

C.S. LEWIS: MODERNIST OR ANTI-MODERNIST? HIS RESPONSE TO HIS TIMES

Iulia-Teodora Driscu

“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Carol I Boulevard number 11, 700506, Romania

Abstract

C.S. Lewis lived during the turbulent 20th century, a time when literature was divided between the modernists, who sought to innovate the art of writing, and the anti-modernists, conservative writers who tried to keep the classical values of the past. This paper intends to analyse the way Lewis approached the dominant literary movement of his times, modernism, both in his theoretical writings and in his fiction. It brings examples from a large variety of sources, including not only his literary essays, articles or academic works, but also his greatly loved Chronicles of Narnia or The Space Trilogy. The discussion it instigates helps better understand this author's place inside (or outside) the literary canon and the reasons behind such a categorisation. Its novelty lies in the way it examines the primary material and especially in the question it raises: how can we situate Lewis related to his times, as an adherent to the modernist creed or a dissident?

Keywords: Lewis, modernism, fiction, canon, myth, transcendence

1. INTRODUCTION

C.S. Lewis wrote in a period of great political, social and ideological turmoil, the 20th century. It was a time of great changes in all spheres, including, or especially, in culture. The two World Wars, the instauration of dictatorships in Eastern Europe and capitalism in Western societies, followed by lengthy periods of financial crisis, led to a massive change in people's perspective on life. As literature usually responds to reality one way or another (either by accurately reflecting it like the realists tried to do or completely rejecting it like the romantics), the response to this chaotic situation all over the world was first a general atmosphere of sheer instability. This climate generated many transformations in the way people perceived traditional values, faith, art, including, of course, literature. As Matei Calinescu stated in the introduction to his famous book *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch and Postmodernism* (1987, p. 3) [1]: “What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty”.

Modernism was called by some “the aesthetic of modernity”, fact which is mentioned in the *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (Ardis 2004) [2]. This would mean that modernist literature perfectly reflects the enormous social, political and philosophical changes of that century. Randall Stevenson in his book *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (1992, p. 3) [3] claims that modernism is quite a good term to use for the work of writers who believed that it was a necessary condition of art to abandon tradition. We learn from his clarification that this movement was mainly supposed to be a novelty in writing and mentality, fact which implied a clear separation from the already overwhelming influence of so many decades of literature. The primary focus was on the idea that the writers of this age have to be totally different from their ancestors.

We could say, like Roland Barthes, that the “anxiety of influence” reached a critical point in the 20th century, so much that it determined writers to completely shift perspectives and try to form new paths in literature. Virginia Woolf (1961, pp. 3-4) [4] recognizes that maybe how they write is not better than their predecessors, but they cannot know this for sure; only time will offer an accurate account. Certainly, modernism changed the direction of literature, from tradition to novelty, but did it change it qualitatively? Randall Stevenson (1992, p. 4) tends to doubt this when he contends that the differences between modernism and previous literary movements are quite relative, quantitative for sure, but not necessarily qualitative.

All periods of time trigger a certain amount of gain and loss of understanding. Lewis expressed that in his scholarly work called *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (1962, p. 31) [5], contending that Humanism, although commonly regarded as a benefactor for culture, also had its drawbacks. Indeed, it brought a new learning to the table, but it also created a new ignorance, as all movements do. Certainly, Lewis talked about the Renaissance as a literary movement, but what he said fits remarkably well in the context of our subject. Although modernity promoted a new learning about life, science, art, a shift of perspective which had its share of contribution to the literary stage, it also triggered a new ignorance of the sound values promoted in previous centuries. Modernist writers were no longer interested in the Platonic Ideals of Good, Beauty and Truth, in the medieval pursuit of honour and courtly love, or in religion as the source of truth and fulfilment. They were rebels, protesting against everything that was before them and inevitably dismissing the preoccupations of their predecessors as unimportant and irrelevant for their age. They had no sensitivity for the concept of immutability; they were experiencing a time of constant change, so nothing should remain untouched by the new master, change itself. In that sense, the new discovery that the modernists made in the field of literature brought its fair share of ignorance and folly. We are not sure though that the gain was greater than the loss.

