



THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MAKE-BELIEVE

*A Guide to the Principal Works
of Britain, Europe, and America*

John Goldthwaite

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the Gollum. In light of this vast and compulsive output, it is hard not to suppose that he was searching all the while for his *Eucatastrophe*, the *evangelium* he so valued that with a “sudden joyous turn” would make his life’s imaginings ring true. If so, he might have known better what to expect. Down there in the abyss, joy was going to elude him to the bitter end.

Tolkien’s confidant at Oxford in matters of faith and literature was his younger friend and fellow don, the noted Christian apologist Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963). What the two men shared most was a sense of alienation from society and a love of old legends. They read to each other from works in progress, and together they recited Wagner librettos and talked about the old gods in their twilight. As Tolkien was bringing *The Lord of the Rings* to completion, his friend was likewise at work, drafting a series of seven novels that, when completed, would constitute the first major tutorial muse fantasy and Christian parable since *Pinocchio*. Lewis’s imagination was to take him on a more circular route than Tolkien’s, however, to a parallel universe called Narnia, where parties of earth children could be tested in the rigors of adventure and tutored in the ways of God.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950),
Prince Caspian (1951), *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952),
The Silver Chair (1953), *The Horse and His Boy* (1954),
The Magician’s Nephew (1955), *The Last Battle* (1956)

“Supposing,” wrote Lewis when explaining how he meant to story matters of faith, “supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time [sic] appear in their real potency?”⁷ What he meant to do with his Christian parable had not, in fact, been done before. **He meant to make Christ Himself the muse of the tale.** It was the potency of Christ that he wanted to bring out, the presence of a Christ, as he wrote in *The Silver Chair*, “so bright and real and strong that everything else began at once to look pale and shadowy compared with him.” His rationale for taking the reader to another world to achieve this end he reiterated at the close of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* when his Savior, the lion Aslan, tells the children about to embark for home, “there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. 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.”

The journey to this understanding had begun a decade earlier, at the outbreak of World War II. Some schoolgirls evacuated from London were being billeted with the Lewis menage at Oxford; the occasion suggesting a tale, Lewis worked up a trial sketch for one:



This book is about four children. . . . They all had to go away from London suddenly because of Air Raids, and because Father, who was in the Army, had gone off to the War and Mother was doing some kind of war work. They were sent to stay with a kind of relation of Mother's who was a very old Professor who lived all by himself in the country.⁸

The Chronicles of Narnia began in a good and basically harmless spirit, then, in the tradition of the school-holiday story. Lewis's chatty lingo and easy rhythms recall the English storyteller Edith Nesbit, a favorite of his childhood. To Nesbit can go some of the credit for the trial sketch being brought forward as the opening to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* after lying idle for seven or eight years. The magic wardrobe leading to Lucy's rendezvous at a lamppost in the snows of Narnia is a borrowing from Nesbit's story "The Aunt and Amabel," published when Lewis was ten. It may be that the best writing in the series reflects this interim, Nesbit period when Lewis had yet to take a hard fix on his meanings. There are passages in *The Chronicles* that seem fresh from his first discoveries of how to get in and out of Narnia and of the kinds of magic that could be practiced in such a place. When he let Nesbit's voice speak for him in conjuring new and wonderful things, he spoke rather well. She herself lacked an instinct for fantasy, although taking her cue from Mrs. Molesworth and H. G. Wells, she wrote several of them anyway. In *Five Children and It* (1902), *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), the prose is clear and comely but the invention thin. Nesbit could round the circle of her circular fantasies nicely but wanted for interesting places to send her children, and could find little for them to do once they arrived. She is best understood as a comic realist:

"Oh, hats, how hot it is!" said Robert. "Dogs put their tongues out when they're hot; I wonder if it would cool us at all to put out ours?"

"We might try," Jane said; and they all put their tongues out as far as ever they could go, so that it quite stretched their throats, but it only seemed to make them thirstier than ever, besides annoying everyone who went by.

Five Children and It

If Lewis had been content to stay with his narrative model, the work might have achieved a greater unity than it did. But he was too instinctively mimetic to hold to a single voice; each new narrative need in this long series brought to mind the best examples of its kind from his vast reading, and he fell like an acolyte into that manner of saying the scene. Lucy's foray into Narnia is a page taken from that first, famous story of a little girl wandering a new world, and her encounter with the Faun at the lamppost is really Alice's encounter with the White Rabbit in Wonderland. Later in the same book, a book being told as a holiday adventure, we find Lewis calling up conjunctive resonances from the King James Bible as his leonine Christ is taken down from the cross and echoing Kenneth Grahame's "Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship."

