

***The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature***

C. S. Lewis

Canto Classics Reprint Edition

Cambridge University Press, 2012

232 pages, \$19.99 paper

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In *Beowulf*, near the mathematical center of the poem, the aged king Hrothgar offers a lecture to the eponymous hero who has just slain the Grendelkin. In “Hrothgar’s Sermon,” as it has come to be known, the king cautions the young hero against pride, warning that physical strength will not last forever. Hrothgar explains that he too was once a powerful young hero, only to become an aged man incapable of protecting his own people. The poem then fast-forwards a hundred half-years, placing Beowulf in the position of Hrothgar, prompting the reader to speculate on whether Beowulf has heeded the lessons of that man who, in Seamus Heaney’s translation, had “wintered into wisdom.”

I begin this consideration of C. S. Lewis’ *The Discarded Image* with Hrothgar’s Sermon because the Beowulf-poet posits the period of fifty years as a time to reflect on the imparting of wisdom and lessons learned. As Lewis’ book, published posthumously in 1964 by Cambridge University Press, turns fifty, it is fitting to reappraise the work and consider to what extent it too has wintered into wisdom, and to what extent readers have grown in wisdom because of it.

A description of the book itself is best summed up by its subtitle: *An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. Based on a series of Oxford lectures, the book is a *vade mecum*—a handbook designed to equip the reader on the front end with some basic understanding of how the universe was perceived during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The purpose of *The Discarded Image*, then, is to liberate the reader of Dante or Chaucer or Spenser or Shakespeare from having to consult footnotes at every turn, enabling greater reading comprehension and pleasure. The title refers to an image of the universe that contemporary culture no longer comprehends. For most of the book, however, Lewis does not use the term image

to refer to what might be called the “medieval worldview”; rather, he prefers the term “The Model.” After referencing Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as works which best reflect the medieval mind’s capacity to codify phenomena, Lewis writes of a third work: “This is the medieval synthesis itself, the whole organization of their theology, science, and history in a single, complex, harmonious mental Model of the Universe. The building of this Model is conditioned by two factors I have already mentioned: the essentially bookish character of their culture, and their intense love of system” (11).

The book consists of eight brief chapters. The first two chapters articulate The Model—what it was, how it was constructed, who subscribed to it, and to what degree. These are followed by two more chapters which outline the basic ideas of certain classical and medieval writers who were very influential but might not be widely known today (e.g., not Vergil and Ovid, but Claudian and Macrobius). Lewis then turns his attention from the architects of The Model to its architecture and occupants: “The Heavens,” “The Longævi” (beings such as faeries who were believed to live long lives), and “Earth and Her Inhabitants.” His final chapter outlines “The Influence of the Model,” examining recurrent medieval and Renaissance literary preoccupations such as cataloging, amplification, didacticism, and love of detail.

Within these chapters are several subheadings, and any attempt to simplify *The Discarded Image* does a disservice to the astonishing breadth which belies its 232 pages. In an early review of the book, Edward Grant surveyed its contents and wrote, “There is, of course, much else, and Lewis discusses some of it...” (Isis 56.1, Spring 1965: 100). This description hints at the generous and wide-ranging nature of *The Discarded Image*. I suppose one could get this kind of information today from a host of sources—most likely Wikipedia— but it would take a while, and it would ultimately be of uneven reliability. In Lewis’ book, the essential information has been gathered in one place and sifted for relevance, and by a scholar of considerable *auctoritas*. Indeed, Lewis’ erudition is impressive but never off-putting. It is the kind of erudition that inspires readers

to higher things. When Lewis drops in an untranslated (even untransliterated) Greek phrase, it does not intimidate or frustrate you because it is clear by context. It does, however, make you want to learn Greek. When Lewis naturally and organically alludes to works of both major and minor medieval authors, it inspires you to read as widely as he has. And Lewis' scholarly prose is so engaging that reading him is like listening to him over a ploughman's lunch at the Eagle and Child. Thus *The Discarded Image* can be read cover to cover with some pleasure, but it can also be "dipped into" as required. Reading Shakespeare and need a primer on the physiological doctrine of the humours and their cosmological origins? Review Chapter 7. Reading Milton and wish to understand his angelology? Consult Lewis' outline of Pseudo-Dionysius' nine-fold hierarchy of angels. Mounting a defense of the Liberal Arts and require a historical approach to their role in the university? That's in chapter 7, too.