This paper aims to analyse the way C.S. Lewis responded to the literary tendencies of his times by examining some of his academic works, essays and articles in which he talks about modernism and also a few extracts from his fictional writings. Lewis's opinion about modernism was clearly highly different from that of his contemporaries and this is certainly visible in his non-fiction, although there are some clues in his imaginative works as well. We will first look at Lewis's theoretical works and extract the gist regarding his attitude to modernism from them and then at his fiction which illustrates actually his opinion stated in his academic works, before finally drawing a balanced conclusion about his place in the 20th century literature.

2. LEWIS AND MODERNISM

2.1. In his theoretical works

C.S. Lewis did not identify with his times at all. Actually, in the lecture "De Descriptione Temporum", later published in the volume *Selected Literary Essays* (2013, pp. 13-14) [6], he makes the point that he is a "dinosaur", in the sense that his mentality, literary taste and manners are considered "ancient", as he never went with the flow. He ends by recommending his audience, who was mainly formed of future students of literature at Cambridge, to take advantage of him, so to speak, in the literary sense, as he was a representative of the medieval way of thinking: "I would say, use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs". He felt different and unrepresented or misrepresented in the modern society. But at the same time, he was perfect for his chair in the Medieval and Renaissance Literature Department in Cambridge, because he understood the way the old writers thought.

A point of dissension between Lewis and the modernists was the literary form. Modernism focused very much on form: new techniques of writing were invented, one of them, the stream of consciousness, being extremely popular back then and extensively used in many literary masterpieces written by famous writers such as Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. This writing technique was regarded as extremely modern, as it attempted to show the real way the mind works by jotting down random thoughts that come to an individual while he is actually doing something else, using a lot of flashbacks (like Marcel Proust, in his *In Search of Lost Time* did) to express the fact that the human mind always wanders around different thoughts and topics without actually settling much time on a certain issue. The stream of consciousness was supposed to give readers a real image of life, a "piece of life", making them more aware of what happens inside their mind. It was also meant to break some boundaries and norms of writing, by omitting the quotation marks when one person speaks or the references to the character that expresses his thoughts. It was quite a revolutionary way of writing back then and many authors adopted it with much public success.

However, Lewis was not very thrilled by this idea, as his secretary Walter Hooper confessed in the Preface of one of Lewis's collections of short stories called *The Dark Tower and Other Stories* (1977, p. 11) [7]. He thought it was chaotic and ironically called it the "steam of consciousness", pointing out

that the human mind cannot do two things at the same time: think and observe its thoughts. This was compared with looking in a mirror in order to see what one looks like when he is not looking at himself, so a totally absurd situation. In other words, this technique was easily dismissed by the British author, who considered it a sheer aberration. It is interesting to stress Lewis's view on this, as most of his contemporaries were very excited about this new literary trick. Amusingly enough, in a culture of revolt against tradition, we also have protest against novelty – as every action inevitably triggers a reaction at least of its size and magnitude.

Nevertheless, Lewis experimented a little in some of his literary pieces with this new technique, more with the aim of satire rather than of exploration. He used it in one of his short stories called "The Shoddy Lands", in which he satirizes how the mind of a "modern" woman might work. The main event of the story is the fact that the narrator finds himself trapped in the mind of a woman. She is very shallow and has all types of entangled thoughts, all of them mainly centred on herself. Judging everyone around her, people appear in her vision as having different sizes, according to the importance she attributes to them. In the end, we sense that it was a terrible experience for the narrator and he would not want to repeat it again. That was, briefly, how Lewis saw the most popular literary technique of his times.

In general, the author of Narnia did not think highly of any literary novelties brought by modernism, claiming in the essay "On Juvenile Tastes" (2013, p. 63) that: "The literary world of today is little interested in the narrative art as such; it is preoccupied with technical novelties and with 'ideas', by which it means not literary, but social or psychological ideas". With this sentence he summarised the general literary tendencies of his times which clearly disturbed the more conservative writers. While literature has always given importance to both content and style, it seems that in the modernist age the priorities were different and authors were much more interested in the latter. The form has apparently beaten the substance.

