

The Personal Heresy: Scholars Can Be Gentlemen

An exchange between C.S. Lewis & E.M.W. Tillyard

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WE LOVE the imaginative tales of Narnia, the straightforward theology and clear use of analogy in Mere Christianity, the provocative combination of philosophy and theology in The Problem of Pain or Miracles, and the upside down imagination of The Screwtape Letters, but few of us, whether we have training in English language and literature or not, are able to appreciate the somewhat technical arguments of a book like English Literature in the Sixteenth Century or The Personal Heresy.

The Personal Heresy is a book that I have recently become familiar with of necessity. Reprinting this long out of print book has caused me to read the book six times this year for the purpose of proofreading, editing, and in preparation for this article. I must admit, that in the process of having my nose rubbed in its argumentation, I have learned a few things about Lewis that I would never have learned without that nasal chafing. So I pass them on to you here.

The book was first published in 1939, and the events leading up to that publication will be rehearsed shortly. Oxford University Press was the original publisher, and it also published a reprint in 1965. But since that time, the book has been out of print . . . until now. I began two years ago to secure copyright permission for both the Lewis and the Tillyard halves of the book. The Lewis permission was easy. Just locating the copyright holder for the Tillyard half was quite difficult, however. After some unsuccessful efforts, I contacted Jesus College, Cambridge, which is the College at Cambridge University where Tillyard taught English between 1926 and 1954. You can read a little more biographical information about Tillyard on page 131 of the 2008 reprint edition. I first wrote to Jesus College on July 31, 2006 and received my first response six weeks later, on September 15 of that same year. These things take time. Stephen Heath, Professor of English and French Literature and Culture at Jesus College at first thought that Jesus College held the copyright. They did not, but he was able to discover who did. It was the daughter of Tillyard, a woman who lives in Reading, England. That information got things moving, Professor Heath informed me that she was agreeable to a reprint, and the project finally got underway. The August 7 release of the reprint edition by Concordia University Press culminated that two-year process.

A Summary of Chapter I, The Personal Heresy in Criticism, by C.S. Lewis

Some publishers are claiming to be able to offer insights into ‘young soldier poets’ that even those soldiers poets do not have. It is as though the publisher were saying, ‘You might have read their poetry, but we know what they were really saying. We can read between the lines.’ Poetry is increasingly believed to be the ‘expression of personality’ rather than writing on a topic, and that is the personal heresy. Lewis disagrees, stating that poetry is not a representation of a personality. This tendency appears not only in poetry, Lewis writes, but also in advertising and in reputable criticism. Tillyard’s book *Milton* is the prime example of this, as are Hugh Kingsmill’s book on Matthew Arnold, some of T. S. Eliot’s writing, and perhaps even H.W. Garrod’s book on Wordsworth. Tillyard wrote in his book *Milton* that such matters as style ‘have concerned the critics far more than what the poem is really about, the true state of Milton’s mind when he wrote it.’

As an example of what poetry is about, Lewis cites a poem, part of William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. There is a personality in a poem, says Lewis, but we don’t know whose. We meet the poet ‘only in a strained and ambiguous sense’. Especially in drama we meet the poet’s creation rather than the poet. In order to write poetry, the poet must use words to suggest what is public, common, impersonal, and objective. That is why we can understand his poetry. That is also why the poetry can’t be about the poet’s personality, because the personality of a poet we have not met is private. Poetry annihilates personality rather than asserts it, because it draws on the common experience of all people. And, for Lewis, personality is one’s ‘daily temper and habitual self’. The poet arranges the words, but the experience is a common one. Then Lewis uses three analogies to illustrate his point: the poet is ‘not a spectacle but a pair of spectacles’, the poet is like a scout who brings a report to the commander in a time of war, and the poet is window through which we attend to the landscape. The position of a window is analogous to the personality of the poet; we see through both of them, in one instance the outdoors and in the other instance the subject of the poem. In short, Lewis argues for an objective, or impersonal, point of view, that poetry is about something out there, while Tillyard argues for a subjective, or personal, point of view, that poetry is about something inside the poet.