It is clear that *The Discarded Image* still holds great value for students. But what of its place among medieval and Renaissance scholars? It's fair to say that totalizing approaches to the history of ideas have fallen out of scholarly favor. Literary criticism of the past twenty-five years has sought to reclaim marginalized voices and perspectives which deviate from the dominant discourse, and which may not fit neatly into any systematic model. Ideological monoliths, so the argument goes, do not represent the rich variety of medieval thought. To put it another way, for every Dante neatly ordering his universe and "preserving the appearances" of things in accordance with classical and biblical *auctores*, there is a Margery Kempe weeping in the back of the church, disrupting comfortable hierarchies, and generally kicking against the pricks. Chained libraries may have a hard time accounting for her, though I suspect that Lewis would insist that even Margery Kempe subscribed to many aspects of the model. Suffice it to say that just as Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture with its Great Chain of Being may still be promulgated in the undergraduate Shakespeare classroom, discussions in graduate seminars would likely privilege New Historicist perspectives designed to reveal heterogeneity in

thought, represented by a plurality of voices drawn from a host of resources, both canonical and noncanonical: letters, broadside ballads, medallions, religious tracts, diaries, medical treatises, etc. Thus *The Discarded Image*, which sets out to present a medieval and Renaissance world picture, might be viewed as unduly reductive in the present study of literature.

I first encountered the book as recommended reading for my sophomore-level British literature survey course at Vanderbilt, taught by the Spenser scholar Harold L. Weatherby, Jr.—a man whose erudition was both as intimidating and inspiring to me as was Lewis'. The work made a profound impression on me as a student, and as I reread it as a professor some quarter century later, I am struck by how many of my classroom bromides come from it. Whenever I teach Dante's *Paradiso*, structured as it is by its concentric spheres of light, I typically assign Lewis' Chapter 5, "The Heavens," on the pre-Copernican universe controlled by planetary spheres, each with its own operant divinity. In my classical antiquity course I regularly teach the second-century author Apuleius—an author I was first introduced to in Chapter 3 of *The Discarded Image*. And my lectures on Chaucer's pilgrims bear the heavy thumbprint of C. S. Lewis. I do not think I am alone in being deeply indebted to this book. I suspect that it has become part of the teaching and research DNA of many a medievalist and Renaissance specialist, perhaps in ways they are not fully aware of.

One shaping legacy of *The Discarded Image* is its insistence that readers engage the Middle Ages and Renaissance on their own terms. There is a pernicious tendency for modern thinkers to conceive of medieval men and women as infantile versions of themselves—naïve caricatures from illuminated manuscripts lacking perspective, roaming a flat earth looking for witches to dunk. Lewis' work, which refuses to condescend, is a necessary antidote to such dangerous misapprehension.

In an epilogue, C. S. Lewis acknowledges one inconvenient detail about The Model: "[I]t was not true" (216). The gradual discarding of the medieval image, however, was not merely due to changes wrought by scientific advancement. While Lewis never

explicitly identifies the source of its demise, he argues that in the centuries after the Renaissance a broad shift occurred in the European imagination—a shift which favored an evolutionary vision of human experience rather than a devolutionary vision. Put another way, medieval and Renaissance thinkers saw perfection at the origin of things, to be superseded by gradual decay. By the time of the Romantics, however, a different view was gaining currency. Human-kind could be, if not perfected, at least improved, and time would bring bright evolutionary possibilities in a host of disciplines, not inevitable degeneration. Elsewhere Lewis writes, “In modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in [The Medieval Model], he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light” (74-5). It is this shifting mentality, Lewis argues, that accounts for why The Model becomes discarded. And while Lewis acknowledges real affection for The Model, he cautions against a regressive fetishization of it:

I hope no one will think that I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model. I am only suggesting considerations that may induce us to regard all Models in the right way, respecting each and idolizing none...No Model is a catalogue of ultimate realities, and none is a mere fantasy. Each is a serious attempt to get in all the phenomena known at a given period, and each succeeds in getting in a great many (222).

*The Discarded Image*, then, calls to us from across a gulf of fifty years, reminding us not to be so overconfident to believe that current structures of perception hold absolute truth; even the strength of our present vision will pass away.

In *Beowulf*, fifty years after Hrothgar’s sermon, the aged Beowulf insists on fighting the fire-drake single-handedly. The faithful retainer Wiglaf ignores the old king’s wishes and helps him dispatch the dragon, but not before it has inflicted Beowulf’s death-blow. The hero then commands Wiglaf to fetch some of the dragon’s treasure hoard so that he might gaze upon it in his last moments: “þæt ic ðy seft mæge / æfter maððumwelan · min alætan

/ lif ond leodscipe, · þone ic longe heold” (“so that I, because of the treasure-wealth, may more softly leave my life and the nation which I long held”) (ll. 2750b-2751). However, the lordless Geats know that without Beowulf they are a race doomed to destruction at the hands of neighboring Germanic tribes. They bury the gold in the ground with him, “þær hit nu gen lifað / eldum swa unnyt · swa hit æror wæs” (“where it now dwells, as useless to men as it ever was” (ll. 3167b-3168). The strong implication at the end of the poem is that Hrothgar’s Sermon, uttered fifty years earlier, went unheeded by the courageous but short-sighted warrior king. At fifty, C. S. Lewis’ *The Discarded Image* can be seen as both sermon and treasure, and like both, its true value may be determined by our resolve to use it wisely. It remains as instructive and finely crafted as the medieval universe which Lewis gazed upon with wonder and with love.

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