As far as the content is concerned, it is worth delving a little into the type of ideas to which Lewis makes reference. The narrative art was considered dated and maybe exhausted of anything else to say to the current generation of writers, so they started looking at other sources of ideas and explored other humanist fields such as psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, philosophy etc. For instance, psychoanalysis gained immense recognition because of Sigmund Freud's theories, which became considerably popular back then. His division of the subconscious into the id, the ego and the superego inspired many literary scholars to apply these concepts in their essays and later developed in a whole new subject. Freud, along with his disciple, Carl Gustav Jung, who, among other things, advanced the theory of the archetypes, succeeded in bringing psychology to the attention of the intellectuals. In addition, the famous philosopher Karl Marx was extensively read at the beginning of the 20th century, although he lived in the previous age. His political theories did not influence only the history of multiple Eastern European nations, but also the humanities, including literature.

The preoccupation for literature itself was, therefore, very much diminished or combined with other elements. Lewis's reaction to this trend was, certainly, negative. He was in this sense old-fashioned, being purely interested in literature for its own sake. He was fascinated by the incredible power of words to create imaginary places and fantastic characters which would not completely resemble the real ones (for what is the point of perfectly copying life as you know it?), but would be independent. Only this way of writing would add something to life, making it more meaningful and magical. The creator of Narnia thought that literature should not give you a sense of reality, but it should add to it. In this way, its aim could truly be to enlarge one's being, as he beautifully explains in his book *An Experiment in Criticism* (2019, pp. 81,137-138) [8]. Literature therefore does not comment on life, it adds to it, it gives the readers a new perspective, a new way of seeing their existence, it makes them see life with a lot of eyes. Its aim should never be to shut one down in a Leibnizian monad, but on the contrary, it ought to provide windows for readers to perceive other realities and go beyond themselves.

Another issue linked to our discussion and incredibly important in order to understand Lewis's place in literature is the literary canon. This is usually made in hindsight by reputed scholars with a high authority who decide who should be studied or not. Usually, the poets and novelists that get to be in the textbooks have had a large impact on society, either during or after their lifetime. In the context of the 20th century, we talk in literary studies about modernism and its main representatives (James Joyce, Virginia Wolf,

Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot etc.). Hardly ever do we hear of authors who did not “fit the canon”, being totally outside any literary schools or trends. They were usually more conservative and wrote in the “old” way, this is why they are generally dismissed from the discussion of the 20th century literature. Why should they not be discussed, since they created in that century and had tremendous success?

The answer to this question can also be found in Lewis’s essay “On Juvenile Tastes” (2013, p. 63). His opinion about the literary movement fashionable in his time was that it was very narrow and dull. When the canon of taste does not let enough space for truly creative authors to express their views, writers have to appeal to an audience that enjoys pure storytelling without demanding literary novelties (most of which were everything but literary). Lewis found this audience in children and this is partly the reason why he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* in the form of a fairy-tale. Although many readers have “moved on” with the times, embracing modernism, there were still some “old-fashioned” ones who appreciated true storytelling and would care for what he had to say. The British writer actually did not estimate correctly how large this audience was, as his books were sold in thousands of copies worldwide and translated in several international languages even during his lifetime.

Many would say after reading the passages above that Lewis was an anti-modernist. Certainly, we do not intend to provide this impression of him, as he himself confesses his stance on this point in the introductory letter to his collection of poems (1994, p. XIX) [9]. There he claims that he is out of touch with the literary trends fashionable in his time. This means he is totally outside modernism, not against it; we may call him an “amodernist”. He further claims that the readers of his collection could call him an “escapist”, but had better not inquire into what he is escaping, or whom he is escaping from, as this discussion might trigger controversy. Even in poetry Lewis followed his own path, rather than stepping on the beaten track like other writers or supporting an ideal of literature in which he did not believe. By offering what appears to be a disclaimer, he prepares his readers for his own way of doing literature: original, spontaneous, truthful with the author’s principles and not following any pre-established literary canon or political agenda.

