

A STUDY OF C. S. LEWIS AS A LITERARY CRITIC



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CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

Although C.S. Lewis was a novelist, a critic and a writer of popular theology, he is better known as a literary critic in the academic world. Some of his critical works have been acclaimed as major contributions to literary criticism, and his critical theories have attracted new interest in recent years because of their relevance to the contemporary situation in literature and their challenging propositions. Though the present study is concerned only with his critical theories, some of his critical works have also been examined along with his theories as they contain insights, views and theories.

The development of his critical theories can be traced back as far as his childhood. He was a precocious child and by the age of ten he had already acquired the habit of writing fiction and poetry. These childhood ventures into writing made him aware of the qualities essential for a good work of art. Some of the qualities he frequently mentioned in his letters to Arthur Greeves, his childhood friend, were clarity, conciseness, elevation of style, evocativeness and romantic charm.

Lewis' potential as a critic became evident while he was studying in the English school, Oxford University: his performance there indicated that he had the ability for extraordinary scholastic attainments, and also had original critical ideas as some of his tutorials there became seminal works for his published essays and books later.

Lewis firmly established himself as a first rate critic and "writer of exceptional imaginative power"¹ after the publication of The Allegory of Love. Another book that won wide critical acclaim was A Preface to Paradise Lost. He also wrote one volume, English Literature in the Sixteenth Century (excluding drama) for The Oxford History of English Literature. It was highly praised as "being brilliantly written, compulsively readable, and constantly illuminated by sentences that are true as they are witty".² Besides, he wrote essays on theory and also on major authors in poetry, drama, and the novel from Chaucer's time to the present. But his most important books on critical theory were The Personal Heresy and An Experiment in Criticism.

As Lewis responded to literature as a romantic, any discussion on his literary theory has to begin with his romanticism. Romanticism manifested itself quite early in his childhood, and at the centre of his romanticism was Sehnsucht. Sehnsucht is an intense kind of longing which borders on pain but which is a delight in itself. It can be

triggered, for instance, on seeing a beautiful sight. But its visitation can neither be forced nor discontinued at will. But when it comes, the delight is so intense that no other earthly joy can be compared with it.

Sehnsucht made a powerful impact on Lewis as a writer. It made him aware of the existence of a transcendental realm from where thrills of joy come. It also made him extraordinarily sensitive to the beauty of nature. As a critic, he formulated a theory on transcendental longing which found artistic expression in his novel The Pilgrim's Regress.

However, despite the presence of this romantic temperament, it is difficult to label Lewis as a romantic critic. Because he was very eclectic in his approach and did not subscribe to certain important romantic theories such as the expressive theory of art, the intentionality of the poet, the theory of genius and so on. But his eclecticism does not end here. His eclectic approach was applied to the Neoclassicists as well. He shared similar views with T.S. Eliot on tradition and the impersonality of art. He also had a common approach with the New Critics to textual analysis. But he disagreed quite strongly with Eliot on his view that only practicing contemporary poets could be judges of Paradise Lost. And Lewis also had no faith in F.R. Leavis'

belief that civilization could be saved by discreet literary criticism.

Lewis was a scholar with great natural intelligence, analytical power and dialectical skills; in addition he enjoyed polemics - both private and public. And one fortunate aspect of this rather disagreeable habit is that some of his best insights, views and theories on literature emerged from his polemical writings. One of such exposition is his book, The Personal Heresy. The book came out as the result of a controversy between E.M. Tillyard and C.S. Lewis on the role of the poet's personality in a work of art. In this book Lewis defends the view that a poem is not the expression of the poet's personality. He contends that in reading a poem we apprehend what the poet presents to us in the poem and his skill in presenting it but not his personality. When we read a poem we look at something with the poet's eyes and see as he saw it. It is true that in the act of reading we come into contact with the poet's consciousness in a very intimate manner as he is sharing it with us. Often this consciousness is mistaken as his personality but they are not identical. This is not his normal consciousness as it is a heightened one and comes only at certain times, so it cannot be his personality. In fact, an act of composition is an escape from personality rather than an expression of it. Let us illustrate the point with the example of a poet who is

presenting an intensely dramatic situation. In presenting the situation, though the character may be in the overwhelming grip of a particular emotion, the poet has already escaped from that emotion to be able to present it to us objectively.

