, but little is said for his religious point of view. On the other hand, Hooker, who champions the Anglican position in his 'Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity', is shown not only as achieving the summit of the Golden style in prose—which he probably did—but his ideas are given in full for their embodiment of the Elizabethan view of life. In fact, the pages on Hooker are among the finest in the book, for he is clearly Lewis's personal hero in the literature of the century; and there is indeed much to be said for his choice—except that it is a little one-sided. On the other hand, in the whole book, which includes so many minor writers in its scope, there is not even a mention of the prose of Parsons the Jesuit, whom Swift (in his essay On Corruptions of Style) commends together
with Hooker, as the two outstanding models of Elizabethan prose.

III

These are all serious faults, and it would be wrong to minimise them out of consideration for the author: they are no mere matters of superficial detail, the result of oversight, but enter into the very substance of the book and destroy at least half its value. It is, no doubt, a model of industry and scholarship in certain respects, and will always remain invaluable as a book of reference; but it cannot be read for enjoyment, or even for instruction of a deeper, more solid kind, for that understanding which transcends and enlightens mere factual knowledge. On the other hand, the very greatness of the faults may well be taken as a measure of the greatness of the author. For his faults are not those of mediocrity, which condemn an author to ignominious obscurity: if he offends, he offends on a grand scale and challenges that kind of opposition which is fruitful in the cause of truth. He offends, moreover, in such a way that the very remedy of his offences is to be found in that wherein he offends: for the meaning of his period, despite his prejudices against 'Historicism', is not so concealed in the pages of his book, that we cannot here and there gain some glimpses of understanding—even though they remain mere scattered glimpses, and not a full vision.

The very first paragraph of the Introduction is replete with promise, where a theme is proposed which might well have served as the basis of unity for the whole period:

The mid-century is an earnest, heavy-handed, commonplace age: a drab age. Then in the last quarter of a century, the unpredictable happens. With startling suddenness we ascend. Fantasy, conceit, paradox, colour, incantation return. Youth returns... Nothing in the earlier history of our period would have enabled the sharpest observer to foresee this transformation. (p. 1)

But this theme is hardly proposed before it is rejected without further discussion, thus destroying a splendid opportunity of achieving an ordered narrative and introducing an initial confusion into the whole book:

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. (p. 2)
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On the other hand, in the pages that follow we are given occasional hints at an explanation, especially when the main characteristics of the Drab and Golden Ages are recorded and compared: only Lewis will never develop those hints, and so his remarks remain scattered.

Thus, of the close of the Middle Ages in England, he observes:

All the conditions—or what we naturally suppose to be the conditions—of a great literature seem to be present in early Tudor England. (p. 120)

He goes on, in the same passage, to criticise the northern humanists for their neglect of, and even opposition to, the vernacular literatures in their excessively antiquarian pursuit of the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome. Later, in his discussion of the religious controversy in its first stage, he notices on the one hand—

the affinity between the Drab Age and the XVIII Century,

and on the other—

the difference between the freely emotional Middle Ages with their ready tears and boyish ardours and the graver, more deliberative period that was coming in. (p. 221)

Further on, the change from Drab to Golden is noted in the chapter on Drab and Transitional Prose:

It is less important that we should criticise than that we should perceive the change—whether we describe it by saying that the fog has lifted, or that the age of the martyrs has given place to that of the fantasticals, or that Mercury has succeeded Saturn. (p. 304)

and on the next page he sees—

the air and fire of youth chasing away the staidness of the Drab Age. (p. 305)

Finally, when he comes to treat of the Golden Age in the poetry of Sidney and Spenser, he remarks:

We do not know why men of genius are born at one period rather than another. But granted the genius, it may find more or less favourable conditions. And surely no genius is so fortunate as he who has the power and wish to do well what his predecessors have been doing badly. He need neither oppose an existing taste nor create a new one: he has only to satisfy a desire which is already aroused. None of his powers are dissipated or embittered by the struggle to make his aims understood: he can get to work at once. This advantage the Golden poets enjoyed. (p. 323)