Lewis ends the chapter by arguing that the personal heresy comes from an inability of most modern people to decide between a materialist and a spiritual theory of the universe. Either view would end the personal heresy. If the universe has a god behind it, then He speaks through the poet and it’s not the poet only who speaks. If there is no god, there is no Muse who inspires the poet, and so there is nothing inside the head of the poet except a fortuitous concourse of atoms.

Chapter II, Rejoinder, by E.M.W. Tillyard

Tillyard begins his Rejoinder in chapter two by saying that he thinks the personal heresy is not a sign of modernity, but a bit shop-soiled. It's been around a while, and Lewis later concedes the point. He then proceeds to challenge Lewis's definition of personality, which seems to include trivial details about the author rather than the author's mental pattern, his habitual and normal self, the big picture if you will, but not his 'practical and everyday personality'. Personality in poetry includes such things as style and rhythm. We can agree with Tillyard to an extent, and Lewis himself does. He says that he does not deny the difference between the poetry of Shakespeare and that of Racine. After all, many of us recognize the musical style of J. S. Bach as distinct from most other composers, and we know the Beach Boys when we hear them. The same is true of certain ethnic foods, for no one would consider bratwurst and sauerkraut to be Chinese food or tacos to be an example of Thai cuisine. A certain cook's style might be seen in his preference for some foods, his use of parsley to decorate a plate, a preference for certain side dishes or colors, or other things, as Lewis and Tillyard would both probably agree, but Lewis would insist that the dinner is still primarily about the good food that satisfies the palate and the stomach of the eater rather than being about the cook's personality, even though that is present. In a hungry moment, I believe that Tillyard would also.

Tillyard says there is an analogy between the mental pattern in a poet's life and that mental pattern expressed in his art, but Lewis distinguishes between life and art. Tillyard agrees with Lewis that we shouldn't mix biography and criticism by allowing our knowledge of the author's life to take shortcuts and make hasty conclusions because we think we know the author. But Lewis is too concerned about things, writes Tillyard, and too little concerned with people.

Another thing that Tillyard begins to do in this chapter is to suggest that the poet is a cut above the average person, for example, by writing about 'the superior penetration of poetic genius'; later he will call Wordsworth 'a superior person' and Milton one 'who is truly virtuous.' He will say that Milton 'has inhabited heavens and hells unbearable by the ordinary man' and that Shakespeare 'reached a sanity richer than the normal'. We will see Lewis challenging that assumption, stating that Milton and Wordsworth are simply great men who happen to be poets rather than great poets who are superior people.

Chapter III, Open Letter to Dr Tillyard, by C.S. Lewis

Against Tillyard's dismissal of personal details, Lewis says that trivialities often give one the essence of a personality, such as the fatness of Falstaff in Shakespeare's play. But the greater question still remains—even if personality is more of a mental pattern, what do we see through those mental patterns that Tillyard insists on as the center of

personality? He wonders if Tillyard has not made an unconscious pun by arguing that individuality in artistic work is done by an individual, which suggests a single personality.

Lewis says that we don't owe the personality an aesthetic response; we owe him love. The latter is in the realm of ethics and is not within the purview of imaginative literature and its appropriate response. We love and serve our neighbor, but we appreciate our artists.

Lewis offers three dilemmas, or three ways of offending against personality: first, that encounter with a real personality forces us out of the world of poetry, second, that it is uncivil to ignore what a person says and think instead of the person, and third, that poetry is in danger of becoming Poetolatry, that is, the worship of poetry.

Part of Lewis's second dilemma is that in social life, it is not civil to think about the person who addresses us in conversation instead of thinking about what he says. I would agree, since *ad hominem* arguments are often the typical response to the person whose position we cannot refute. 'Well, you only say that because you're a man (or a woman).' Or, 'You're one to talk about relationships; you can't even get along with your next door neighbor.' Statements like that don't address the issue, Lewis says; they obscure it. Or, as Jay Budziszewski says, 'Sir, I understand the insult, but what is the argument?'