Incompatible borrowings can be found all through the series; sometimes the mingling echoes work to advantage, and sometimes they seem only the comfortable murmurings of The Man Who Read Too Much. In imagining his world between worlds, he would draw heavily from MacDonald's adult work, *Phantastes*; but, sorry to say, Lewis was no Greatheart; despite the felicity of many passages in *The Chronicles* there will be no final giving away of himself to the task of guiding his pilgrims to the Celestial Country, only, in the end, a stop here, a stop there, and always the trilling whistle of the troop leader.

When these various influences do level out into a single, pervasive voice in the series, moreover, it is not Lewis's voice that we hear but the voice of the literary storybook. This is a sound never perfected by more than a few children's authors, and its limitations are manifest. Katharine Pyle's "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Aladdin" are possibly the best "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Aladdin" ever told,⁹ but they are rather patrician tellings and their subjects are made middle class and wholesome in a way foreign to their own lives. Never, however, did Pyle speak in the affected manner of her more famous brother, and this is just what we so often hear Lewis doing. Like Howard Pyle or, later, Tolkien, he could not resist trying his hand at the high heroic style, and, like them, he sounds perfectly archaic and silly doing it:

"Fair Consorts, let us now alight from our horses and follow this beast into the thicket; for in all my days I never hunted a nobler quarry."

"Sir," said the others, "even so let us do."

Speaking out of several inherited traditions betrayed him into making some truly fatal blunders. His central problem in building the parable had always been the difficulty of portraying his Lion of Judah, Aslan, in such a way that the Christ figure would speak with the needed authority yet without intimidating the tale back into those stained-glass and Sunday School associations Lewis wished to avoid. The odds against him were long, and he did not really surmount them—or, rather, he surmounted them and toppled over onto the other side of good judgment. His provenance for an anthropomorphized godhead lay in two biblical apocalypses:

And as for the lion whom you saw rousing up out of the forest and roaring and speaking to the eagle and reproving him for his unrighteousness, and as for all his words that you have heard, this is the Messiah whom the Most High has kept until the end of days. . . . in mercy he will set free the remnant of my people, those who have been saved throughout my borders, and he will make them joyful until the end comes, the day of judgment. . . .

2 Esdras

Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed. . . .

Revelation

And this was his storybook solution to the dilemma:

"Wow!" roared Aslan half rising from his throne. . . .

Even a child might question the “real potency” of a Christ given to yelling “Wow!” At this point in the tale the reader may be noticing how shaky the props truly are that support Narnia. The muse was never made to look foolish by misspeaking like this in *The Water Babies* or *Pinocchio*, or the stories of MacDonald or *The Little Lame Prince*. A suspicion begins to arise that *The Chronicles* may not be, after all, quite as inspired as one would hope of a parable written by the most famous Christian apologist of the day. It may be a good time to ask of Lewis what I asked of Dodgson and Tolkien: why an avowed Christian would choose to make his witness by setting up a creation in competition with God’s. His reason had seemed clear enough—to portray Christ so vividly in make-believe terms that children would know him as “bright and real and strong”—and there are moments when he does approach this end. There are many more, however, when the Lion of Judah simply looks goofy. And there are even some scenes ugly enough to suggest the presence of a debilitating animus driving these seven books, just as one had driven *Alice in Wonderland*.

Spiritual estrangement is the most obvious reason for creating a world sequestered off to the side of reality, of course. Lewis’s career as misanthrope, misogynist, xenophobe, and classroom bully has been well and depressingly documented. Like Tolkien, too, he lacked Kingsley’s fascination with the natural world as a bright given of our existence. Here and there we see him paying lip service to the beauties of creation, but nature—that is, real, not make-believe, nature—is generally viewed as a crawly, fallen state to be avoided whenever possible. The spirit of Psalm 26, to “tell of all thy wondrous works,” is little in evidence for a practiced Christian apologist. Unlike Kingsley, Lewis ignored, or never saw, what might have been useful to him in his daily disenchantment, how the psalmists could praise God and with the very same words raise a moan about the world without giving offense.

Subtract man and nature from the parable and what does the author have left? He has his storybook stereotypes, his pessimism, and here a Christ who must be an uncertain presence largely dependent on the parablist’s own prejudices. In Narnia they will be the prejudices of a man who, as Lewis wrote in *Prince Caspian*, fills all his spare hours with “thinking and dreaming about the old days, and longing that they might come back.” It was not idle talk when the biblical prophets and wisdom writers warned against the spiritual snare-net of nostalgia. In the haze of sweet regret, grace must seem a phantom thing, to be found only in the antiquities of books or the promise of the New Jerusalem. The alienated Christian is necessarily at odds with perhaps the most famous passage in the New Testament: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” Lewis so deplored the world that, once deprived of his usual method, that of arguing His Christ into being, and having now to evoke him in story language instead, he could do it only by making some other, some presumably better world for him to inhabit. This first and more obvious reason for creating the parallel universe of Narnia was the negative reason: it allowed Lewis to leave out

everything about the world that he disliked or to summon up what he disliked in such a way that he could knock it about however he wished. Making the way straight for Jesus was his warrant.

