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### Milton & Lewis on Education

The connections between Milton and Lewis are many and strong.

Milton was indirectly influential in Lewis' conversion. Along with Spenser, Johnson, Chesterton, and MacDonald, Milton was one of Lewis' favorite writers *before* he became a Christian. He wrote, "[T]hose writers who did not suffer from religion . . . all seemed a little thin; what as boys we called 'tinny.' It wasn't that I didn't like them. They were all . . . entertaining but hardly more. There seemed to be no depth in them. They were too simple" (Surprised by Joy 213). Even Milton haters don't call him "tinny", "thin", shallow, or simple; so it is easy to see why Lewis would like him.

The most obvious evidence of the connection between Lewis and Milton is Lewis' *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), still in print, still useful. As Tolkien redirected the study of *Beowulf* in *The Monster and the Critics* five years earlier, Lewis attempted to remove barricades to appreciation he thought modern critics had erected between the poem and the reader. He not only prepares the reader to read the epic—as any good preface should—he argues for Milton's essential orthodoxy—in the *epic*, anyway—closely associating Milton's thought with Augustine's.

And then there is Lewis' successful sub-creation of prelapsarian worlds in *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. Only one thoroughly steeped in Milton and curious about the possibility of unfallen beings on other worlds could have produced these novels. This curiosity is obvious in books like *Miracles* and *Mere Christianity*.

Witness this passage from *Miracles*: “The universe may be full of happy lives that never needed redemption. It may be full of lives that have been redeemed in modes suitable to their condition, of which we can form no conception. It may be full of lives that have been redeemed in the very same mode as our own. It may be full of things quite other than life in which God is interested though we are not” (*Miracles* 82).

There is a lesser-known connection between the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers—Lewis’ spiritual master, George MacDonald. MacDonald’s intimacy with Milton is seen most clearly in his novels, from which Lewis drew so many of the selections for his 1946 tribute, *George MacDonald: An Anthology*. Lewis systematically mined MacDonald’s novels—and other works—to select the best passages he could for this collection. Annotations in his MacDonald books reveal a selection process whereby he ranked passages and eventually selected only the very best ones, one for each day of the year. (Some of Lewis’ annotated copies of MacDonald’s novels are in the Edwin W. Brown Collection at Taylor University.) Lewis’s debt to MacDonald is well known, but relatively few people read the novels, and they are generously salted with Milton quotes and allusions. MacDonald describes one character reading in a library as “embalmed rather than buried in one of Milton’s prose volumes” (*Malcolm* 213). This description accurately describes MacDonald himself, for in a typical novel, MacDonald quotes or alludes to Milton, roughly, six times or more. And some of the references are relatively obscure, to “Eikonoklastes,” for instance.

Leaving these connections for now, what I would like to shine some light on today are some similarities between Milton’s essay, “Of Education” and Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*. Both works are essays on educational philosophy with an eye to

the kind of adults education should help produce. This alone is remarkable; not all writers bother to formulate their ideas on this subject. But Lewis & Milton were both professional teachers. And of course, each could be justly nominated as the best-educated, best-read English writers of their respective centuries. Both—it hardly needs saying—were deeply patriotic and thus concerned about the future wielders of political power. Milton wrote his essay at the request of Samuel Hartlib in 1644. Hartlib was a social theorist of sorts, tapping the best minds of his time to write opinions on a variety of public issues. Lewis wrote *Abolition* in response to disturbing trends in education, philosophy, and science, the same trends he dramatized in the three space novels. What Lewis feared was that in the future, one generation might acquire the science and the technology to abolish man by taking control of human nature itself—thus eliminating it—through genetics, “pre-natal conditioning”, education, and “propaganda based on a perfect applied psychology” (*Abolition* 59). He was responding to what he called “Innovators” and conditioners. B. F. Skinner is a good example. He defined man as a collection of behaviors. He denied the existence of an inner or spiritual man. He wrote in response to Lewis, “Is man then ‘abolished’? Certainly not as a species or as an individual achiever. It is the autonomous inner man who is abolished, and that is a step forward. . . . A scientific view of man offers exciting possibilities. We have not yet seen what man can make of man” (Skinner 354).

Finally, both Milton and Lewis subscribed to what Lewis calls the doctrine of objective value. Lewis defines it as “. . . the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are” (*Abolition* 18). He explains, “Until quite modern times all teachers and even

all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or incongruous to it—[they] believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could merit, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt” (Abolition 14-15). He asserts that “Natural Law or Traditional Morality” (Abolition 43) are “self evident”, that “There has never been, and never will be a new value in the history of the world” (Abolition 43). Milton is one of those teachers who before “quite modern times” believed in the doctrine of objective value. His famous description of the purpose of education leaves no doubt: “The end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection” (981). If we are now in ruin, there must once have been wholeness; and if we are to aspire to true virtue and the highest perfection, there must really be such things.