When Lewis warns against what he calls Poetolatry, i.e. the idolatry of poetry, he mentions Matthew Arnold who once said that poetry would replace religion. Using alliteration, Lewis laments 'this collapse from criticism into cult'. The cult of poetry, Lewis says, is taking on two religious characteristics: the worship of saints (such as biographies of Keats and Lawrence) and traffic in relics. Appreciation is the appropriate response to good poetry, not worship. We can't deify 'Christ, Shakespeare, and Keats' because of their heterogeneity. We can obey Christ, but not Shakespeare or Keats! The dead poet is not sentient! It won't do any good to serve a dead poet unless you believe in praying for the dead. Our living neighbor is the true object of our loving service. 'It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption.'³ Lewis was constantly on the watch for possible gods and goddesses that became a corruption, and poetry was a candidate for that status.

Chapter IV, No Title, by E.M.W. Tillyard

Early in this chapter, Tillyard agrees with Lewis that 'Poetry . . . must give the green to the tree and not to our eyes', and he concedes Lewis's position as a possible one, i.e. that in Robert Herrick's poem about Julia the issue is Julia herself, not the fact of the poet's awakening towards Julia. But Tillyard insists that the poet's state of mind when he writes is still an issue. Tillyard sees continuity between the life of the artist and the

products of the artist's creativity, while Lewis sees discontinuity between them. Tillyard agrees that one can inappropriately mix life and art. I think that each one sees his own position better than the other person's position and that the two of them are not that far apart. When Tillyard visits a piece of Romanesque architecture, he thinks he shares something with the architect, and he is probably right. But Lewis would suggest that 98% of what one sees is the product of the architect and only 2% comes from the architect's personality, while Tillyard would probably put that 2% figure at 10% or even higher, if I may be so bold as to give a quantitative measurement to their respective positions. In the last chapter, Tillyard says 'that personality accounts for only a part' of poetry. He probably meant 'a small part.'

Tillyard also agrees with Lewis that at times the little things matter a great deal for what they say about the writer's personality, but only if those little things are part of the essence of the individual's personality. On this point, they agree. They have been talking past one another. Now they are on the same page.

Near the end of the chapter, Tillyard says, 'Poetry is more complex than scouting...,' harking back to an illustration in Lewis's first chapter. This is an elitist view that has no conception of what is involved in scouting, primarily because Tillyard knows poetry but does not know the outdoors, the advance scout in a military or geographical expedition, or the intricacies of a piece of terrain. But I realize that I am treading on territory that is outside my expertise, since I know neither poetry nor scouting very well. Still, Lewis's championing of the common person, the ordinary person who is really not ordinary, causes me to agree with Lewis on this point far more than Tillyard.

At the end of the chapter, Tillyard says that, although personality counts for little in a poet like Tennyson, personality has two functions in literature — to allow the reader to share with the author and to serve as an example to the reader. He wonders if he and Lewis can resolve their dispute into a matter of terminology, especially a different definition of the word 'personality.'

Chapter V, No Title, by C.S. Lewis

Early in chapter five, Lewis states a problem he has with the disparagement of common things and common men by Poetolaters (and he implies that Tillyard has slipped into this category). This point continues the debate over poetry and poets, i.e. whether the poet is a cut above or not. Lewis's own position was greatly influenced by his friend Arthur Greeves, who taught him to enjoy common things, and Lewis learned to see that these common things explain a want or longing or desire that has been 'prepared from all eternity'.

Lewis agrees with Tillyard on two points. First, Lewis agrees that the poet's personality can serve as an example to the reader, but he says that it's not the normal function of poetry or the poet any more than the function of a volume of Shakespeare is

to support a rickety table that has one leg shorter than another, although it could do so in a pinch. He also agrees on the sharing function of the poet's personality, which is Lewis's view exactly. We share the poet's consciousness and look with his eyes, not in reciprocity (as in mutual love when the lovers look at each other) but in sympathy or 'feeling together' (when the poet and the reader of poetry both look at the same thing).

We are not sharing the personality of the poet. No, we share what is common to the poet and to us. We share his common, human experience, not his personality. Lewis especially likes poets giving him 'a new and nameless sensation,' which he also sees in the prose of George MacDonald, and this suggests that it is not unique to poetry.

Lewis then implies that the personal heresy started when the romantic critics, such as William Wordsworth, diverted our attention away from the fruitful question, 'What kind of composition is a poem?' to the barren question, 'What kind of man is a poet?'