The second reason followed from the first: a Narnia gave him a place to put in everything that did please him. **This is where Tolkien fell out with his friend**, finding in the way he peopled his Platonic “shadowland” an utter disregard for the laws of consistency that must be observed when writing any fantasy. The new world must seem all of a piece, naturally evolved to its own fullness. Narnia is all pieces of other fullnesses, hastily thrown together like stage props retrieved from a warehouse. **The only law of consistency Lewis observed was the law of his own fancy.** His characters—medieval lords and ladies, talking horses and beavers, Greek fauns, witches and magicians, Father Christmas, elves, werewolves, mermaids, an evil ape, a dragon, and Cyrano de Bergerac played by a mouse—mill about like actors from various costume dramas in a Hollywood back lot. Narnia is much like Barrie’s Never Never Land, **a theatrical set that will be knocked down when the curtain falls on the apocalypse of act seven** and the assembled cast is dispersed either to heaven or to hell. Platonism has here become an excuse for artistic license, as if the author could throw into the mix anything that came to mind, on the specious reasoning that anything he thinks into existence must already exist—indeed, be favored—in the mind of God. Lewis’s supposition that this was so led him into a theological morass. As eclectic as the books are in their stylistic borrowings, so **are they equally syncretic in borrowing from the pantheons of the world’s pagan faiths and demonologies.** As a Protestant fundamentalist, Lewis liked to ridicule other faiths in his pages, attacking Islam in *The Horse and His Boy*, for example, and in *The Last Battle* belittling Roman Catholicism, but he held fire if he happened to fancy the faith’s imagery. When the children first encounter Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the king of heaven is found to be sporting in the forest not with his saints but with Dryads, Naiads, a unicorn, centaurs, and a bull bearing the head of a man. The Lord of this hellenized, New Age land of make-believe is really more the son of Zeus and Hera than any recognizably Christian Christ.

I would hazard a guess that Lewis was emboldened to become this precipitous in his misreading of Plato by William Blake’s infamous dictum, **“Everything possible to be believ’d is an image of truth.”**¹⁰ I would guess, too, that he was encouraged into thinking the time ripe for a sorcerer’s apprenticeship **by Walt Disney’s recent homage to pagan mythologies, *Fantasia* (1940).** The Judeo-Christian idiom had by now pretty much become a thing of the past, having in the nineteenth century rapidly lost its authority as a common language for the arts as biblical literacy declined and the fairy tales and myths of all nations and creeds became universally popular. A Romantic like Keats, affecting Greek ways, could rephrase Blake’s bill of goods into the comely lie that any beauty is truth and any truth beauty, and declare, “that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” The

Moderns similarly reanimated themselves by looking to primitive art. As a pop travesty of this long search for a new metaphoric language in what everyone was eager to call the post-Christian era, *Fantasia* stands as perhaps Hollywood's greatest ode to eclectic kitsch. To the strains of Stravinsky and Moussoursky, cartoon fauns and centaurs gambol, Pegasus soars, wizards beckon the elements, dinosaurs thunder, and hippopotami pirouette in pink tutus. If Lewis needed encouragement to throw into his drama whatever he pleased, he would certainly have found it at the movies. The temptation to poke through neighboring mythologies has always been great, of course, for paganism affords the artist more cunning, new ways of feigning miracles than he could accommodate in three lifetimes. That men are ever "vain in their imaginations" is a warning sounded everywhere in Scripture, from Sinai through Proverbs and the prophets to Paul, who cautioned,

Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,
And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.

Nesbit's magic wardrobe must have offered the professor of English an escape from doctrine too convenient to pass by. And what harm could there be, after all, in something that was only make-believe? Taking license with the Platonic Forms, he could use this secondary world to play his religion to the tune of his own fancy. Becoming a demiurge unto himself empowered him now, not merely to leave out what he did not like and to put in what he did, but to say all those extraneous things he wanted to say that he could not get away with in the world of real men and women or in his usual world of orthodox, fundamentalist thought. That this was yet a third reason motivating the creation of Narnia he as much as announced in his offhanded Platonic *summa*, "I wrote fairy tales because the Fairy Tale seemed the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say."¹¹ When he wrote that he had things to say, he meant it as a pedagogue of the old school. Beyond saying his story, beyond saying his parable, he made *The Chronicles* serve every petty prejudice and every theological revision that could be fitted into the general scheme. And it is here—and not, as he told it, with the White Witch of the North—that evil entered Narnia. It is Lewis's own original sin of pride that infects this new world and brings about its fall.