In A Preface to Paradise Lost, Lewis is at his polemical best. In the book he defends Milton's epic against detractors, and he also refutes two errors in the interpretation of Paradise Lost. In his defense of Paradise Lost he contends that Milton's criticism is lost in misunderstanding because many modern readers are unfamiliar with the epic form and they set out to find in Paradise Lost "little patches of delight" as if they were reading lyrics, and when they are not found those readers get frustrated. This happens because the readers have no idea that in a long narrative poem the line is subordinated to the paragraph, and the paragraph to the book and the book to the whole; and they condemn those properties which the poet laboured hardest to attain. Lewis, therefore, believes that the study of Milton should be preceded by a study of the epic in general.

Epic poetry is a species of the genus narrative poetry, and Lewis divides epic poetry into primary epic and secondary epic. This is simply a chronological division without any suggestion of one being superior to the other. Primary epic is oral, ~~solempne~~, aristocratic, festive, public and ceremonial; and attains its effect through the use of stock-

words, phrases, whole lines and also a special diction which is familiar and yet non-colloquial.

Then Lewis discusses the subject of 'primary epic'. He says it doesn't have to be on a subject of national or cosmic importance. All it requires is that it has to be a heroic story, e.g. The Illiad. In the poem the Trojan war provides only the background for a personal story of Achilles. Concerning the subject of 'secondary epic', Lewis says Virgil was the one who invented it. He was interested in an epic to rival Homer, and he chose a national theme to satisfy the Roman spirit and found a solution by narrowing down his theme to a national legend and handling it with great skill. By discovering this procedure, Virgil discovered new possibilities for poetry itself; and any further development of the secondary epic proceeds from Virgil. In a way the secondary epic is more complicated than the primary as it has to create solemnity without external aids such as a hall, a garlanded priest and an altar. Moreover, the secondary epic requires even greater solemnity than the primary one as it is meant for a person in his armchair in the privacy of his room. So blaming it for being ritualistic is to blame it for being what it is intended to be.

Lewis next discusses the technique of 'secondary epic'. In general it is produced by the elevation of style. In Paradise Lost, grandeur is produced mainly by three things:

the use of slightly unfamiliar words and constructions, the use of proper names, and continued allusion to what heightens our sense experience, such as light, darkness, storm, flowers, and jewel. The effect is mainly achieved by unremitting manipulation of his reader. He makes him feel that he is attending an actual recitation. Another technique is the evocation of stock responses like constancy in love and friendship or loyalty in political life. Yet one more technique in epic style is continuity which is done by maintaining a sense of continuity between sentences, paragraphs and books.

In the Preface Lewis attempts to refute two errors that have been prevailing in Milton criticism for more than one hundred years. The first one is the doctrine of unchanging human heart. According to this doctrine the things which separate one age from another are superficial and if we strip people off their beliefs we find the same unchanging human heart. But Lewis points out that this method is absurd as it may deprive a work of its very essence and render it a mere abstraction. For example, we cannot study Hamlet after stripping off the revenge code as Hamlet no longer exists after stripping off that code. In the same way, we cannot study Paradise Lost after stripping off Milton's theology. So Lewis suggests that we rather put ourselves in the position of the character by embracing their traditions and beliefs

and try to feel how they felt so that the full meaning of the poem may emerge.

The second error is the Satan-hero theory. Lewis contends that though Satan is a magnificent poetic creation it is not meant to be an object of admiration. And he believes that there are both literary and theological evidences in Paradise Lost which confirm this view. As Paradise Lost is an epic, Milton has to treat the satanic predicament in the epic form which involves treating the subject in a grand style by subordinating his absurdity to his misery. Moreover, Satan is the best drawn character in the poem as it is easy to draw a character worse than oneself. So a magnificent Satan emerges. But this is only one side of the picture. Milton also has clearly shown that Satan is full of absurdity. There is a co-existence in him of a subtle intelligence with an incapacity to understand anything. He is the cause of his own predicament. He develops a sense of injured merit after the exaltation of the Messiah as head of the angels though this does not do him injustice in any way. His revolt against God is suicidal as he is a derived being: it is analogous to "the scent of a flower trying to destroy the flower".³ His degradation is rapid and repelling. He comes to Eden as a spy but soon turns into a prying peeping Tom, and then by his own will turns into a toad and then finally a snake. This progression from hero to

snake was mistakenly considered by some critics as a miscalculation on the part of Milton who made Satan more glorious than intended and then attempting to rectify it again. But Lewis believes it was Milton's design to show Satan at the height of his glory and then trace what becomes of such self-intoxication when confronted with reality.

