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► **To cite this version:**

Jonathan Fruoco. C.S. Lewis and T.S. Eliot: Questions of Identity. *Persona and Paradox: Issues of Identity for C.S. Lewis, His Friends and Associates*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.285, 2012, 1443839663. hal-00871082

HAL Id: hal-00871082

<https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00871082>

Submitted on 8 Oct 2013

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C.S. LEWIS AND T.S. ELIOT: QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

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Much has been written in the last decades about C.S. Lewis and his friendship with men such as Charles Williams or J.R.R. Tolkien, but the nature of his opposition with T.S. Eliot has somewhat remained obscure. Indeed, very few people are today aware that the Christian apologist and author of *The Chronicles of Narnia* had found his nemesis in the acclaimed poet and receiver of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

A few years ago, however, Bart Jan Spruyt brilliantly summed up the various factors opposing Lewis and Eliot in his paper “One of the enemy: C.S. Lewis on the very great evil of T. S. Eliot’s work,”¹ but he failed, in my opinion, to expose the psychological dimension of that confrontation which was more than a simple battle of wits between two intellectuals. Therefore, in order to throw some light on this multi-faceted opposition it is necessary to ask ourselves some simple but essential questions: what could possibly be Lewis’s reasons for hating Eliot? Was it jealousy? Or perhaps, did he simply dislike Eliot as a man? And more importantly, what was at the origin of their reconciliation? I will try to provide answers to those questions, proving in the end that their religious, academic and national identities were central in their opposition for Lewis was surely an interesting and complex man. As Tolkien once said, “Interesting? Yes, he’s certainly that. You’ll never get to the bottom of him.”²

In order to understand the origins of this enmity and the importance of the question of identity it is necessary to say a few words about Lewis’s and Eliot’s backgrounds. Lewis and Eliot were in a certain way similar to one another. Both were born outside England, Lewis in Ireland in 1898

1. Bart Jan Spruyt, “One of the enemy: C. S. Lewis on the very great evil of T.S. Eliot’s work,” *De Edmund Burke Stichting* (2004), accessed September 16, 2009, www.burkestichting.nl/nl/stichting/isioxford.html.

2. Taken from *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* by George Sayer, © 1994, p. xx. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

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and Eliot in the United States ten years earlier; both got married³ at an advanced age in 1957 (Eliot was 69 and Lewis 59); and both were converts and were considered as conservative defenders of their religion.⁴ Indeed, on 8 September 1947, the Time Magazine issued an article titled “Don v. Devil” in which Lewis was said to belong to a an ever-expanding band of heretics among 20th century intellectuals and to a new class of literary evangelists together with scholars such as T.S. Eliot, Dorothy L. Sayers, Graham Greene, W.H. Auden and many others. However, the fact that Lewis and Eliot were seen as members of a same school of thoughts tended to upset Lewis who disliked intensely the whole Modernist approach to religion. In *The Pilgrim’s Regress* (published in 1933), Lewis thus conceives an allegorical world, inhabited among other people by the Clevers, in which his hero, John, has to fight various figures representing all the features of the 1920s he found questionable. Not only does Lewis attack Modernism, Marxism and Freudianism in the book, but he also defends what had helped him in his conversion, namely Reason and Romanticism. A few years later, he even identified in the headlines of a new edition what represented the Clevers: “The poetry of the Silly Twenties,” “The swamp-literature of the Dirty Twenties” and “The gibberish-literature of the Lunatic Twenties.”⁵

Eliot makes an apparition later in the book when we are introduced with three Pale Men called Humanist, Neo-Classical and Neo-Angular who live a highly ascetic life. The first two do not believe in anything, Neo-Angular however explains, “My ethics are based on dogma, not on feeling,”⁶ and then adds that John should “learn from [his] superiors the dogmata in which her deliverances have been codified for general use.”⁷ Besides, he also disapproves of John’s search for Joy (symbolised in the story by the Island) which is, for him, the wrong reason for a pilgrimage. Neo-Angular is in that way the allegorical representation of Eliot. In a letter, Lewis explained that “What I am attacking in Neo-Angular is a set of people who seem to me to be trying to make of Christianity itself one more highbrow, Chelsea, bourgeois-baiting fad. T.S. Eliot is the single

3. Valerie Fletcher was actually T.S. Eliot’s second wife; he had been married before with Vivienne Haigh-Wood.

4. Spruyt, “One of the enemy.”

5. C.S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*. Rev. ed. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1933/1946), 50, 52 and 54.