On Being Boys and Girls

Several parties of children are assembled for the various adventures in Narnia. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and *The Last Battle* it is the Pevensie clan: Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. In *The Dawn Treader* Lewis added as the hapless foil of the piece a Pevensie cousin, the unlovely Eustace Scrubb, "a puny little person" whose parents "wore a special kind of underclothes."

In *The Silver Chair* the struggling foil and heroine, Jill Pole, is joined by a Eustace newly reconstituted as one with a certain potential for heroism after all. In *The Magician's Nephew* the children are Polly and Digory, and in *The Horse and His Boy* the Narnian children, Shasta and Aravis. The first adventure had begun in the spirit of a school holiday, but this was a deception: these children are about to be examined more rigorously than ever they were at school; one of them Lewis is literally going to damn to hell. Unlike a Pinocchio, moreover, they will not even enjoy the freedom and dignity of their own thoughts along the way. The oft-scolded Pinocchio was only being asked to look to his studies, after all; he was otherwise free to think and run loose as he chose. In Christian terms he had the full free will necessary to make his actions meaningful. Lewis's children are puppets in a way that Pinocchio was not. It is possible, of course, that they are lacking free will by default; for where Collodi could quote straight from a child's brain and heart, Lewis seems not to have had a clue. His children are stock characters from series books, and they think in the clichés of series books. Occasionally they sound at least as convincing as Nesbit's children, but usually not, for he lacked Nesbit's ear for child-talk. The Pevensies and their friends speak the rhetoric of adventure and school stories. As a consequence, Lewis could ignore them as real persons and deal with them punitively at his leisure. The voice of the hall proctor stalks these pages, monitoring the children's every move and thought. Lewis judges their already predestined decisions, counts the demerits of their tears, and sets them to monitoring one another for lapses in right behavior. He is the sort of teacher who entertains the class by belittling the one or two kids whom no one much likes anyway. As much as he hated his own school days, they were good enough for him, and they ought to be good enough for us. There will be no nonsense about coeducation and enough corporal punishment to teach the way of things. The subject under study, in short, is not Christianity, or Christian ethics, but the kind of quasi-military comportment honored in the boy's books of R. M. Ballantyne and Captain Marryat, favorites of Lewis's youth. Poor "puny little person" Eustace, with his beetle collection, his miserable excuses, and his parents who wear funny underwear (what *can* this mean, by the way?), will become a hero not through any real agency of his own but because Lewis, having made his point about the sort of boy he detests, now wants to explicate the rules by which a worm can become One of Us.

If the books had quite so regimental a feel to them as I am here making out, of course, they would not be as popular as they apparently are, especially with girls. Lewis is sly. The going seldom seems too rigorous as you read along; the voice editorializing in the background is solicitous enough in the right places to be encouraging. Instead, the lessons are being insinuated; the method is one of innuendo. Incredibly, Lewis will sometimes even cozy the reader into a conspiracy against one of the main characters. Again and again in *The Silver Chair*, Jill Pole is spotlighted as a person who,

being a girl, is not up to the challenge. She forgets her instructions, causes accidents, and

I hope you won't lose all interest in Jill for the rest of the book if I tell you that at this moment she began to cry. There was a good deal of excuse for her.

At first reading this sounds a kindly way of putting the matter, not unlike Dinah Mulock Craik tending to her little lame prince. But it is not kindly; it is patronizing, and, worse, it is a betrayal of Jill. The relationship between Lewis and his characters is here exposed: he is the false friend of their need, ever ready to throw a wink over their shoulders to the reader. No one need be reminded of the man's public testimony on the inherent inferiority of girls to notice how often in these pages he allows them only the little things, and without much conviction even then. Rarely do we find him saluting a girl without crossing his other fingers behind his back:

Polly absolutely refused to do any exploring in new worlds until she had made sure about getting back to the old one. She was quite as brave as he about some dangers (wasps, for instance) but she was not so interested in finding out things nobody had ever heard of before; for Digory was the sort of person who wants to know everything, and when he grew up he became the famous Professor Kirke who comes into other books.

It is everywhere painfully clear in *The Chronicles* that if girls are to be of any use, either in this world or in the New Jerusalem, they must learn to conform to the code as set out in boy's adventure novels. If they must tag along, that is, they had better follow orders, show pluck, and not blubber over all those things they can usually be expected to blubber over. Most will be found wanting along the way, naturally, and the reasons will be tediously familiar: "She's not like Lucy, you know, who's as good as a man, or at any rate as good as a boy."