The use of the word “escapist” deserves some consideration. Lewis actually did not have a word to describe himself in terms of literary establishment. If you were not a modernist in modern(ist) times, then what were you called if you wrote fantastic literature (not so popular back then actually)? People generally said you were an escapist. In fact, to be an escapist was seen as almost an offence in those days when extreme realism was applauded. However, Lewis did not perceive it in its pejorative form, but more as a humble term for “a creator of worlds”, someone who enlarges one’s being by providing fabulous images and giving life to his broad imagination. Lewis did not create enchanted worlds to escape in them, but to offer his readers something else than what was on the market, so to speak, to give them some very profound food for thought by literary means. He believed that the fantastic was a suitable literary genre in which to do that, while also being an adequate form for his creative ideas. He expressed his thoughts in the article “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s To Be Said”:

The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalise while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of ‘commenting on life’, can add to it. (2000, p. 60) [10]

In the first part of the quote cited above, Lewis makes a fine allusion to the people that do not consider the fantastic genre suitable for adult readers. In quite a simplistic fashion, some scholars thought the mythical is appropriate for children while the realist art for adults. However, Lewis claimed numerous times that if a story is not good enough to be read in adulthood, it means it is not good for children either. The power of fiction is the same at all ages, children are not separate species who deserve special treatment. They can understand some concepts, even though they should be simplified. In the same manner, adults enjoy very much the fantastic if they agree with its conventions. What is more, the author clearly states that he does not agree with the whole principle of modernism to offer the readers a “comment on life” or “a piece of life”, but he intends to enrich the lives of those who read his writings, to add a little bit of magic and depth to it.

Furthermore, this citation opens the door to another crucial discussion about literary sources of inspiration, which includes, for Lewis at least, a lot of myths. Steven Connor wrote in his essay “Modernity and Myth” published in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* (2004, p. 251) that these two concepts are perfectly opposite. While myths have a primordial character and generally appeal to everyone, modernism is very much about the present time. Modern culture attempted to go beyond myths, which were considered outdated and unable to appeal to contemporary society. Modernists aspired to create their own myths, whereas Lewis used some well-established biblical ones such as The Fall of Adam and of Lucifer. He found in the Bible an inexhaustible resource of literary themes and used it accordingly, while his contemporary modernist colleagues dismissed it and sought their inspiration elsewhere.

What the Inklings have achieved in their endeavour to re-enact myths is considered ‘pre-modern’ as Patrick Curry claimed about Tolkien in his work *Defending Middle Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*. He explained that by using the power of Indo-European myths, Tolkien creates a fascinating pre-modern world (cited in Connor *The Cambridge History*, 2004, p. 266). Of course, we could extrapolate this and claim the same thing about Lewis, as he uses a lot of myths in his enchanted worlds. It seems that the Inklings were before their times, they could not actually fit into a canon of taste or a literary trend, they remain to this day hard to categorise. This is another reason why they are so special and fascinating to study.

Connor (2004, p. 267) later explains that modernity had quite a contentious and multi-faceted relationship with myths. He claims that it is the consequence of the demise of myth, making reference also to Max Weber’s view of modernity as the “disenchantment of the world”. This movement tried to create a “post-mythical” culture, to live without myths, but in the process it only succeeded in inventing new ones and by doing this it invented itself. Weber’s view is quite telling, if we think only of the reason why the moderns thought of the world as enchanted. Perhaps from a literary perspective, the use of so many ancient sources of inspiration might have given this impression, although the realists tried to move as further away as possible from them.

If modernity, through the literary movement called modernism, rejected myth and searched elsewhere its inspiration, Lewis and the Inklings went straight for this resource. Mythology occupied a very distinguished position in their literature, as both Lewis and Tolkien regarded it with great deference and admiration:

While Lewis defined myth as ‘lies breathed through silver’, Tolkien (...) believed in the inherent truth of mythology (...) ‘myth is invention about truth. We have come from God, and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they may contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God. Indeed only by myth-making, only by becoming a ‘sub-creator’ and inventing stories, can Man ascribe to the state of perfection that he knew before the Fall.’ (Carpenter cited in Hooper *Of This and Other Worlds*, 2000, p. 6)

Certainly, Lewis held this view before his conversion to Christianity, when he could not accept God’s role in myths, but he still had a very high opinion about them, without however sharing Tolkien’s lofty perspective. After his conversion, he came to the same conclusion as his friend, reflecting it in many of his writings. In fact, in his *Space Trilogy*, he makes a lot of use of biblical myths: in *Out of the Silent Planet* he builds his story around the myth of the fall of Lucifer, imagining what could have happened after such a terrible event, in *Perelandra* he creates a wonderful story of what could have been our world if Adam and Eve had not fallen by eating the forbidden fruit, while in the last book of the trilogy entitled *That Hideous Strength* he explores the myth of the Tower of Babel and the entanglement of tongues in order to make his grand finale. Thus, Lewis becomes that sub-creator that Tolkien was talking about in his wonderful essay “On Stories”.