6. *Ibid.*, 97.

7. *Ibid.*, 102.

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man who sums up the thing I am fighting against.”⁸ Consequently, even though Eliot and Lewis were considered as fellow defenders of Christianity, Lewis did not share Eliot’s approach to religion, which was, according to him “sectarian” and “counter-romantic.”⁹

We have seen that Eliot and Lewis did not embrace religion from the same perspective, but spiritual dissension was only one of the many elements that fuelled the hostilities. After the end of the First World War, a new literary movement appeared in which the great literary figures of the time (Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, etc.) developed a new system of belief. It is “actually defined,” according to Heather O’Donoghue, “by its self-conscious dissociation from the literary, philosophical and political assumptions of the previous century.”¹⁰ Modernism proposed, thus, a new reflexion not only on literature, but also on religion, as we have seen, and literary criticism. That new approach to criticism came directly from Cambridge University where, after 1928, I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavies and others focused on modern literature, to the detriment of Anglo-Saxon literature, but also of authors such as Shakespeare, Milton or Percy Shelley. Actually, Milton had become since the beginning of the century one of the main targets of criticism, which tended to upset Lewis greatly. Middleton Murry, for example, wrote “We cannot make him real; he does not, either in his great effects or his little ones, trouble our depths,” while Eliot declared that Milton’s style had damaged the structure of the English language and that his theology was “repellent.”¹¹ That was simply too much to accept for Lewis who was, at that time, struggling alongside Tolkien for the implementation of a reformed syllabus at Oxford.

The reason why Lewis joined Tolkien in that reform was that he had never been interested by modern literature, even though his own literary tastes were remarkably eclectic. He read more widely than anybody else around him, and considered Brooke, Flecker, de la Mare, Yeats and Masfield to be among “our best moderns.”¹² He also enjoyed reading E.M. Forster, Edith Sitwell’s poetry, W.H. Auden’s alliterative verse, but he generally disliked most of the other authors he read (Virginia Woolf for

8. Quoted in R.L. Green and W. Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: Collins, 1974), 130.

9. H. Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and their Friends* (London: HarperCollins, 1978/2006), 49.

10. Heather O’Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: the Remarkable History of the North Myths* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 163-64.

11. Quoted in Carpenter, *Inklings*, 118.

12. *Ibid.*, 158.

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instance). Lewis remained all his life a Georgian, both in his approach to criticism and to poetry, and eventually found himself living on an island whose shores were progressively eaten away by the ocean. Far from giving up, he tried for many decades to turn the tide in attacking Eliot, who symbolised everything he disliked in Modernism. Lewis discovered Eliot's poetry as soon as he read *Prufrock and Other Observations* (published in 1917) and immediately considered Eliot's use of language and his lack of structure as a deliberate attack upon traditional English poetry. However, he was still convinced that the possibilities of "metrical poetry on sane subjects"¹³ were not exhausted. In 1918, he thus realised one of his dreams when a volume of his poems was published by Heinemann under the title *Spirits in Bondage*. Nevertheless, Lewis attracted almost no attention as a poet. He then discovered that most of his fellow undergraduates at Oxforde admired Eliot's poetry, which, in my opinion put an end to his ambitions to become a successful poet. In October 1918, he wrote to Arthur Greeves, "I'm afraid I shall never be an orthodox modern. I like lines that will scan and do not care for descriptions of sea-sickness."¹⁴ Nonetheless, he was not alone in that situation and rapidly became friend with Owen Barfield who shared his opinion on modern poetry.