I do not pretend to understand why girls like these stories as much as they do. As far as I can tell, boys have not cared for them much. It may be that boys are quicker to sense when another boy is making a grab for the whistle and clipboard. Insofar as girls today can more readily take their intellect and talents as a given, I suppose it is natural that they should be attracted to the challenges being offered them in Narnia. Lewis does court them with the occasional bouquet. Lucy acquits herself well, and so in the end does Jill, and the warrior maiden Aravis, of *The Horse and His Boy*, "was proud . . . and true as steel." The seduction here for girls, I suspect, is their implicit induction into a private club previously reserved for boys only. As they read along, they may not care what an elitist clique for Top Boys and Girls it is, or how exclusion from it will be for everyone else the quite literal loss of heaven in the end. Harvey Darton had noted the Victorians' "modest feeling of prerogative audience." In Lewis's keeping, this feeling has turned immodest and smug, allowing him to post his own keep-out signs on the clubhouse door:



"Squints, and has freckles," said Caspian.

"Oh, poor girl," said Lucy.

Once you have granted yourself license to say the snide thing, you are only a smirk away from the wicked one. In *Prince Caspian* appears what may well be the vilest passage ever to poison a children's book. Aslan has been coursing through Narnia, winnowing the wheat from the chaff, the saved from the damned, when he arrives with his entourage at a school-house where a class is in progress:

"If you don't attend, Gwendolen," said the mistress, "and stop looking out of the window, I shall have to give you an order-mark."

"But please, Miss Prizzle—" began Gwendolen.

"Did you hear what I said, Gwendolen?" asked Miss Prizzle.

"But please, Miss Prizzle," said Gwendolen, "there's a LION!"

"Take two order-marks for talking nonsense," said Miss Prizzle. "And now —" A roar interrupted her. Ivy came curling in at the windows of the classroom. The walls became a mass of shimmering green, and leafy branches arched overhead where the ceiling had been. Miss Prizzle found she was standing on grass in a forest glade. She clutched at her desk to steady herself, and found that the desk was a rose-bush. Wild people such as she had never even imagined were crowding round her. Then she saw the lion, screamed and fled, and with her fled her class, who were mostly dumpy, prim little girls with fat legs. Gwendolen hesitated.

... "You'll stay with us, sweetheart?" said Aslan.

"Oh, *may* I? Thank you, thank you," said Gwendolen.

Lewis's hatreds were petty, his enemies weak. The role of tutor-as-bully was one he relished, both at Oxford and in his books. Apologists for his work have written that his sadism should not be exaggerated. His pupil and biographer Roger Lancelyn Green, who will also promote the Reverend Dodgson as demiurge, sniffily dismisses Lewis's detractors as "watchful dragons." Well, perhaps. These same apologists refer to the master as "Saint Jack" and have even submitted to Rome that he be considered for beatification. Nevertheless, somewhere among the world's vast population of dumpy people with fat legs, there is one crestfallen schoolgirl who understands all too well the message of saintly Jack in this passage. So let us not ourselves simply pass it off as make-believe. The happy entourage here cavorting through Narnia is not a gathering of Christ and his Elect; it is a party of the Smart Set frolicking down the avenue and laughing at the pokey people they pass. Sweethearts named Gwendolen are in; girls with fat legs or freckles are out. In the care of Saint Jack, the Last Judgment has become a beauty contest: no Prizzles allowed at that heavenly pub, The Lion and the Lamb, and no freckles and no dumpies, either. For the extraordinary assumption behind this passage must be that there are no girls with fat legs among Lewis's readership — or else, perhaps, that their feelings are too inconsequential to matter. It is an assumption that makes Lewis either the most obtuse children's author who ever lived or the most fatuous.



If the latter, the word evil springs to mind, and, if not evil, then certainly the word shame. These lines, and many others like them, were written in cold blood. Lewis had ample opportunity to edit them out or to rewrite them in a better spirit. He chose to let them stand. His editors and publishers, to their own shame, have let them stand as well. People commonly, and unnecessarily, I think, worry about the violence in some children's books. Here is the real violence. Mother Goose would have slapped this saint silly.



Charles Kingsley may inadvertently have opened the door to this kind of mean-spiritedness when he promulgated a whimsical and potentially dangerous doctrine to explain the prickles that appear all over Tom's body—a phenomenon that he assures the reader

was quite natural; for you must know and believe that people's souls make their bodies just as a snail makes its shell. . . . And therefore, when Tom's soul grew all prickly with naughty tempers, his body could not help growing prickly too, so that nobody would cuddle him, or play with him, or even like to look at him.