Next, Lewis offers his own theory of poetry, starting with definitions of poetic language, poetry, and poem. He defines poetry as the skill of concrete utterance. Poetry is 'a skill or trained habit of using all the extra-logical elements of language—rhythm, vowel-music, onomatopoeia, associations, and what not—to convey the concrete reality of experience'. He defines a poem as 'a composition which communicates more of the concrete and qualitative than our usual utterances do'. But, he says, sometimes poets do this communicating worse than non-poets.

What is the value of poetry? If poetry is to be understood by the mass of readers, it requires two things.

1. That the poetry be interesting and entertaining (the pleasure factor).
2. That the poetry have 'a desirable permanent effect' on us (like food, which should be both nourishing and palatable) (the profit factor).

Then Lewis writes about reviewers, stating that the only essential qualifications for criticism are 'general wisdom and health of mind'. He deplores those reviewers who use words such as 'bogus' and 'sham' to criticize writing because they have 'not yet discovered what is wrong' with a piece of writing rather than using the pleasure factor and the profit factor as a guide.

Perhaps you have noticed that Lewis's tendency in this chapter has been 'to lower the status of the poet as poet', to return the poet to humility. There are no ordinary people, but by this Lewis means that everyone is on the same plane, participating in the image of God as God's children, but no one category of people is above the rest, even though there are many differences between people.

Finally, Lewis closes this carefully reasoned chapter with this imaginative section, which explains why we sometimes appreciate poetry that is poorly done:

The Ugly Duckling has stuck too deep in our minds, and we are afraid to condemn any abortion lest it should prove in the end to be a swan. It is high time to remember another story in Hans Andersen which teaches a lesson at least equally important. It is called The Emperor's New Clothes.

**Chapter VI, No Title,
by E.M.W. Tillyard**

Tillyard agrees that the function of the poet serving as an example is not inherent in the poet's nature, and he defends his view that poets are separate from the man on the street and he argues that they are a cut above. He thinks that the feelings of poets 'are much more interesting' and that they excel in the matter of courage.

But the key theme of this chapter is what poetry is about. Since Lewis did not fully answer that question, Tillyard offers his own theory of poetry. What is poetry about?

First, poetry is partially about rendering personality or a mental pattern as an author's object or end, but also about much more. Second, 'poetry is concerned with large general states of mind', universal ideas like anger and hatred. Third, poetry is about areas of feeling, such as new sensations, enrichments of experience (as Lewis stated). Fourth, poetry is about something very new. A footnote by Lewis agrees. Fifth, poetry is about something very old, such as the experience of rebirth.

All of these categories, states Tillyard, are universal to man and therefore accessible to everyone. So, in a sense, Tillyard agrees with Lewis's plea for the Common Reader and for poetry to be seen as something that anyone can appreciate, although he still thinks the poet a higher person than the rest. Winsomely and imaginatively, Tillyard concludes his last chapter with this sentence about Lewis: 'He is, indeed, the best kind of opponent, good to agree with when one can, and for an enemy as courteous as he is honest and uncompromising, the kind of opponent with whom I should gladly exchange armor after a parley, even if I cannot move my tent to the ground where his own is pitched'. By the way, there is a five-page Note that Lewis appends to the end where he deals with the question, 'Does poetry carry a creative or a recording function?' And he concludes that it does both.

**A History of
The Personal Heresy**

In 1924 Lewis addressed the Martlets, an undergraduate Oxford literary society to which he belonged, arguing that the personal life of author James Stephens, a popular Irish author, had little to do with understanding his works. In 1930 Lewis addressed the Martlets, this time as an Oxford don, developing his thinking more fully. In that same year, Tillyard published his major work on John Milton, in which he wrote, 'All poetry is about the poet's state of mind.' To understand *Paradise Lost* correctly, he stated, one must read it as an 'expression of Milton's personality.' On June 14, 1932, Lewis wrote to his brother Warren about the virtues of Thackeray vs. Trollope after having just finished rereading Thackeray's *Pendennis*. While he thought of Thackeray as a genius, he also thought that Trollope wrote the better books, books that don't knock you down with their power and depth. He stated, 'What I don't care two pence about is the sense (apparently dear to so many) of being in the hands of 'a great man'—you know; his

dazzling personality, his lightning energy, the strange force of his mind—and all that. So that I quite definitely prefer Trollope—or rather this rereading of *Pendennis* confirms my long standing preference.’ Notice Lewis’s preference for the more ordinary Trollope over the genius of Thackeray.

