*Book Review by Jack DesBois*
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**The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature**
by C.S. Lewis
*Cambridge University Press, 1964*
*232 pages*

In an effort to fill a gap in my world history education, I checked this slim book out from the library as a complement to Susan Wise Bauer's brick-like *History of the Medieval World*. Lewis's book (an adaptation of a series of Oxford lectures compiled toward the end of his life) promised to give an introduction to the "Medieval worldview" as an aid to the study and enjoyment of Medieval literature. It proved engaging, clear, entertaining, challenging, and mind-broadening. I came away with a deeper appreciation and understanding of the Medieval literature I have already enjoyed, an appetite for more, and—perhaps most important—a sense of freedom from the fetters of today's technocratic worldview.

A reader will certainly benefit from some prior exposure to the canon of Western Medieval literature, though he need not be an expert by any means. Lewis assumes an audience familiar with many works from the Classical to the Renaissance eras, as well as with Classical languages, but he also provides enough context to keep afloat those unfamiliar with the examples he gives. I had previously read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (all in modern English translations), as well as a smattering of Homer, Virgil, Plato, and Aristotle on one end of the time frame in question and a good deal of Shakespeare on the other. This prior reading came in handy in approaching Lewis's book (especially the *Comedy*), and it was sufficient to carry me across the massive gaps left by my near-complete ignorance of Latin, Greek, post-Aristotelian philosophy, and literature between Virgil and Dante. Lewis's references to Malory, Boethius, Langland, La3amon, Boccaccio, and countless others were meaningful to me within the frame he provides and the background I brought, though the authors and their works were entirely new to me. And I now have a Medieval and Classical reading list that I'm very much looking forward to exploring.

Lewis endeavors to impress upon the reader the remarkable orderliness of the Medieval mind—at least, as manifested in the era's literature—epitomized in the Medieval Model of the universe. The universal scheme of concentric heavenly realms corresponding to the seven planets, familiar to readers of Dante's *Paradiso*, is an example; Dante did not invent this ordering of the universe but rather articulated in intricate detail what had already been developing in the collective understanding for over a thousand years. To trace the development of this understanding, Lewis goes back to the Classical texts most influential to the Medieval poets, introducing the reader to (among many others) Cicero, Boethius, and the secondhand fragments of Plato that were available in pre-Renaissance Europe.

Along the way, Lewis surprises the reader with revelations about the Medieval mind, often illuminating modern misconceptions. For example, while the visual map of the Medieval cosmos is undeniably geocentric, with Earth in the middle of a series of concentric spheres, Lewis argues that this makes not

for a geocentric but a geoperipheral worldview; our mutable realm that we call Earth is as far as possible from the immutable Empyrean—the outermost sphere and the abode of God—and is the size of a point in spatial comparison.

To illustrate the complexities inherent in a model that seeks supreme simplicity, Lewis goes further to introduce the friction, and co-existence, between the pagan/Platonic conception of Man's insignificance and the Christian centrality of the very same Man's Fall and Redemption. The Platonic triad influences the Medieval Model alongside the Christian Trinity, creating patterns often involving two elements and a go-between—such as the categorization of beings as mortals (plants, beasts, and humans), immortals (three three-fold hierarchies of angels), and the in-between "Longaevi": elves, fairies, and the like.

This last category will delight fans of Lewis's and his colleague J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy fiction. Within the Medieval Model of the universe we find the forerunners of the former's Mr. Tumnas and the latter's hobbits and elves. Indeed, the literature of the 20th-century Inklings owes much more to Medieval literature than merely its characters; Lewis and Tolkien wove Medieval thought patterns into their worlds in a way that separates their literature from the resolutely Modern works of their contemporaries.

Throughout this book, Lewis treats the Medieval Model with respect and admiration; as often as he points out a Medieval absurdity from the Modern perspective, he will flip the scales and present the reader with a Modern absurdity as viewed from the Medieval perspective. For example: Originality, so highly prized among Modern works of art, was an utterly foreign concept to the Medieval artists and poets. It would have smacked of egotism to them. Rather than create something new, the Medieval poet's duty was to re-tell an extant story, doing justice to worthy subject matter. Lewis writes:

> If you had asked Laȝamon or Chaucer, 'Why do you not make up a brand-new story of your own?' I think they might have replied (in effect) 'Surely we are not yet reduced to that?' Spin something out of one's own head when the world teems with so many noble deeds, wholesome examples, pitiful tragedies, strange adventures, and merry jests which have never yet been set forth quite so well as they deserve?

The Progressive worldview did not grip the Medieval poets; theirs was not a society marching forward to a brave new world but one reveling in the fading glories of the past. And yet, as their vibrant poetry attests, they wasted no energy in self-pity or lamentation but really did revel. Lewis draws the reader's attention to such differences between the Medieval and the Modern worldviews not to point out the flaws in one or the other, but to disabuse the reader of the notion that the Modern is necessarily more truthful than the Medieval. Rather, every Universal Model does its best to fit the facts it deems most important into as elegant a structure as it can.

Lewis wrote *The Discarded Image* at a time when even his own society's Universal Model was in flux, morphing through the influence of quantum theory, the decline of popular Darwinism, and the advent of space travel. Living through this cultural shift, he urges his reader "to regard all Models in the right

way, respecting each and idolising none. … No model is a catalogue of ultimate truths, and none is a mere fantasy."

Today, sixty-odd years after Lewis wrote, a technocratic elite is imposing a new, information-technology-centric Model on the world and pushing civilization to the breaking point. Lewis's insights can perhaps give us an opportunity to step back from the brink. His window into the Medieval mind has the power to remind us of forgotten truths, opening our eyes to new—meaning very old—ways of understanding God's Creation and our place in it.

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