

21h.931 Seminar in Historical Methods
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The Discarded Image

After having read C.S.Lewis' handy little book, I kept struggling to find a word with which to describe it. After some rumination, *Literature Review* came to mind. Although this term hardly does much justice to Lewis' attempts to lay out a Model of Medieval cosmology, thought and belief, I think it does have some applicability, especially in Chapters 3 and 4, where Lewis extensively reviews the evidence.

For quite some time, while I was reading the book, I was actually a bit lost as to what Lewis was writing about. In the first two chapters, he--in typical Oxford Don Style--rambles on about the medieval conscience, savagery, religion, and the omnipresent *Model*, but unfortunately he is never very explicit about what this mysterious model actually *is*. What is it that he seeks model? Or said in another way, what Model is he seeking to establish? Only upon reading Chapters 3 and 4, which examines the evidence from the classical and seminal period, did I slowly grasp his intentions. However, the examination of his evidence was highly abstract and philosophical, and I was thankful for his more rudimentary, and sometimes highly entertaining, description of the actual components of the model in Chapters 5 through 8.

What really allowed me to appreciate the Discarded Image however, and encouraged me not to discard it from my mind immediately upon having read it, was Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*. In this book, which is the precursor to the epic ring trilogy, Tolkien sets out to describe the history of Middle Earth, beginning from its very creation. In fact what he is really doing is conceiving a myth, a model of cosmology and belief for Middle Earth, precisely what Lewis does in a more directly scholarly fashion in *The Discarded Image*. An omniscient being is imagined, from it derive the lesser 'gods', and there is a classic tale of 'sin and fall.' The creation of the world, and the character and nature of all its inhabitants are

described. Upon first reading *The Silmarillion*, which Tolkien considered to be his most important work, I did not quite understand exactly what he sought to achieve with it. Now, however, my amazement is manifold. While C.S.Lewis simply examines a model which the collective human conscience conceived of in a millennium, Tolkien entirely by himself creates a world of equal complexity in his mind, *creates* the necessary evidence, and models it just as eloquently.

A final word about Lewis' final words needs to be said. Personally I am fan of conclusions, especially those that leave me confused, moved, inspired. I would thus quite like to understand exactly what C.S.Lewis means with those simple words "Having eaten up everything else, he eats himself up too." Is this a reflection of man's voracious desire for knowledge? Is it a poetic eulogy for the death of the Model itself? Is it simply a quip from a jocular fellow intended to puzzle his readership, or should I say dazzle? I feel that this is a concluding paragraph that cannot be discarded, but rather deserves much closer examination.