The first three essays of *The Personal Heresy* were originally published in the journal *Essays and Studies*, a periodical of the English Association, in 1934, 1935, and 1936. The first essay was written as a challenge, and it was taken up by Tillyard, who wrote the response that became chapter two of *The Personal Heresy*. The exchange continued from there. After the first three essays were complete, three additional untitled essays were added, along with a concluding note by Lewis and a Preface by both authors. Together they comprise *The Personal Heresy*.

The controversy was concluded with a live debate at Magdalen College, Oxford, on Feb. 7, 1939. Of this debate, former student of Lewis John Lawlor wrote, ‘There was a memorable occasion when in the Hall at Magdalen Dr Tillyard met him to round off in debate the controversy begun with the publication of Lewis’s indictment of ‘*The Personal Heresy*.’ I am afraid there was no debate. Lewis made rings round Tillyard; in, out, up, down, around back again—like some piratical Plymouth bark against a high-built galleon of Spain.’

Some of Lewis’s letters provide us with additional perspective on this controversy, showing Lewis to be aware of the potential for a negative view of him, but also showing Lewis to be congenial towards Tillyard himself. Lewis seems to discuss his first essay in a letter of April 5, 1935, to Paul Elmer More, stating that he might be pushing Mr. More if he sent him a copy of his essay. In a letter to Joan Bennett, February 1937, Lewis jokingly refers to this controversy by calling himself a ‘professional controversialist and itinerant prize-fighter.’⁸ Interestingly, there seemed to be no acrimony between the two men, for Lewis wrote about joining Tillyard in contributing chapters for a *Festschrift* to Sir Herbert Grierson,⁹ and on Jan. 25, 1938, Lewis wrote to Frank P. Wilson about meeting Tillyard in London and lunching together there. There is evidence that, shortly after the publication of *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis considered the heresy over. On July 23, 1939, about two months after the publication of the book, Lewis wrote to Owen Barfield, ‘I quite agree that the *Personal Heresy* is not important—now! But it was rapidly becoming so. I was just in the nick of time . . .’ But if the personal heresy had disappeared by that time, I’m afraid that it has come back in our day which has drunk so deeply of ‘the poison of subjectivism.’

On Sept. 12, 1940, Jack wrote to Eliza Marian Butler, a University of Manchester professor at the time, stating that the kernel of *The Personal Heresy* was ‘Don’t attribute superhuman qualities to poetry unless you really believe in a superhuman subject to support them.’ So there is a Christian sub-text to Lewis’s position. Poetry can only do great things if there is a great God.

Lewis’s position in *The Personal Heresy* reflects his conviction that objective values are resident in people, places, events, and things, rejecting the relativistic mindset of that age and subsequent ages. It shares with *The Abolition of Man* (1943) a concern for the

undermining of objective value. That is why, throughout *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis consistently defends the position that literature is about the objects or people or events out there and not about thoughts and feelings inside. Lewis's position was further developed in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) and reached its culmination in his 1961 work, *An Experiment in Criticism*. In that work Lewis wrote, 'Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.'

I believe that Lewis has here anticipated the modern approach to literature known as Reader Response as well as the post-modern deconstruction movement, where a text means not what it means, but whatever meaning the reader ascribes to it. Surely our way of life cannot help but be harmed when the message of performance-enhancing drugs or marijuana use becomes 'Do it, if you can get away with it' and the message of an adulterous relationship becomes 'Do it, if you feel like it' and the message of laziness and inactivity becomes 'Do it, if you can get someone else to pay your way.'