In *The Water Babies* this is a phenomenon presumably restricted to Purgatory, where visible signs will help us to purge ourselves of sin. In Lewis it has become corrupted into a doctrine that speaks of the living. The implication is clear. This is the predestined damnation of Calvinism that MacDonald had wanted no part of: ugly people are ugly because they have ugly souls. If, like C. S. Lewis, you have been gifted with a true eye for God's favor, you can, simply by looking at them, save boys and girls the trouble of looking into their mirrors to see for themselves if they are saved or damned. Freckles and fat are unmistakable signs; tears and odd hobbies render you suspect as well. Indeed, whomever Mr. Lewis deems contemptible or risible, pray that you aren't one yourself—for Mr. Lewis, children, speaks for God.



It is a shabby performance, lacking even the Puritans' reservation that for children excluded from heaven there will at least be "the best room in hell." Lewis's critics have called his method and message fascistic; certainly, it is anything but Christian to teach children to judge their neighbors. Dumpy girls with fat legs are Lewis's Jews. This is wicked enough; to implicate Christ in such a travesty is to commit, by one's own canon laws, a great sin. I have argued that an author ought not to think of himself as a priest, as Andersen had done; nonetheless, when you are writing a Christian parable, your story does become in effect the body of Christ, and your readers communicants. A priest who would offer communion to four children and knowingly, out of personal malice, slap shut the mouth of a fifth would be guilty of an unpardonable offense. Just so with the scribe.

On Being Men and Women

Not unlike Kingsley, but in a poorer spirit, Lewis used his tale to vent whatever opinions he held on whatever subjects. In general, these ring with

the bravado of the barroom, a place where he particularly liked to hold forth. Whatever achievement one might name from the Renaissance on, he was against it. He deplored democracy and denied any wisdom to the separation of church and state. He held science and social welfare in contempt, ridiculed modern education, and advocated the beating of students. In *The Dawn Treader* he dismissed any and all benefits of progress out of hand: “We call it *Going bad* in Narnia.” Most of the opinions expressed in *The Chronicles* are merely petty, however. He took digs at vegetarians, teetotalers, nonsmokers. Some others are so personal as to be pointless, such as his announced distaste for people who sleep with their windows open. His views on men and women and how or whether the twain shall meet are likewise caricatures of real thought. There are no real men or women in these stories, just as there are no real children. His men are either storybook knights or weaklings defined by a craven subservience to women, whose sole pleasure and evil purpose it is to emasculate the sorry beggars. Lewis had no difficulty mating beavers happily, but whenever we find him placing a man in proximity to a woman, or in situations that might suggest a muse relationship, it is to expose the pairing as unnatural and wicked. The pattern is so consistent as to suggest an intrusive neurosis: “He’s a great baby, really: tied to that woman’s apron strings; he’s a sap.” Lewis feared women and disliked them categorically. Femininity he saw as an imperfection, the sin of Eve, unspiritual and sinister.¹² Like Tolkien, the only women he could admit to feeling comfortable with were “shapes that looked like women but were really the spirits of trees.” Whenever he sees them in a more threatening role, he retreats, interestingly, into the sadomasochistic rhetoric of pulp literature:

... Jadis the Queen of Queens and the Terror of Charn. Her teeth were bared, her eyes shone like fire, and her long hair streamed out behind her like a comet’s tail. She was flogging the horse without mercy.

Otherwise, grownup women are simply unpleasant: “I know of nothing so disagreeable as being kissed by a giantess.” All women were giantesses to Lewis. The evil witches and queens in *The Chronicles* are all of them “tall and great.” What in Kingsley and MacDonald were signs of nobility only struck fear in the heart of C. S. Lewis. Any man drawn to quality in a woman he brands a fool or a baby or a sap. He recognized but two kinds of woman: seducers and dominatrixes. Not that he minded borrowing from them, as he had done with Edith Nesbit. Ironically, the very scene in *The Silver Chair* in which a sap’s mistress weaves her malevolent spell over the children is a conceit lifted from the author Jean Ingelow. The Lady of the Green Kirtle’s sophistic argument denying any reality beyond the light of her underworld sun is an argument presented in *Mopsa the Fairy* about the moons of Fairyland.