Moreover, in the opening of one of his masterfully written academic works called *The Allegory of Love – A Study in Medieval Tradition* (1958, p. 1) [11], Lewis explains that the allegorical poetry of love is liable to repel the modern reader because it presents a totally different conception. The form is the battle between personified abstractions, which is very far from what moderns supposed art should be doing: actually meaning what it says or having no meaning whatsoever. In other words, the author makes the

point that the poetry written during the Middle Ages had far more meanings and nuances than the one written in his times. Here we can clearly see Lewis's opinion of the modern man interested in literature: influenced by modern ideologies, he is unable to dig deeper in his readings and notice the large array of significances they offer. Abstractions in an age of scientific revolution and incredible technological progress seem to be too much of an effort for the reader accustomed to the customary "slice of life" that modern literature promised to provide. Modernity meant a lot of practicality even in art (which is of course a paradox – if art does not deal with deeper issues and does not stimulate the mind to search for essence and meaning, then what does it do?), which certainly marginalised the great authors who dealt with profound philosophical questions.

Lewis's goal in writing fiction was to convey meanings; his literature is full of symbolism and ways of perceiving reality through spiritual lenses. Nevertheless, modernists did not try to make sense of life, their whole creed was about the impossibility of understanding reality, about the absurdity of existence and the abolition of objective value. Lewis endeavoured to (re)create meaning, reaffirming the existence of objective value and ultimately of an all-powerful Creator. Lewis's and the modernists' aims in writing were considerably distinct, so much so that we can hardly believe they lived in the same period of time.

As a disclaimer, we should be careful to note that the modern reader is not necessarily a temporal concept, Lewis does not refer to the man born in the 20th century, but he means the man who only reads contemporary fiction and his taste for literature is directed by modernist principles, whereas the real intellectual and lover of literature would read books from a large range of time periods and literary movements in order to be able to have an overview of literature and to grasp as many meanings as possible.

Although we are quite accustomed with a peaceful Lewis, who only expresses his positions in his writings or lectures, in his youth Lewis was quite militant. Not even then, although he was not yet a Christian, did he like what literature had become. This is shown in a passage from a biography of Lewis called *Jack/C.S. Lewis and His Times* (1988, pp. 90-91) [12] written by a friend of his, George Sayer. It is worth noting the way the British author attacked modernism as a literary movement (a literary fashion more likely) even from a young age, thus before he converted to Christianity. This passage talks of a Lewis in his Oxford undergraduate days, when he was dreaming of becoming a poet himself and tried to create some poems. Even then, regardless of the obvious anti-Christian touch of modernism (by which he was not greatly disturbed in those years), he rejected modernism because it was no longer authentically interested in literature and in great subjects of life or philosophy. They promoted, as he said, a "sick of everything" mood, with which he could not agree. He planned to be actively involved in protecting the literary subjects that really mattered by publishing an anthology of poems, which would greatly differ from the trends of his times. There, he and his literary friends would have the freedom to write about "sane subjects" and to promote authentic literature. This fact says a lot about his attitude; he seems to have been militant about the writing fashion of his days and quite outspoken among his peers. He talks of indecent literature promoted by the French poets, with whom he obviously does not agree, fact which proves his classical literary taste. He may have felt that the 20th century literature attacked too much and too profoundly what he most liked about this art: the elegant use of language, the stimulation of imagination in a decent way, the enlargement of one's view on reality.

In another passage from the same book we find out that Lewis had actually two reactions in what concerns modernism: the first is the one discussed earlier, that of resistance and opposition (even active one), but the second one is very different from the former because it involves a total disregard of the writings of his age. Sayer (1988, p. 122) talks about the fact that Lewis had no interest in free verse and regarded it as a deliberate revolutionary movement against the English poetic tradition. He was not very fond of American writers in general and tended to be quite ignorant of anything literary which was fashionable. It seems that tradition was a very important issue for Lewis. It is no wonder, actually, since he studied ancient Greek and Latin at Oxford along with philosophy. His taste in literature was quite sophisticated because he had read many of the great works of literature.