Lewis had a conservative temperament and his conservation is reflected in his attitude towards modern poetry, and the use of psycho-analysis and anthropology in literary criticism. Regarding modern poetry Lewis feels that it has differentiated itself too much from prose and as a result it has become too difficult for the common people to understand it. Moreover, even for the professionals who read it, the interpretation of poetry has become so subjective and variable that it is no longer possible to tell which is the right interpretation. So the future of such poetry is not promising. Lewis is equally sceptical about the use of psycho-analysis in literary criticism. Because some critics use psycho-analysis to infer the pathology of the poet instead of concentrating on his work and thus, it becomes a digression from genuine criticism. Secondly, Lewis has serious doubts about the interpretation of certain symbols by Freud which are too farfetched to be a contribution to literary criticism. Lewis also finds no merit in the use of anthropology as a critical tool. Anthropology's supposed

contribution is the discovery of the mythical or ritual origin of the romances. But these origins are only conjectural and they may or may not be true. Or even if they are true they have no literary relevance as they simply furnish facts about the origin of a poem and do not reveal anything about the literary equality of the poem.

Lewis was more of a reactionary critic than anything else. An in his book An Experiment in Criticism he is reacting against an extreme form of evaluative criticism prevailing in the universities at that time. In this book he proposes a new system of criticism in which literature is to be judged by the way men read it. He says this is possible because a good book is read in one way and a bad one in another way. And a good book is one which permits, invites and compels good reading. Thus good reading is a key concept in his system. According to him good reading consists in surrendering ourselves totally to a work of art to make ourselves receptive to the work. And this total surrender has something in common with love, religion and intellectual attainment.

Thus in the system, reading is made the basis for our judgement, and any literature which has the power to compel good reading can be considered potentially good literature. However, to distinguish the good from the bad, Lewis uses double distinctions. He puts some books beyond the pale, and

then from within the pale the better has to be separated again from the worse. In judging readers, he does the same. To quote him, "we make a broad but hardly disputable division between those who read seldom, hastily, hazily, forgetfully, only to kill time, and those to whom reading is an arduous and important activity. But within the latter class, we distinguish 'good' from 'bad' taste".⁴

Then Lewis enumerates the advantages of the system. Firstly, it fixes our attention on the act of reading. Books are only potential literature and they become actual only when read. So also is literary taste. It is a potentiality till we read literature. But in reading, both scholarship and criticisms find their fulfilment as their sole function is to multiply, prolong, and safeguard experiences of good reading. The system thus helps us to get away from abstraction and focus our attention on the act of reading literature itself.

Secondly, the system "puts our feet on solid ground, whereas the usual one puts them on quicksand".⁵ So it is risky because one begins to condemn somebody's taste on the strength of an inference. For example, my taste may be condemned simply because I like a particular author. But one's condemnation is based on either one's own isolated personal reaction, like my own, or the prevalent view of the literary world. If it is the former, as one has not heard my view it is a one-sided judgement and one is never sure that

one is right. So one's condemnation of my taste is simply insolent. But if it is based on the prevalent view how long is it going to prevail. Because literary judgements change according to the vagaries of fashion, and dethronements and restorations are almost monthly events and one can trust no judgement as permanent.

But suppose one goes the other way round and observes the reading habit of men one will find oneself standing on firmer ground. For example, suppose one had encouraged me to talk about Lamb and discovered that I was ignoring things he really has and reading into him a great deal that he does not have and also that I seldom read what I so praised and the very terms of praise revealed how completely it was for me a stimulant to wishful reveries of my own. And suppose one went around and on testing others, one found the same kind of result, one has solid ground to presume that Lamb is probably a bad author as the worst kind of reading is used by those who enjoy Lamb. Thus the observation of how men read provides a strong basis for judgement on what they read, as "the distinction between attentive and inattentive, obedient and willful, disinterested and egoistic mode of reading is permanent, if ever valid, valid everywhere and always".⁶

Thirdly, it would make critical condemnations difficult. Lewis considers this an advantage as condemnation has become too easy which has produced detrimental effects on

sane criticism. All the great names in English literature have been condemned except half a dozen protected by the current critical establishment. These dethronements are a great waste of energy as the real function of criticism is not to denigrate somebody's favourites but to help him to enjoy something better. In the established system, in judging books, a critic puts some books beyond the pale and some within. But often the books he puts beyond the pale may be books he has never read. However, in the new system it works in the open. If we can observe the reading habit of people, we can assign those habits to the 'literary' and 'unliterary'. If we find that a book is read only in one way and no other we have a *prima facie* case that the book is bad. But on the other hand, if a book is passionately and constantly loved and reread by the reader or readers, we can with certainty say that the book has to be good no matter what the critics or the current literary fashions say.