Interestingly enough, the poem written by Eliot that most marked Lewis's mind was "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which opens with a comparison of the evening sky with an anaesthetised patient. This immensely shocked Lewis who wrote a harsh criticism of the poem in his *Preface to Paradise Lost*:

I have heard Mr Eliot's comparison of evening to a patient on an operating table praised, nay gloated over, not as a striking picture of sensibility in decay, but because it was so 'pleasantly unpleasant.' ... That elementary rectitude of human response, at which we are so ready to fling the unkind epithets of 'stock', 'crude', 'bourgeois', and 'conventional', so far from being 'given' is a delicate balance of trained habits, laboriously acquired and easily lost on the maintenance of which depend both our virtues and our pleasures and even, perhaps, the survival of our species.¹⁵

Lewis's use of the word "decay" is quite interesting here for it echoes Barfield's *Poetic Diction* (1928). Indeed, Barfield states among other

13. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 1: Family Letters 1905-1931*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 492.

14. *Ibid.*, 407.

15. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume 2: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931-1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 1030.

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things that the poetic language has decayed over the centuries, moving from a semantic unity to fragmentation, which would imply that modern poetry is less rich in meaning.¹⁶

From that day forward, Lewis almost never stopped arguing against Eliot and he himself acknowledged that fact in a letter dated 23 October 1942, where he writes to Dorothy L. Sayers:

Oh Eliot! How can a man who is neither a knave nor a fool write so like both? Well, he can't complain that I haven't done my best to put him right – hardly ever write a book without showing him one of his errors. And still he doesn't mend. I call it ungrateful.¹⁷

That letter not only gives us a glimpse of Lewis's sense of humour, but also of Eliot's lack of reaction: he never answered as frankly as he should have to those criticisms, which, far from cooling Lewis's ardour, encouraged him to carry on.

In 1939, Lewis thus published a volume of essays defending his linguistic and literary values entitled *Rehabilitations*. It is now public knowledge that the most important essays for him were "Shelley, Dryden and Mr. Eliot" and "William Morris." In the first one, he writes that Shelley is a more classic poet than Dryden, and that he is even "superior to Dryden by the greatness of his subjects and his moral elevation ... and in the production of poetry appropriate to its subjects."¹⁸ Lewis also makes an allusion to the vulgarity of Dryden's poetry, and then focuses on Eliot's own essay on Dryden (published in *Selected Essays* in 1932). Sayer explains that Lewis was then convinced that Eliot with *The Waste Land* "had done more than any other writer of free verse to corrupt other poets and to lead the British poetry-reading public astray. Traditional English poetry," he adds, "had been so destroyed that it was almost impossible for a traditional poet to achieve popular success."¹⁹ That last reflection implies that Lewis felt he could not become a poet anymore because of the ascendance of Modernism and of a general lack of interest for classic poetry. This new poetic era remained painfully inaccessible to him, and he wrote in a poem symbolically entitled "A Confession" (1954) that despite

16. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 158.

17. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Volume 2, 533.

18. Taken from *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* by George Sayer, © 1994, p. 258. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

19. *Idem*.

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all his efforts, he remained incapable of seeing the resemblance between the evening and an etherized patient.

This confrontation of religious and academic identities only represent, however, what we may call the public dimension of their opposition, for Lewis was careful not to let people discover some of his deepest feelings about Eliot. When one reads Lewis it is indeed possible to see his criticisms of Eliot as a simple divergence of opinion or as a debate, such as the one he had with E.M.W. Tillyard. He was, besides, always very respectful and considered Eliot to be one of the leaders of the Modernist movement.²⁰ Yet, his antipathy was sometimes much more profound. In order to enlighten those underground feelings, it is necessary to have a look at two revealing events, namely Lewis's "anti-Eliot campaign" and a letter he sent to Paul Elmer More in May 1935.