Another good example of this is found in Michael Ward's book *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*:

He determinedly held the line against intellectual currents that would equate 'high style' and discernible organisation with empty pretence. Wordsworth, in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* might outline a manifesto for preferring 'natural' speech to elevated poetic diction; Joyce and Woolf might, in their turn, abandon received novelistic structures; functionalism, brutalism and absurdism might become the height of fashion and even buildings might eventually be constructed with their innards showing. None of these artistic movements (or their adumbrations) meant much to Lewis. His models remained Dante, Spenser, Sidney and others of their kind who practised literary formality and self-control, and who considered rhetorical maskings and layerings valuable. (2008, p. 20) [13]

Ward's words show exactly Lewis's attitude to his times: without being influenced by passing and ephemeral fashions, he stood firmly rooted in his convictions of what good literature really is. He disregarded all the modern trends and admired Dante's magnificent talent of using biblical myths in a splendid literary piece, for instance. He was an adept of the hidden literature, as Ward further contends, the indirect literature which does not show everything it has to offer, but disguises its true value. This capacity of Lewis not to be influenced (or deeply influenced) by what was happening around him and to be able to return to his "safe space", so to speak, is also shown in the way he handled the aftermath of the First World War. Although his colleagues were writing massively about the war and its major effect on modern society, Lewis chose to be silent, almost not mentioning a word about it. Instead, he focused on the inner life of an individual or on the supernatural realm.

2.2. In his fiction

Moving on to his literary writing, his thoughts about this subject were quite transparent. Modernists and Lewis differed dramatically in the way they perceived the world. The former tended to consider it chaotic and futile, conveying this sense of hopelessness in their literature. A good case in point is the affirmation of T.S. Eliot in his review of *Ulysses* (1975, p. 177) [14], where he states that contemporary history is only an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy". If we think of Lewis's *Space Trilogy* and all the history of the planets, all the order of the universe, its beauty and noble aim, its Maleldil that takes care of everything and under whose protection Malacandra and Perelandra can thrive, we realise that Lewis did not think of the world as anarchic or futile at all. He described it as a realm of wonders, with immense possibilities of growth and knowledge. Even the characters' adventures in Narnia were not a means to escape the futile world, but methods of actually understanding it and most of all, of getting to know God, as Aslan says in the second book of *The Chronicles of Narnia* called *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (p. 411) [15]: "This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there". Certainly, Aslan is a figure of Christ and when Lucy asks him if he is also present in their world, he confirms. He explains that he is also there but under a different name, this is why this whole experience in the enchanted realm of Narnia would help her really know the Aslan of Earth, who is Christ. The fact that he tells Lucy she was there only to be able to know him better in her own world conveys a sense of predestination, of an all-encompassing plan that God has for this world and also for each individual. This is only a simple example of Lewis's concern with meaning and order, but there are far more in his literary works. Everything in Lewis's books is rife with symbols of order, meaning, destiny, transcendence. His works are as far from the modernists' concerns with the futility of the world as they could be.

Another illustrative example of this is Lewis's poem "Dymer", which was reviewed by Hugh d'A. Fausset in "The Times Literary Supplement". The critic commends the poem for its philosophical depth, which is in sharp contrast with the type of poems written in those times. He confesses that he has not recently read any poem that impressed him so much by its deep metaphysics, which make it stand far above most modern poetry (cited in Sayer, 1988, pp. 127-128). Sayer later comments that the poem made sense in a period when poetry in general was supposed to be obscure. Metaphysics was not a matter of interest in the 20th century, so Lewis chose quite unpopular subjects for his age. This is why he stood out as an exception from the century to which he belonged. It is quite dismal to think that depth of meaning in poetry should be frowned upon rather than looked up to only because the fashion of times does not agree with these types of themes. Fashions come and go, but deep art stays for many years, passing the test of time.

This clash in literature between ways of perceiving the world is very obvious in his first novel published after his conversion, *The Pilgrim's Regress*. There Lewis describes multiple perspectives on reality which were very popular in his times or in the past such as Romanticism, Freudism, Marxism, Realism etc. Clearly, he attacks all of them by making his main character, John, try every one of them out and prove their inefficiency and falsehood. They represent only extremes of approaching the world. He satirizes Freud's psychology and also attacks free verse and the modernist fashion (Sayer 1988). Later in his career he further commented and wrote about Freud, as someone with whom he does not share any values. By making all the current ideologies seem fake and wrong, Lewis clears the path for his choice of perspective on the world, which is highly different from the rest. The Christian view, although held dearly in the Middle Ages, has gradually lost its popularity and became more and more contested until it reached a critical point in the 20th century: it became either ignored or extremely mocked by a lot of popular canonical writers. However, Lewis chooses it as the best approach for his character, John, who meets Mother Kirk (a symbol of the Church) and finally accepts what she has to offer and gets baptised, starting by this a new life. Christianity was seen by the author of Narnia as the deepest way of seeing the world and, consequently, art, since it is only a reflection of reality.