All these statements, if taken together and not as they are separately
recorded in the book, provide us with the outline not only of an intensely fascinating theme, but also of a means for reducing confusion to order in the literature of the XVI Century. It is indeed true that the occurrence of individual genius is quite unpredictable, even in the light of the event; yet the conditions of this occurrence are not only observable, but it is the positive duty of the historian to observe them. Now these conditions, as Lewis himself remarks, were actually present in the England of the later Elizabethan Age, when the genius of Shakespeare shone forth amid a score of lesser luminaries. They were present also in the early Tudor period, and gave rise to the lyric poetry of Wyatt and Surrey, full of a promise which was for various reasons unfulfilled. The reasons (which it is the clear duty of the literary historian to investigate) may be found, first, in the unfavourable attitude of the humanists towards vernacular literature and particularly to the Romances of the Middle Ages; but, most of all, in the religious controversies of the Reformation, which were beginning about that time and did more than anything else to cast a cloud of seriousness over the minds of men, thus effectively hampering the free growth of literary genius. Later, however, as the first effects of humanism wore off and its indirect influence for good (through classical education) began to make itself felt, and still more, as the bitterness of religious controversy gave place to the pursuit of secular affairs, a new spirit was born more favourable to literature—a spirit whose presence even Lewis cannot wholly disregard, though he still persists in his scepticism:

"Nothing is more remarkable in the nineties than the way in which excellence may suddenly flow from the meanest pen... Poetic power is spread in such commonalty that if we were not on our guard we should come to take the spirit of the age for more than a figure of speech and believe that poetry could be really 'in the air.' But that way all the chimeras lie." (p. 479)

But the fact that a truth may be perverted does not make it the less true; and this is precisely the truth about the XVI Century which Lewis, as a literary historian, should have examined and not avoided, for it contains implicitly the clue to the meaning of his whole period. But he does avoid it, because he cannot, or will not, see the religious controversy of the period as more than one branch of literature, in comparative isolation from other branches, and not of central importance to the development of the literary, no less than of the social and political and spiritual, life of the nation. Here lies the true unity
最近イギリス小説雑感

最近出版されたイギリスの小説について感想をいたものをを書る。最近といっても、ここ二三年の間にことであり、大した準備知識もなく漫然と読んでみたのでも、まったくの雑感にすぎないことをお許し願いたい。

まず初めに Neo-picaresque novelists といわれている三人の新進の作家についてみる。John Wain の Harry On Down (1953)、Irish Murdoch の Under the Net (1954)、Kingsley Amis の Lucky Jim (1954) の三つで、いずれも處女作のようだ。これらの小説は相当に問題となったらしいが、Mrs. Fraser の通信などがからも推察される（英語青年昭和 30 年 4 月号参照）。大体において若いイギリスの知識人の気持が現在どんなところにあるのかということが判るような気がした。これらの作品が Neo-picaresque というように総括的な名称をつけて扱われているのは、もちろん共通した特徴をもっているからである。その主人公は自分を室しくしたような存在で、いわば無の境地にあつて、社会に面していいく。積極的に社会と戦うというよりは、外縁の力に消極的に流されているような生き方である。こういう主人公が現代社会のさまざまな局面にぶつかって行くここに諷刺的な効果も出てくるが、主人公がそのように消極的であるから社会批判の力は強烈とはいえない。しかし従来の小説が主人公の内部心理の探求という方向に主力を注いでいたのに反して、これらの小説では主人公のぶつかる社会の外縁を描くことに主力が注がれていって、picaresque という名称にふさわしい型をみせている。主人公の行動は時には思わずも吹き出したことのような滑稽なかれがあって、小説に笑いの要素を多く入れている点で従来の深刻かつ暗い小説などよりも読者をひきつけるところがあるだろうと思うことは、Mrs. Fraser のいう通りだ。

and meaning of the XVI Century; and if only Lewis had firmly grasped it, instead of dissipating his energies upon a multitude of minor writers with all their tedious writings, he would have made a real and lasting contribution to literary history.

—Peter Milward, S. J.