In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis wrote, “in the hive and the anthill we see fully realized the two things that some of us most dread for our own species—the dominance of the female and the dominance of the collective.” It would be interesting to know whom he was implicating as being down there alongside him in his psychic bunker, but no matter; a valid analogy between human and insect life cannot be drawn, nor can one equate the feminine with the collective. Aware that psychologists might pounce on this almost pathological simile, he naively tried to head them off at the pass by tracing his fear of insects back to a nursery book given him by his mother. In it a Tom Thumb is menaced by a stag beetle whose mandibles could be opened and shut “like pincers” by pulling on the “devilish contraption” of a cardboard tab. “How a woman ordinarily so wise as my mother could have allowed this abomination into the nursery is difficult to understand,” he wrote, but of course it was only a mechanical toy book of a sort most little boys would pounce upon. Apparently, Lewis never forgave his mother for this innocent mistake: the only mention of her in the story of his life is this one citation for her insensitivity. The memory of it haunts *The Chronicles*; insects are frequently invoked, or otherwise implied, as in this image from *The Magician’s Nephew*:

“You!” said the Queen, laying her hand on his shoulder—a white, beautiful hand, but Digory could feel that it was strong as steel pincers.

I draw the equation reluctantly, but it is Lewis himself who has led us to it. Women, even those so ordinarily wise as his mother, come bearing pincers and knives. Let your guard down for a moment and the dreadful thing will surely happen.

Put the creatures in charge of educating children, as Kingsley had advised, and you need only await the breakdown of civilization:

I shall say as little as possible about Jill’s school, which is not a pleasant subject. It was “Co-educational,” a school for both boys and girls, what used to be called a “mixed” school; some said it was not nearly so mixed as the minds of the people who ran it.

Who does run it is a little revelation that Lewis saves for the great battle in the playground that ends *The Silver Chair*:

And then the Head (who was, by the way, a woman) came running out to see what was happening. And when she saw the lion and the broken wall and Caspian and Jill and Eustace (whom she quite failed to recognize) she had hysterics and went back to the house and began ringing up the police. . . .

I doubt that there exists anywhere in children’s literature a more dishonest parenthetical remark than this, or a more supercilious use of the phrase



“by the way.” There is nothing “by the way” about anything in these stories, and certainly nothing “by the way” about this arch slur or about the fact that the Head will summarily be removed from office for incompetence. To assess how truly malicious an aside it is, substitute for “woman” the word “Jew” or “Negro.” And then give a thought to the man’s jacket photo and to how puckishly he beams out at us while lighting his pipe. We are the prerogative audience he is cozying up to with these remarks—we, and our children.

The impulse to reopen a tale that had lain fallow for eight years had risen from this same unquiet corner of his psyche. Some billeted refugees would prompt *The Chronicles*; Christ would give them a purpose and Nesbit open the door, but the actual provocation for executing these seven novels sprang from his need to put a woman in her place—or two women, perhaps, or all of them. He had reason to speak of the dominance of the female, and yet a second reason in the bargain, that had added insult to the injury. His mother having died when he was ten, Lewis at nineteen had attached himself to a demanding lady twenty-six years his senior; for the next thirty years of his life he would live with her secretly as lover and devoted errand-boy. A measure of self-loathing seems to have accumulated over the decades. The exasperation that poured out of him suddenly and into *The Chronicles* in 1949 was precipitated by his humiliating public defeat the year before at the hands of the second imperious woman in his history, the Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. As Lewis biographer A. N. Wilson tells it, “The debate took place early in 1948 at the Socratic Club, and instantaneously became legend. Elizabeth Anscombe . . . shared his taste for fisticuffs. . . . She was quite equal to the bullying and the exploitation of the audience to which Lewis resorted when he was boxed into a corner. . . . That evening at the Socratic Club was the first in the Society’s history that Lewis was thoroughly trounced in argument.”¹³

Worst of all, the object of the debate had been one of his very own books, *Miracles*, and the inadequacy of his argument for the existence of God. What his fellow Christian had established, furthermore, was his own ignorance of himself as a dualistic gnostic. As his friends attested, he took it badly, and took it badly for a long time. I am sure Wilson is correct in concluding that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* “grew out of Lewis’s experience of being stung back into childhood by his defeat at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe.”¹⁴ I would suggest, though, that it stung him back into the broodings of adolescence rather than the innocence of childhood, and into a state of wanting to do with the event what Charles Dodgson had done with his trial-in-absentia at the hands of the Liddells. Between the lines of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* I suspect we are hearing those same midnight rehearsals that in *Alice* had also yielded up a knave of hearts pure and shining before a howling queen. To Lewis, Anscombe was a White Witch of the North, and so he portrayed her. For the story part he referred back to that other Queen of Reason and Christ-killer, Hans Chris-



tian Andersen's Snow Queen, whom he now brought forward, sleigh and all, to whisk Edmund away to her palace of ice, just as she had done with little Kay. The lurid crucifixion scene in the same book, ostensibly an allegory of Christ's passion, so little resembles it, in fact, that it can be read only as Lewis's final rehearsal of the debate at the Socratic Club, with Anscombe now made to look grotesque, her followers loathesome, and Lewis himself long-suffering and noble.