In An Experiment in Criticism, apart from advocating a new system of criticism to replace the present evaluative system, particularly the judgemental and condemnatory type, Lewis also refutes certain literary assumptions of his age. The dominant one among them was the assumption that civilization could be saved by literary criticism. But Lewis had no interest in a substitute religion as his critical

position was aesthetic rather than moral. And in An Experiment in Criticism he emphatically denies that literature is to be valued for telling us truths about life and as aid to cultural propaganda.

Thus as a critic, Lewis was a complex man: he was a romantic who could not be called a romantic critic, he was a conservative man whose conservatism did not prevent him from being eclectic as he would not hesitate to learn from different schools of criticism if it suited his taste; he was a conservative man who was also a reactionary. These qualities put him at odds with his times at times. But they also made him an original critic and thinker.

The present dissertation is an exploration of Lewis' works to study his insights, views and theories on literature and to assess his contribution to the modern critical tradition.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In one's evaluation of Lewis as a critic it is imperative to begin with an assessment of the influence of romanticism on his criticism; because romanticism was ingrained in him and he responded to literature essentially as a romantic. Romanticism manifested itself quite early in his childhood in the form of *Sehnsucht* or longing. In fact, *Sehnsucht* constituted the centre of his romanticism and it moulded him as a man, as a creative writer and also as a critic. As a man his experience of joy through *Sehnsucht* helped him to go on searching for the ultimate reality or God till his return to the Christian faith. As a creative writer, it made him extraordinarily sensitive to the beauty of nature around him, and also made him keenly aware of the Neoplatonic transcendental realities. And as a critic, his experience of *Sehnsucht* helped him to evolve a theory of longing which was later transformed into a work of art - The Pilgrim's Regress. It also helped him to evolve critical concept on the perception and experience of transcendental realities through the power of a "baptized" imagination.

But despite the presence of these romantic traits in him, it is difficult to put him in any particular tradition

as a critic — romantic or otherwise. He had great independence of mind and eclecticism marks his approach in criticism throughout and though a romantic Lewis does not accept a number of romantic critical concepts. One of them is the expressive theory of art. He believes in the objectivity and impersonality of art and he makes a distinction between artistic emotion and the emotion of the poet. In The Personal Heresy, he says, "The character presented is that of a man in the grip of this or that emotion: the real poet is a man who has already escaped from that emotion sufficiently to see it objectively The man who cries out with pain is not the same as the man who vividly expresses to us that blood-curdling nature of the cry".¹ He believes that the expressive theory of art has generated an excessive interest in the study of the psychology and biography of authors which inevitably leads to poetolatry. For Lewis this is a deviation from true appreciation of literature as true appreciation should be concerned with concentration on the work itself to discover what it has to offer. A corollary to Lewis' rejection of the expressive theory of art is his rejection also of the intentionality of the poet, such as sincerity or insincerity, as a critical principle as it has nothing to do with the intrinsic worth of a work of art. A fourth romantic theory that Lewis rejects is the theory of genius, especially that of Coleridge which says that poetry is a product of the

action of reason, imagination and the will. In place of this theory, he espouses a theory of imitation with particular reference to the position of a Christian in the light of the New Testament. Lewis says, in the New Testament, life itself is an art of imitation and originality is the prerogative of God alone. And our destiny lies in humbling ourselves, reflecting a glory which is not our own, and being a fragrance which is borrowed. Lewis applies the same principle of reflection and derivation to literature as well and says that it should form the basis of all critical theory. So "an author should never conceive himself as bringing into existence beauty or wisdom which did not exist before, but simply and solely as trying to embody in terms of his own art some reflection of eternal Beauty and Wisdom".² But of course, Lewis does not mean here that a Christian writer cannot be original. He says that a Christian can be original. To illustrate his point he brings the analogy of Homer's Phemus who claims to be self-taught but also inspired at the same time. He says there is no contradiction in this because Phemus can learn his trade by himself without following the example of his predecessors, and the inspiration he receives can be treated as a part of himself as it is internal. Thus a Christian writer also can be truly original in the same sense. But of course one has to remember here that for a Neoplatonist like Lewis, inspiration and imitation or

contemplation of God — eternal Beauty and Wisdom — are the same. It may be noted here that in this particular theory, though Lewis rejects Coleridge's theory of the creative power of genius, he retains something of romanticism because he continues to echo Shelley's Neoplatonic belief that "poetic inspiration is to be identified with the blissful contemplation of the sempiternal Form".³