In 1926, Lewis borrowed a volume of Eliot's verses from the young John Betjeman, who was then his pupil, and studied them in order to organise a campaign whose purpose was to ridicule Eliot. Together with Franck Hardie, Henry Yorke and Nevill Coghill, he wrote a parody of modern verse that was to be sent to the *Criterion*, edited by Eliot, under the name of a brother and a sister called Rollo and Bridget Considine. Lewis immortalised their prank in his diary better than I could:

Bridget is the elder, and they are united by an affection so tender as to be almost incestuous. Bridget will presently write a letter to Eliot (if we get a foothold) telling him about her own and her brother's life. She is incredibly dowdy and about thirty-five. We rolled about in laughter as we pictured a tea party where the Considines should meet Eliot: Yorke would dress up for Bridget and perhaps bring a baby.²¹

This little conspiracy tells us again a lot about Lewis's sense of humour but his motivation in that particular case was not simply to have fun, on the contrary. He writes in his diary, "Hardie and Coghill are in it for pure fun, I from *burning indignation*,²² Yorke chiefly for love of mischief."²³ The project was eventually abandoned, but Lewis's intentions are still vivid today thanks to his diary.

20. In 1943, Lewis wrote to Eliot, "One aims at the officers first in meeting an attack!" Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 557.

21. Quoted in, Carpenter, *Inklings*, 21.

22. The emphasis is mine.

23. Quoted in, Carpenter, *Inklings*, 21.

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Lewis then expressed his ‘burning indignation’ in 1935, when he received a letter from Paul Elmer More who did not understand nor share his dislike for Eliot. Nowhere else is Lewis’s deepest feelings about Eliot expressed as clearly as in his answer to More. Firstly, Lewis sums up – sharply – what he thinks about Eliot as a poet and as a critic. Not only does he “regard Eliot’s work as a very great evil,”²⁴ but he also writes:

His constant profession of humanism and his claim to be a ‘classicist’ may not be consciously insincere, but they are erroneous. The plea that his poems of disintegration are all satiric, are intended as awful warnings, is the common plea of all the literary traitors to humanity. ... I must be content to judge his work by its fruits, and I contend that no man is fortified against chaos by reading the *Waste Land*, but that most men are by it infected with chaos. ... The *Inferno* is not infernal poetry: the *Waste Land* is.²⁵

He concludes the first part of this letter by suggesting that Eliot cannot hide his sympathy for poets such as Marlowe or Jonson, which ruins all his efforts to present himself as a classicist.

Secondly, Lewis comes back on their supposedly shared religious identity, identifying Eliot as “one of the enemy: and all the more dangerous because he is sometimes disguised as a friend”²⁶ and finally gives his opinion about Eliot’s American citizenship. He writes:

[T]his offence is aggravated by attendant circumstances, such as his arrogance. And (you will forgive me) it is further aggravated for an Englishman by the recollection that Eliot stole upon us, a foreigner and a neutral, while we were at war – obtained, I have my wonders how, a job in the Bank of England – and became (am I wrong) the advance guard of the invasion since carried out by his neutral friends and allies, the Steins and Pounds and *hoc genus omne*, the Parisian riff-raff of denationalised Irishmen and Americans who have perhaps given Western Europe her death wound.²⁷

Lewis’s accusations are here extreme, but they reflect his state of mind at the time. I will not comment his reference to Eliot’s arrogance, but I believe the rest of his statement needs to be explained. Eliot arrived in England at the beginning of the First World War, but, though he was 26

24. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 163.

25. *Idem*.

26. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 164.

27. *Idem*.

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and consequently in age to fight, his American citizenship allowed him to stay far away from the battlefields. While the European nations were destroying each other, he lived a more peaceful life in London than most men of his generation: he found a job, wrote books, poetry and gave lectures to earn extra money while young men like Lewis were slaughtered every day in the trenches. Lewis himself was sent to the Somme when he was 19 and was wounded during a German offensive in 1918; his brother Warren was fighting too, and Lewis's friend, 'Paddy' Moore, was killed in action ... In other words, Lewis felt strongly against Eliot because he found unfair that "while we were at war" a man, who came from a country then unwilling to intervene in that conflict (the United States would not declare war on Germany until April 1917), made the most of life thanks to the blood of thousands of young men, and even took advantage of their being at war to prepare the invasion of the Modernists.