Regarding this topic of the depth of art, Nichifor Crainic, a renowned Romanian philosopher and apologist, talks about the sense of culture and contends in his work *The Nostalgia for Paradise* (1994, p. 252) [16] that all cultural creation stems from the writer's nostalgia for paradise, so it is motivated by a desire to transcend the limits of our earthly existence. What he says seems quite utopic knowing a few things about what modernists tried to do in literature, as it looks almost impossible in their case. But in Lewis's case it fits like a glove, as he always aimed at meaning and depth in his writings, trying to transcend this existence and to make reference to another world, the afterlife in some cases, or another planet, another reality etc. All this passion for science fiction reflects his inner wish to transcend this reality, world and his intuition.

In the same line of thought, artists are the ones who feel the need of transcendence most acutely, since they are extremely sensitive souls. Saint Augustin in *Confessions* (1886, p. 45) [17] claims that "Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee". This restlessness is also manifested in art, especially the 20th century one, since it strays away from religious thought so much that it does not find its place anymore. What Saint Augustin said is of course applicable for every individual, but in our case, it introduces a spiritual lens through which we could perceive reality in a different manner. Modernist fiction expresses exactly this restlessness because it challenges some fundamental concepts such as life's meaning and aim. It actually intends to be metaphysical, at least it engages with this concept, but its conclusion seems to be that there is nothing to explore in this realm.

Regarding the choice of heroes for his novels, Lewis always promoted as a model the Christian figure, which has been considered quite traditional for the last almost two thousand years. Aslan, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is an obvious Christ figure, as he gives his life in order to save the world that he created and his people, Ransom in *The Space Trilogy* is at the beginning brought into another planet in order to be used as a sacrifice for the Malacandrians so they could let Weston and Divine achieve their goals, while in the last book of the series he gives his energy and knowledge in order to save the world. It is actually the same sacrifice of self-renunciation, but put in a different light. The Christian "patient" of Screwtape is also a heroic character as he resists multiple temptations of Wormwood and finally goes to heaven. Lewis's literature is filled with heroes and role-models, so he is actually in opposition with the modernist agenda, which promoted rather a cult of anti-heroes.

Despite the clear evidence we have of Lewis's negative attitude towards modernism, there are some scholars who believe that he used modernist themes or techniques in his writings, thus engaging with this literary movement in one way or another. Margaret Barbara Hiley in her PhD thesis entitled *Aspects of Modernism in the Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams* (2006, p. 40) [18] contended that Lewis and the Inklings in general had some things in common with the modernists, namely the feeling of alienation which appears in their work and the struggle with reality: "The alienation central to the modern experience of reality and the concern with what actually constitutes reality is addressed in the works of both Inklings and modernists, and is often dealt with in similar ways". Although there is indeed a feeling of alienation in some works of Lewis (especially in *The Space*

Trilogy and *The Chronicles of Narnia*), he portrays it very differently from the modern works and with distinct implications. Alienation appears only at the beginning for some characters that experience both the normal world and the fantastic realm they encounter. This sense arises like any other feeling of insecurity mixed with marvel and fear which is typical for one who has changed his surroundings.

In the case of modernism, alienation appears most often as a result of the war and of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and of the incapacity of characters to deal with the enormous baggage of suffering, trauma and shock they experienced in the battlefield. It is something very realistic, as it actually happened to many soldiers who returned from the war and authors have used it in their literary works to give a better account of life as it was back then, of pure reality. Alienation in the works of Lewis seems like a mere shadow compared to the modernists: some characters feel that only when they cross the threshold to another world (for example Ransom when he gets to Malacandra, or Lucy when she goes to Narnia). It is present for a brief period of time and only to emphasize the strangeness of the new world. There is no trauma disorder in the works of Lewis, no attempt to reintegrate in society, no classical war between countries or political powers. Having said that, we do not believe that this reason is valid enough to say that Lewis's writings had modernist features. On the contrary, it shows how extremely different he wrote compared to his contemporaries.

