

C.S. Lewis' *The Discarded Image* and the Liberal Arts

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*Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta, conspiciuntur:
sempiterna quoque ejus virtus, et divinitas: ita ut sint inexcusabiles* (Rom 1:20).

The academic and novelist C.S. Lewis capped off his career with a book written at the very end of his life, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*. In this book, Lewis sets before us the eponymous image, which is the great synthesis of medieval thought which developed organically over time during the Christian Middle Ages, uniting many fields of knowledge into one cohesive model of reality. The book gives us an entryway into the mind of medieval man and shows how different his view of the cosmos was from our own. The eminently Christian worldview which Lewis presents has implications for our own study today.

The book discusses several ancient and early medieval texts which served as sources for this developing model. The author known as Pseudo-Dionysius made an important contribution, giving to the medieval synthesis the recognition of man's place at the bottom of the seemingly infinite hierarchy of personal beings. Between us and God stood a multitude of angels showing forth the divine splendor in their nine choirs. How different this view is from the modern conception of the hierarchy of being. "In modern, that is, in evolutionary, thought," Lewis writes, "Man stands at the top of a stair whose foot is lost in obscurity; in this, he stands at the bottom of a stair whose top is invisible with light."¹ There has been an inversion of how man views the hierarchy of creation and his place in it. Where once he had seen himself as dwarfed by a staggering ladder of being stretching into the heavens, man came to think of himself as the pinnacle of being, above which there was nothing.

In addition to this metaphysical loss, there was a similar deprivation in how modern man came to view the physical reality of the universe. The medieval mind saw in the night sky a vast firmament of carefully ordered motion, intelligently guided. The celestial spheres moved in harmony, humming with a kind of music. When modern man looks up at night, he longer sees "the heavens" but largely empty "space". Lewis writes,

To look out on the night sky with modern eyes is like looking out over a sea that fades away into mist, or looking about one in a trackless forest—trees forever and no horizon. To look up at the towering medieval universe is much more like looking at a great building. The ‘space’ of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of the old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony.²

Dante Alighieri travels up through this firmament in the *Paradiso*, the final part of his *Divine Comedy*, which is perhaps literature’s greatest manifestation of the medieval model. Lewis says Dante on his voyage through the heavens “is like a man being conducted through an immense cathedral” rather than “like one lost in a shoreless sea.” For he was traveling through organized creation, not through “heav’ns wide pathless way” as Milton later envisioned it.³

How we conceive of history also separates us from the tradition of the medieval world. “By studying the past we can learn not only historical but meta-historical or transcendental truth,” according to the Christian view of history.⁴ Even if the Christian and the secularist study the same historical events or the same astronomical phenomena, the Christian is able to see beyond them to the Truth which undergirds the whole of reality and the Grace which makes all that exists to be *creation* rather than a brute fact. Lewis writes of the very different situation in which the learned modern man finds himself compared to his predecessors:

Such a man today often, perhaps usually, feels himself confronted with a reality whose significance he cannot know, or a reality that has no significance; or even a reality such that the very question whether it has a meaning is itself a meaningless question. It is for him, by his own sensibility, to discover a meaning, or, out of his own subjectivity, to give a meaning—or at least a shape—to what in itself had neither. But the Model universe of our ancestors had a built-in significance. And that in two senses; as having ‘significant form’ (it is an admirable design) and as a manifestation of the wisdom and goodness that created it. There was no question

of waking it into beauty or life. ... The achieved perfection was already there. The only difficulty was to make an adequate response.⁵

Here we see the real difference between the medieval/Christian and modern/secular view of reality. In the former, the visible phenomena lead us to discover the Invisible Power which created all things and which holds them in being. This is what St. Paul meant when he wrote that “the invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; His eternal power also, and divinity: so that they are inexcusable.”⁶ In the latter view, the visible is all that exists. We are left to create any deeper meaning for ourselves.

In his epilogue, C.S. Lewis addresses the one major objection to the medieval model, which would argue that the model was not true and that modern mathematics and the models based upon it bring us closer to the real truth of things. But Lewis points out that it was not simply newer, better empirical evidence—especially in the fields of biology and astronomy—which led man to reject the old model. Each model reflects not only the best empirical evidence available in its time, but also the psychological and philosophical presuppositions of the time:

There is no question here of the old Model’s being shattered by the inrush of new phenomena. The truth would seem to be the reverse; that when changes in the human mind produce a sufficient disrelish of the old Model and a sufficient hankering for some new one, phenomena to support that new one will obediently turn up. I do not at all mean that these new phenomena are illusory. Nature has all sorts of phenomena in stock and can suit many different tastes.⁷

The old model was rejected in part because the new offered a more elegant explanation of the visible phenomena. Yet Lewis shows us that we err if we think our current model is either the best that can be produced or neutral regarding transcendent truth. Much is lost if we ignore the old model, which had the advantage of providing a stronger foundation for the search for metaphysical truth, for the study of philosophy and theology than the new can. Rather than “recommending a return to the Medieval Model” *in toto*, Lewis suggests that we should “regard all

Models in the right way, respecting each and idolising none.”⁸ Material progress in science and mathematics does not remove the importance of the former model.

The seven liberal arts themselves held a prominent place in the medieval synthesis, serving as the foundation for man’s study of creation. Many forms of liberal arts education today, however, approach the arts wholly from the perspective of the modern model. Rather than entering into the mind of the medieval Christian, such curricula study the *trivium* and *quadrivium* according to modern methods and with modern content. Instead of finding the “built-in significance”, the meaning that is already there for us in the arts, these newer methods have to counter the weaknesses of the modern model by supplementing it with meaning which is extrinsic to it. Because of this, such modern ‘liberal arts’ education, with the presuppositions and worldview of modernity, cannot provide as organic and robust a foundation for later study of philosophy and theology as can the medieval arts. Such study fails to heed Lewis’ warning against the idolization of the contemporary model and cannot reap the wisdom of our forefathers in faith.

Although Lewis does not use this language himself, the medieval view of the cosmos was *sacramental*, that is to say all of creation was seen as a sign pointing toward its Creator. Hugh of St. Victor and other medieval theologians spoke of nature as a ‘book’ in which can be ‘read’ the vestiges or footprints of the Creator. It is worth noting that the modern view of reality as “a system of causes to be explained by means of hypothesis and verification” has largely been abandoned by postmodernity in favor of the older idea of “conceiving the world as a text to be read by means of an adequate hermeneutic.”⁹ Education in the fields of mathematics and science today, however, seem to cling to the modern view. It is the sacramental view of nature and history which is the indispensable foundation for Catholic intellectual life, and for study in philosophy and theology.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1964): 74-5.

² *Ibid.*, 99.

³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 203-4.

⁶ Romans 1:20.

⁷ Lewis, 221.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995): 104.