Let us now have a look at another central figure in the opposition between Lewis and Eliot. The friendship between Lewis and Charles Williams was based on a mutual admiration, but it became more profound when Williams was sent to Oxford at the beginning of the Second World War. In 1936, Lewis wrote down his impression about Williams's *The Place of the Lion* in a letter to Arthur Greeves in which he explained that the book had taught him a remarkable lesson in humility.²⁸

Lewis then sent a similar letter to Williams who immediately answered that it was the first time he admired an author who admired him in return. In short, both men found out that they understood each other, and more importantly that they shared a common system of belief, which led to the integration of Williams into the Inklings.

Eliot, for his part, had long maintained that worthwhile literature was either difficult or simply inaccessible,²⁹ and he was thus quite delighted when in 1934, following the advice of Lady Ottoline Morrell, he finally read *The Place of the Lion* and *War in Heaven*. Indeed, if there were one adjective that could perfectly describe Williams's literature, it would be *obscure*, for his intentions are not easy to determine instantly and it is often necessary to read his books over and over again in order to assimilate everything – J.B. Priestley, for instance, described *The Greater Trumps* as being sorely incredible.³⁰ Later in 1934, both men were introduced to one another by Lady Ottoline Morrell, which enchanted Eliot who wrote immediately after the meeting that Williams's coming

28. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 99.

29. O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla*, 189.

30. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 97.

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was a true blessing.³¹ Williams was equally pleased for he also admired Eliot and had declared in *Poetry in Present*, where he studied a few contemporary poets, that he had a great respect for Eliot's work, even though he failed to understand its meaning.³²

Both men eventually became friends, and Eliot (on the behalf of Faber & Faber) took Williams under his wing. Not only did he commission a few books from Williams, such as a study of Dante and Romantic theology or a book on witchcraft, but he also supported him whenever he needed a publisher. *Descent into Hell*, for example, would probably have never been published without Eliot's help. Their friendship, however, never reached Lewis's level, for even though they enjoyed meeting once or twice a year, they had tremendous difficulties understanding each other and they never really shared their deepest beliefs.³³

The fact that Lewis and Eliot had now a common friend did not really bring them together, even though Williams certainly tried to. Indeed, as Lewis wrote to Eliot in 1943, "Charles Williams is always promising (or threatening!) to confront us with each other [to] hammer all these matters out,"³⁴ but he did not actually manage to arrange a meeting before a couple of years. Eliot and Lewis thus met for what was to be a mad tea party in the Mitre Hotel in 1945 under the surveillance of Williams. When Eliot finally entered the room and was introduced to Lewis, he proclaimed that he looked much older than on the photographs and then added that he found *A Preface to Paradise Lost* to be Lewis's best book, which was far from being a compliment when one recalls that it contains a vehement criticism of Eliot's work. You will, consequently, not be surprised to read that, after those kind words, the tea party progressed poorly and was enjoyed by no one except, perhaps, Williams.³⁵

I have answered some of the questions I raised in the introduction, but now I would like to say a few words about what was at the origin of their reconciliation. While researching for this paper, it has been suggested to me that they became friends when they were both on the commission to revise the Psalter in 1959, but it seems unlikely that this collaboration changed Lewis's feelings that deeply. As we have seen, his antipathy for Eliot was extreme and lasted over more than two decades; therefore

31. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 97.

32. Idem.

33. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 98.

34. Lewis, *Collected Letters*, Volume 2, 557.

35. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 192.

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working together could not have changed Lewis's opinion radically, though it certainly played an important role.

Sayer suggests in his biography that a turn of events took place when Lewis saw – and enjoyed – a representation of Eliot's play, *Murder in the Cathedral*,³⁶ but it only appeared in the mid-1930s, so unless it was a delayed reaction it could not have caused the rapprochement.