Milton’s essay describes an educational program that treats the whole student, specifying his academic subjects, his bodily exercise, even his diet. And since he is concerned with the kind of men these boys will become, he has much to say about character formation. This is where the similarities with Lewis’ book are most striking. They even use similar imagery as they write of character formation. Milton places this invisible component—character—in the breast; Lewis locates it in the chest. Allow me to read some of Milton’s ideas and proposed methods.

He writes, “. . . here the main skill and groundwork will be, to temper them such lectures and explanations on every opportunity, as may lead and draw them in willing obedience, enflam’d with the study of learning, and the admiration of virtue;

stirr'd up with high hopes of living to be brave men, and worthy patriots, dear to God, and famous to all ages. That they may despise and scorn all their childish, and ill taught qualities, to delight in manly, and liberall exercises: which he [a teacher, that is] who hath the Art, and proper eloquence to catch them with, what with mild and effectuall perswasions, and what with the intimation of some fear, if need be, but chiefly by his own example, might in a short space gain them to an incredible diligence and courage: infusing into their young breasts such an ingenuous and noble ardor, as would not fail to make many of them renowned and matchlesse men” (982).

Further, “By this time, years and good generall precepts will have furnisht them more distinctly with that act of reason which *Ethics* call'd *Proairesis*: that they may with some judgement contemplat upon morall good and evill. Then will be requir'd a speciall reinforcement of constant and sound endoctrinating to set them right and firm, instructing them more amply in the knowledge of verture and the hatred of vice: while their young and pliant affections are led through all the morall works of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Laertius, and those Locrian remnants; . . . . that they may not in a dangerous fit of the common-wealth be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such tottering conscience, as many of our great counsellors have lately shewn themselves, but stedfast pillars of the State” (983)

And finally, “The exercise which I commend first, is the exact use of their weapon, to guard and to strike safely with edge, or point; this will keep them healthy, nimble, strong and well in breath, is also the likeliest means to make them grow large and tall, and to inspire them with a gallant and fearlesse courage, which being temper'd with seasonable lectures and precepts to them of true fortitude, and

patience, will turn into a native and heroick valour, and make them hate the cowardice of doing wrong” (985).

Like Milton, Lewis thought education should shape character, that “. . . a good education should build some sentiments while destroying others” (Abolition 14). He cites Aristotle, who said “that the aim of education is to make the pupil like and dislike what he ought” (Abolition 16). Lewis continues: “The little human animal will not at first have the right responses. It must be trained to feel pleasure, liking, disgust, and hatred at those things which really are pleasant, likable, disgusting and hateful” (Abolition 16). Therefore—for those who accept the doctrine of objective value—“. . . the task [of education] is to train in the pupil those responses which are in themselves appropriate. . .” (Abolition 21). In addition to discussing the building of men with “chests”—men with properly-trained character—he explores the relationship of the head and belly to the chest, or, the relationship of the reasoning, spiritual component and the mere appetites to the “trained emotions”, or chest. He insists on reason’s sovereignty, but argues that it can only rule effectively through the chest. He explains, “Reason must rule the mere appetites by means of the ‘spirited element.’ The head rules the belly through the chest—the seat . . . of Magnanimity, of emotions organized by trained habits in to stable sentiments” (Abolition 24-25). “Without the aid of trained emotions the intellect is powerless against the animal organism” (Abolition 24).

If we look closely at Milton—as Lewis certainly did—we find that he also mentions the importance of “stable sentiments”, to use Lewis’ phrase. Milton writes of using “constant and sound indoctrinating to set them right and firm . . . in the knowledge of verture and the hatred of vice” (Milton 983). And again, Milton

proposes to make “heroick valour” a “native” ingredient in his young scholars ( Milton 985).

Today we seem more interested in building men (and women) with “abs” than with chests, as Lewis uses the word. And in our obsession with tolerance and political correctness, what educational institution would dare insist that there is such a thing as objective value, let alone specify what some of those values are? There is only one such institution where this can happen. And it is the most effective of all educational institutions. It is also free—for the moment—of government mandates as to matters regarding values. Of course, that institution is the traditionally-religious home. Despite its grim title, *The Abolition of Man* offers hope as well as warning for the future. By implication, Lewis affirms the family as the best defense against the innovators and conditioners who deny objective value and cheerfully wait to see “what man can make of man” (Skinner 354). “We may well thank the beneficent obstinacy of real mothers, real nurses, and (above all) real children for preserving the human race in such sanity as it still possesses” (Abolition 60). The implications are obvious. As citizens we must honor the family in every way we can, and fight its opponents whenever we meet them. For as Lewis wrote, “Christianity is a fighting religion.”

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