I think that this book also teaches us that good teaching is about two things in particular: the subject matter of the course of study (Lewis's primary concern) and the passion resident in the personality of the teacher (Tillyard's primary concern). When English faculty teach writing, they always recommend that students find for their topic something they care about, something about which they have a passion. That's why Lewis himself wrote to a schoolgirl in America, 'Write about what really interests you, whether it is real things or imaginary things, and nothing else.'

When the author engages with the subject matter, truly engages, we usually have good teaching. We need a passion for our subject in order to give power to our teaching, but we also need something to talk about. If we have only content and no passion, we will bore people. If we have only passion or personality and no content, we have nothing to say. We need both, and Tillyard and Lewis would agree on that point, although they would probably disagree on the proportion.

Another lesson from *The Personal Heresy* is for the pride of the poet, and everyone else's pride, to be held in check, but, correspondingly, to be able to say with Ethel Waters, 'God don't make no junk.' Lewis both challenges the elitism of some poets and elevates the cause of the common man.

One other note: In his Introduction, Bruce Edwards says that reading this book is like taking a tutorial with Lewis. If you ever wished you could have had Lewis for a teacher, you can . . . by reading this book.

Scholars Can Be Gentlemen

Another thing about the book's significance is its tone. Very intriguing to me as I read this book was the fact that this was a friendly controversy! After all, the book is subtitled 'A Controversy.' In the original Preface, we read that the authors, both Lewis and Tillyard, thought that 'a revival of the art of Controversy would be a good thing.' They stated that this style was preferable to one of backbiting and abuse. As you read the book, you will note the kind and generous statements that both Lewis and Tillyard make towards one another. This mirrors a similar disagreement that happened later between Eugene Vinaver and Lewis over the reputation of Thomas Malory, the author of some of the major Arthurian romances. In describing their exchange of views, Diana Glyer states of Lewis, 'Though he disagrees with Vinaver on a number of points, and often strenuously, he gives Vinaver great credit and sincere praise for his important work. Vinaver's response is equally courteous.'

For example, the word 'Sir' appears twelve times in Lewis's chapters. One other unknown statistic: the word 'agree' appears fifty-seven times in the book in its various forms. In Chapter 2, Tillyard compliments Lewis with phrases such as 'his brilliant essay' and 'my warm tribute to his essay's excellence.' And he says that he agrees with much of what Lewis writes. In Chapter 3, Lewis says that it is good to have 'rational opposition' as in Tillyard. Lewis blames himself for the fact that Tillyard thinks him little concerned about people and mostly concerned about things. Lewis states of part of his own writing, 'the passage is culpably obscure,' showing his gentlemanly response, and he says that he is indeed concerned about people, since people are the main thing in literature. Lewis's graciousness also appears in a phrase that refers to Tillyard as 'an older and a better soldier'. Then he signs off with 'the greatest respect'.

In Chapter 4, Tillyard shows a graciousness to Lewis, as did Lewis to him, writing of 'so high a regard' for Lewis and 'the formidable battery of Mr. Lewis's dialectic'. In Chapter, Tillyard uses many other conciliatory words such as 'pleasure,' 'admirable,' 'best,' 'courteous,' and 'honest'. There are many other indications of the kindness each writer has towards the other, but I won't go into every example.

Three more points on gentlemanliness. Earlier I mentioned the fact that Lewis and Tillyard both contributed to the same Festschrift, put together in honor of Sir Herbert Grierson, and that they enjoyed lunch together in London in January 1938. Bitter enemies don't do that sort of thing!

The other point has to do with Eustace Scrubb, the cousin of the four Pevensie children in *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'* and *The Silver Chair*. Was Tillyard the model for Eustace Scrubb? After all, Tillyard's first name was Eustace. He was Eustace Mandeville Wetenhall Tillyard. My guess is 'no,' a firm 'no'. For two reasons. First, Lewis was too kind and generous to make fun of another person's name, especially when your middle name is 'Staples.' With a last name like Heck, I think I understand. Scholars can be gentlemen. And, second, Eustace was chosen as a name for that character because of the sound of the name, making possible the jokes about 'useless' and 'used to it' in the presence of the now aged and hard of hearing Trumpkin. Lewis was known for writing

not only for the eye, but also for the ear. Walter Hooper has told us about how Lewis used to speak the words he was writing as he wrote them.