Lewis', eclecticism is shown on other issues as well. Though a romantic, he has affinity with T.S. Eliot on tradition and impersonality of art. Emphasising the value of tradition he says, "To study the past does indeed liberate us from the present",⁴ and he also agrees with G.K. Chesterton that "any man who is cut off from the past ... is a man most unjustly disinherited."⁵ Lewis further points out the need to conform to the traditional form in writing the epic. He says that by submitting to the traditional form the poem "becomes really original, really the origin of great work. The attempt to be oneself often brings out only the more conscious and superficial parts of a man's mind."⁶ On the impersonality of art Lewis states in The Personal Heresy that in writing a poem the poet does not express his personality but transcends it. So when we read a poem we do not see the poet's personality, but only what he presents to us and his skill in presenting it. Lewis' similarity with Eliot, however, ends here. Lewis disagrees quite strongly with Eliot on the notion

that only poets can be judges of poetry. Eliot has specifically stated that to judge Paradise Lost "the best contemporary practicing poets are the only jury of judgement." But Lewis objects to this statement and points out the absurdity of the statement. To begin with it excludes all to judge Milton, including the greatest critics on Milton, except practicing poets who may or may not be good critics. Secondly, if we examine Eliot's statement logically, it is absurd as one has to assume that one is a poet though one cannot validly make that judgement because that is a critical judgement and it cannot be made before one can answer the question whether one is a poet. So this is an exposed *petitio* and logically fallacious. However, Lewis' difference with Eliot is not on this issue alone, their very approach to criticism is antithetical: Lewis is the antithesis of Eliot's judgemental and authoritative approach.

Lewis was a critic with a conservative temperament, and his conservatism shows in his attitude towards modern poetry, and the use of psycho-analysis and anthropology in literary criticism. Regarding modern poetry, Lewis is of the view that it neither enjoys a wide readership as poetry used to nor is there anything sure about its future. Because it has deviated so much from the traditional norm by differentiating itself so much from prose that it has become too difficult for the common people to understand. So now its readership is

confined mostly to poets and professionals. And when it comes to interpretation, it is doubtful again whether even these readers can come to any agreement as to what a particular poem means as entirely different interpretations have become possible for a poem. And the future for such poetry is bleak. Lewis is equally sceptical about the usefulness of the psycho-analytical approach in criticism. One reason why he opposes it is because some critics use psycho-analysis to find out the pathological condition of the poetry from his works. This is a digression from genuine criticism. Secondly, Lewis has serious doubts about the interpretation of certain symbols by Freud which are too farfetched to make any contribution to literary criticism. Lewis also has no faith in the use of anthropology as a critical tool. He feels that the extent of the contribution of anthropology is exaggerated. In fact it may not be contributing anything at all because though literary texts can be useful to the anthropologist it does not necessarily follow that anthropology can in turn make a significant contribution to literary criticism. The supposed contribution of anthropology is the discovery by the anthropologists of the mythical or ritual origins of the romances. But Lewis feels that these origins are only conjectural and they may or may not be true. Or even if they are true it does not matter much because they simply furnish facts about the origin of a poem which may

have nothing to do with the literary merit or demerit of the poem. Thus these facts have no critical relevance.

Lewis was a creative writer, and he drew on his experience as a creative writer to formulate new critical principle particularly on children's fiction. One of them is his approach to writing for children. He says there are two good ways and one bad one. The bad way is to treat children like a special department and giving them what the public wants. The other two good ways are to let the printed story grow out of a story told to a particular child; and writing children's story because a children's story is the best art form for something one has to say. While discussing children's fiction, Lewis also has advanced a theory of his own concerning fairy-tales universal appeal. He says we find fairy-tale appealing because characters in fairy-tales, such as giants, dwarfs, and talking animals act as hieroglyphs which depict human attitudes and personality much more effectively than novelistic presentations can do. In addition to this, Lewis also has described vividly and perceptively the actual process of writing stories. In his description he makes a distinction between the poet as poet and the poet as man and citizen. The author's mind bubbles every now and then with ideas. It is followed by the longing for a form. When the two things click, the author's impulse is complete. Then he longs to put the bubbling stuff into

form. The man then decides the advantage and disadvantages of writing the story considering it from different points of view.