I suggest, however, that Lewis and Eliot were brought together by William's unexpected death in May 1945. For many years, Eliot had been Lewis's white whale: like Ahab he became obsessed with him and he tried for over twenty years to correct him or to ridicule him every time he could.

Many people could simply not understand why he disliked Eliot so vehemently because they never realised that the acclaimed author of *The Waste Land* symbolised everything that Lewis hated in the post-war world. To kill his white whale meant to overcome Modernism, but such a task was obviously too complex and after Williams's death, Lewis decided to give up the spear. In December 1945, he wrote to Herbert Palmer and explained to him that,

[t]here were years of my own life during wh. the literary situation, the ascendancy of the Eliotics, the dominance of the *Criterion Scrutiny* was the daily subject of my thoughts and nagged me like a nagging tooth: but thank God I got out of it. It's no subject for a man to spend his life on. 'Noble rage' is an *ignis fatuus* and always turns in the end to shrill peevishness.³⁷

To illustrate the influence of Williams's death, we can have a look at Lewis's letters. His correspondence with Eliot really begins in May 1945 when – only a few days after the passing of their mutual friend – Lewis mentioned to him a volume of essays that Tolkien, Barfield, Lewis himself and his brother Warren wanted to publish as a tribute to Williams.

Besides, he also proposed Eliot to join them, which would have been inconceivable a few weeks earlier ("A critique of Charles's own poetry or an account of the man from your hand would be of very great value"³⁸). In the following months, both men wrote to each other actively regarding the *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*. Eliot became thus a member of their working group, and was therefore asked whether Faber & Faber could publish the book. Eliot, "being the only experienced publisher

36. Taken from *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis* by George Sayer, © 1994, p. 258. Used by permission of Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, IL 60187, www.crossway.org.

37. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 684

38. *Ibid.*, 650.

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among”³⁹ Lewis and his friends knew, began to give them advice about the marketable dimension of the book: for instance, when Lewis received a letter from Humphrey Milford (publisher in the Oxford University Press), he immediately asked Eliot’s opinion about it (“you understand the language better than I do. How do you read it?”⁴⁰). Then in 1946, when Eliot failed to send him an essay, Lewis wrote that his absence would very much cripple their book, which in the light of what we have seen until now, led Lewis to an even more extraordinary proposition, since he asked Eliot to send a poem to the Inklings who would include it in the book.

Essays Presented to Charles Williams was finally published in 1947 without any contribution from Eliot who failed to send anything on time. The death of Williams was therefore the starting point of their friendship. Lewis probably realised through the sudden disappearance of his friend that life was not worth living in “Noble rage” and managed to overcome the great differences in their religious, academic and intellectual identity. In 1959, while they were working together on the revision of the Psalter, Lewis and Eliot even sealed their friendship when they dined together with their wives Joy and Valerie. “It was an event,” writes Carpenter, “which the pre-war Lewis would have declared to be in every respect impossible.”⁴¹ That new friendship was particularly visible in the way they addressed each other. For example, in the 1940s when Lewis wrote to Eliot, he usually began his letters with “Dear Mr. Eliot,” while in the 1950s, he switched to the more casual “My dear Eliot.”

When Lewis’s wife eventually succumbed to cancer in 1960, he wrote *A Grief Observed* in which he described and analysed his pain, hoping that it might help other people suffering from the death of a loved one. However, he had no desire to publish it under his own name and thus contacted Faber & Faber, which had never published anything he wrote before. Eliot immediately recognised Lewis’s style.

A few months before his death in 1963, Lewis made a final comment about Eliot as a poet, as a critic and as a man to Walter Hooper, “You know I never liked Eliot’s poetry, or even his prose. But when we met this time I loved him.”⁴²

39. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 658.

40. *Ibid.*, 661.

41. Carpenter, *Inklings*, 246.

42. Lewis, *Collected Letters, Volume 2*, 1030.

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