The author of Narnia was clearly a traditionalist, so he could never agree with what modernism was doing to English Literature. He even said of T.S. Eliot that he was corrupting other poets with his use of free verse, which makes the readers of poetry feel quite estranged (Sayer 1988). In other words, Lewis thought modernism destroyed literature, or, to put it less harshly, did more harm than good to it. As literature belongs to the humanities and to the evolution of thought, it is not exempt from major wanderings. We believe it is accurate to consider modernism a decadent phase of literature, a departure from its power to convey meaning and a revolution against everything that was stable, sound and valuable.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In a nutshell, C.S. Lewis was an atypical writer for his time: not a modern one, but writing in the middle of modernity, not a modernist, but writing at the same time modernism was in bloom. We have shown some essential ways in which he differed from modernists, first of all in his theoretical works, in which he makes clear the preferred literary form for his writings, his choice of content and sources of inspiration. We have also addressed some practical ways in which he tried to disobey the canon, either by trying to form a group that would create an anthology of poems totally opposed to the modernist creed, or by simply ignoring the fashion and writing in his own traditional way. Regarding the fiction he wrote, the text illustrates clearly that he was concerned by the issue of transcendence and Christianity, fact which is quite obvious in all of his works, either in the ideas he conveys or in the choice of his main characters, who are very often Christ-figures.

Now the time has come to offer an answer for the question in the title. Certainly, all of the arguments above have proven that Lewis was not a modernist, which means that only the other option is available, anti-modernist, or a third one at which we hinted briefly, that of "amodernist". It is hard to choose between the two, as there are good examples for each one. Nonetheless, we would choose to call Lewis an "amodernist", as he did not intend to write explicitly against modernism (except in his short story "The Shoddy Lands", which is not as popular as the rest of his works). In most of his writings, he followed his own classical models, as Michael Ward claimed, disregarding fashionable tendencies (not consciously writing in a reverse manner to prove that they are wrong, for instance, which is what an anti-modernist would do). He was not totally ignorant of what was being written back in his times, but read only the essentials, without dwelling much on them. He did not follow an opposite agenda, but only remarked from time to time the deplorable status of literature in the 20th century. Moreover, he did not make any compromises in order to be better read or renowned, but remained loyal to his Christian creed and to the traditional ways of viewing literature. His strength of character to stay truthful and unswervingly loyal to his principles as a creator of fiction and a man of faith is remarkable. This is why he was not only an impressive writer, but also an outstanding personality.

References

1. Calinescu, M., 1987. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch and Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
2. 2004. *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Stevenson, R., 1992. *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
4. Woolf, V., 1961. Modern Fiction. *Modern British Fiction*, edited by Mark Schorer, pp. 3-9.
5. Lewis, C., 1962. *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*. London: Oxford University Press.
6. Lewis, C., 2013. *Selected Literary Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Lewis, C., 1977. *The Dark Tower and Other Stories*, edited by Walter Hooper. London: Collins.
8. Lewis, C., 2019. *An Experiment in Criticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Lewis, C., 1994. *The Collected Poems of C.S. Lewis*, edited by Walter Hooper. London : Fount.
10. Lewis, C., 2000. *Of This and Other Worlds*. London: Fount.
11. Lewis, C., 1958. *The Allegory of Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
12. Sayer, G., 1988. *Jack/C.S. Lewis and His Times*. s.l.:Macmillan .
13. Ward, M., 2008. *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. New York: Oxford University Press.
14. Eliot, T., 1975. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Boston: Harcourt.
15. Lewis, C., n.d. *The Chronicles of Narnia: Complete 7-Book Collection*. s.l.:HarperCollins Publishers.
16. Crainic, N., 1994. *Nostalgia paradisiului [The Nostalgia for Paradise]*. Iasi: MOLDOVA.
17. Augustin, S., 1886. *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin, with a Sketch of His Life and Work*, edited by Schaff Philip. New York: Grand Rapids.
18. Hiley, M. B., 2006. *Aspects of Modernism in the works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams*. Glasgow: Glasgow Thesis Service.