Lewis was the first to classify science fiction into different categories. Science fiction is a broad term and under this term can come many varieties. After making a detailed analysis of all the existing varieties, Lewis classified them into five species. In this undertaking, Lewis did for science fiction what Aristotle had done for Greek tragedy. Apart from this classification Lewis also improved upon the classification of the epic. Traditionally, it was divided into primitive epic and artificial epic. But Lewis found the classification unsatisfactory and re-divided epics into primary epic and secondary epic. In the Preface, Lewis also has refuted two major errors in the interpretation of Paradise Lost. One of them is the doctrine of the unchanging human heart. According to this doctrine the things that separate one age from another are superficial and if we strip characters of one age of their traditions and beliefs we find the same unchanging human heart. But Lewis points out that this is not a solution to the problem as it distorts the meaning of the poem and he suggests that we rather situate ourselves in their position in order to feel what they felt. This, he says helps us to understand the poem better. The next error in the interpretation of Paradise Lost is the

Satan-hero theory. Lewis contends that this error, has occurred because certain things in Paradise Lost have been either ignored or misunderstood. Some of these are the epic form and the intention of Milton in making Satan magnificent and the theological position concerning Satan at the time of Milton. Concerning the first, Lewis says, Milton has to treat the Satanic predicament in the epic form which involves depicting Satan in a grand style by subordinating his absurdity to his misery. So a magnificent Satan emerges. But it is also true that Milton has made the absurdity of Satan abundantly clear: his self-delusion that he is at war with God, his hope to win the war, his initial proclamation to fight for liberty and then ending up fighting for his own glory, his degradation from a hero of the heavenly host to a peeping Tom in Eden. The progression of his degradation fits Milton's scheme well as it was undoubtedly his intention to show the devil at the height of his glory and then trace the consequences of such self-intoxication and exaltation. In trying this Milton was taking hardly any risk of being misunderstood as during his time people believed in the existence of a real Satan whom they knew to be the father of lies and whose public speeches they would not accept as gospel truth.

Lewis was essentially an appreciative critic rather than an evaluative one. He had an aversion to making literary

judgements, especially the condemnatory type, and he also had no interest in establishing hierarchies of excellence. Chad Walsh says this attitude might have stemmed from the unhappy experiences he had gone through in the early years when many of his poems were rejected by publishers. Whatever might be the origin of the attitude, it remained with him throughout his life. But as a certain measure of evaluation is inevitable for any critic, Lewis also engaged in evaluation when the situation demanded. Evaluation can be seen in all his major works like The Allegory of Love, A Preface to Paradise Lost and Prose and Poetry in the Sixteenth Century.

Lewis' methodology in criticism was essentially formalistic. He believed in a very close reading of the text as that is the best way to become a perceptive reader. In addition, for him, a work of art exists on its own right and what the text says counts, not what may be conjectured from the author's life. But his methodology in textual analysis is not as systematic or detailed as that of the New Critics. He is happy with no more than a very close reading of the text.

Lewis was a man gifted with great intelligence, imaginative power and dialectical skills, and he enjoyed taking polemical stands on literary issues. And most of his theoretical writings are the product of his involvement in polemics. If there were no opponents to debate with and no ideologies to battle against, perhaps, many of Lewis'

critical concepts would never have appeared in print. But the problem with his polemic habit is that he tends to push an argument to its extreme logical conclusion — often without much regard to the basic strength or weakness of his own position; and in the process he gets into rather unenviable positions. A good example is his controversy with Tillyard on the personal heresy. It is obvious that a work of art can be viewed not only from the point of view of the material but also from the point of view of the vision of the poet. But Lewis saw no merit in his opponent's case and started a long drawn controversy. So his own friend Owen Barfield commented that the controversy was slightly absurd. And "most reviewers agreed that the increasingly biographical approach to literature was regrettable, but most also pointed out that understanding something of an author's personality would be a pleasure".⁷ Lewis gets into a very basic problem in An Experiment in Criticism as well. It was his intention, to replace evaluative criticism by his new system of criticism. But in the experiment, though many of his ideas are perceptive and insightful, he fails to overcome a very basic problem — the problem of distinguishing good books from better books as there are no char-cut, objective standards with which to determine the intrinsic worth of a book in his system.

Before we conclude we may briefly review here the impact of The Personal Heresy and An Experiment in Criticism on the academic scene in England and beyond. It is true that the publication of these two books drew immediate attention to certain excesses in academic criticism. But perhaps hardly anybody realised at that time that their impact would be more than ephemeral. But now they have proved to be of enduring value. To quote George Sayer, "the idea [The Personal Heresy] presents has had an important influence on the teaching of English literature. Henceforward, boys and girls who had hardly heard of C.S. Lewis were liable to be severely reprimanded if they served up biography in the guise of literary criticism".⁸ Concerning An Experiment in Criticism, the same author says, "within five years it was referred to as a now classic broadside, ... it has attracted a considerable following, especially in America and is already useful in moderating the influence of academic literary criticism."⁹

Finally, one more question about Lewis remains: his position as a literary critic viewed from a historical context. His position can be ascertained from the role he has played as a critic. And as a critic one role towers above the others — his role as a reactionary. As one might have noticed from the preceding two chapters, his major works in literary theory — are all polemic in nature and there is a

good reason for this; Lewis was reacting against certain literary assumptions of his age. Bernard Bergonzi, in his book, Exploding English, calls the assumptions Arnold-Newbolt-Cambridge ideology.¹⁰ The ideology was a continuation of the nineteenth-century optimism of saving civilization by the power of literature. And in this century F.R. Leavis was the chief exponent of this ideology. He feared that the old values were fast vanishing except those that persisted in great literature and those values had to be rediscovered and re-enacted in life through criticism. And as Mathew Arnold had tried to save civilization by poetry in the preceding century, Leavis also tried to save civilization through criticism. But Oxford wanted no part in the new ideology, and one of its most prominent dons who opposed the ideology was C.S. Lewis. His thought on literature which are set out in Rehabilitations, The Personal Heresy, and An Experiment in Criticism, are all in one way or other, antithetical to the conception that literature can save civilization. In Rehabilitations, in contrast to Scrutiny's claim that "there is an absolute distinction between 'good' books, which are literature, and 'bad' ones which were a threat to civilization". Lewis contends that books can be divided into two categories — high brows and low brows. High brows are meant for instruction, preaching, consoling, entertainment and making money and low brow books are

literature meant for providing pleasure and satisfaction. But it is possible that high brow books of one age can become low brow books of another age, and therefore there can be no absolute distinction between the two. In The Personal Heresy, Lewis takes a formalistic stand rather than a moral one. In An Experiment in Criticism he denies that literature is to be valued (a) for telling us truths about life, and (b) as an aid to culture. For Lewis the value of literature is aesthetics and not moral and therefore reading literature is an end in itself rather than a means to something else. Thus the main thrust of Lewis' theoretical writings is a critique of the Cambridge ideology with its cultural underpinnings.

Now this ideology is increasingly under attack and Lewis' views are gaining interest. To quote Bergonzi, "Leavism is now, I believe, part of history, it achieved a great deal but saving civilization by the power of literary criticism was beyond it ... In the present cultural context, it is Lewis' arguments and assumptions that seem to me more challenging, and to have something to contribute to contemporary debates notwithstanding its antique accent and idiom."¹¹

If that is Lewis' position at present, one may wonder how he will fare with posterity. This is a difficult question to answer. But no doubt one can have an optimistic expectation of his continued influence. Human nature does not

change: every generation tends to go from one extreme to another. This can happen in literature as well as in life. It leads to confusion, bewilderment and loss of a sense of direction. But without a sense of direction no progress is possible in any human endeavour; and the solution lies in regaining one's balance and perspective. We believe Lewis has done just that in literary criticism for the present age by rectifying excesses in criticism by demolishing ephemeral assumptions and by reasserting the importance of aestheticism in literary criticism. This achievement is of significance not only to us but to posterity as well. So when posterity reads his books — some of which have become classics — no doubt they will see him as a critic who was not a slave to the spirit of the times but one who was bold and noble in spirit whose ideas restored sanity again in twentieth century literary criticism.