The great apologist enters the hall:

A howl and a gibber of dismay went up from the creatures when they first saw the great Lion pacing towards them, and for a moment the Witch herself seemed to be struck with fear. Then she recovered herself and gave a wild, fierce laugh.

"The fool!" she cried. "The fool has come. . . ."

"Muzzle him!" said the Witch. . . . Everyone was at him now. Those who had been afraid to come near him even after he was bound began to find their courage, and for a few minutes the two girls could not even see him—so thickly was he surrounded by the whole crowd of creatures kicking him, hitting him, spitting on him, jeering at him.

"The cowards! The cowards!" sobbed Susan. "Are they *still* afraid of him, even now?"

The Witch bared her arms . . . whet her knife . . . drew near. . . . Her face was working and twitching with passion, but his looked up at the sky, still quiet, neither angry nor afraid, but a little sad. Then, just before she gave the blow, she stooped down and said in a quivering voice,

"And now, who has won?"

The real intent behind Lewis's treatment of children in *The Chronicles* becomes clear. The codes of behavior and forced marches, the ridicule, the bouquets—or, as here, making two girls stand witness to his humiliation—they are all to one and the same purpose: to keep them from growing up into the kinds of men and women Lewis could not abide. Girls like Lucy and Jill who learn to accept orders will presumably not become the sort of loud and intrusive woman given to arguing with a man like C. S. Lewis. A Eustace Scrubb, if rescued from his craven ways, will not one day be one of the fawning rabble awarding points in the debating hall to the likes of an Elizabeth Anscombe. Improperly tutored, he must become like Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*, an absurd pawn given to muttering, "A devilish temper she had. . . . But she was a dem fine woman, sir, a dem fine woman." The contempt Lewis heaps upon cartoon men attracted to cartoon shrews throughout the series may also have been an attempt to distance himself from any charge that he was a weakling himself. Having lived most of his adult life at the secret beck and call of a very much older woman, and fearing the psychologists, he well might have trumped up these caricatures in part to announce that, although implicated by the evidence of his life, he was not this kind of fellow, never had been, never would be. He

was, he wanted it known, Belfast Jack Lewis, good for a brawl, any time, any where.

On Being Christians

Notwithstanding a five-year spread in publication dates, *The Chronicles* were apparently the work of little more than a year, with the seven novels following one another in a white heat and every old book Lewis had ever enjoyed — Christian, pagan, and secular alike — being thrown indiscriminantly into the pot to sweeten his animus. This new Kingdom of Narnia belonged, ostensibly, to Christ, “that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there”; but supporters of Lewis, seeing an entanglement of problems, have vacillated over whether he ever really intended the books to constitute a Christian story at all. Roger Lancelyn Green feels “it would spoil their effect to attempt to interpret them allegorically or symbolically — certainly for children. They are and must be read simply as stories.”¹⁵ The Custodial Fallacy used to be fairly common in nursery studies. Since children do not read literary criticism, however, and can hardly be disenchanted by it, they will not mind my asking a few questions more of the work.

What is a child to make, for example, of that passage in which Christ is seen sporting in the forest with an entourage of Naiads, Dryads, centaurs, and the like? Would he not conclude, if only unconsciously, that Christianity and Greek mythology are stories with equal claims to the truth, and perhaps even the same story in the end? Lewis did not think he was advocating an all-gods-are-one-god theology; in a thinly veiled dismissal of Mohammed as a false prophet in *The Last Battle* he presents the idea as the sophistical argument of a villain:

“But you others, listen. Tash is only another name for Aslan. All that old idea of us being right and the Calormenes wrong is silly. We know better now. The Calormenes use different words but we all mean the same thing. Tash and Aslan are only two different names for you know Who.”

But can a Christian scribe have it both ways with other faiths? Can he decide that one — Islam — is a dumpy person with fat legs and another — Greek mythology — a Gwendolen? And having picked a favorite, can he then pluck out the imagery and with impunity leave the theology behind? The syncretistic Lewis was not only promiscuous in his borrowing habits; he was arbitrary. If the make-believe of classical Greece made a congenial complement to his understanding of the Christian story, why not the whole of it? If centaurs and minotaurs are “good” and will be Jesus’s playmates in the great by-and-by, why not every creature with a like provenance? So whimsically eclectic a world is Narnia that there may be no sorting it out: “a bull with the head of a man” is good in Lewis’s reading of the world that

Daddy Zeus made, but “bull-headed men” are evil. The distinction escapes me. And it seems to have escaped Lewis that by associating Christianity with a dead make-believe he was implying to children that Christianity might itself be just a make-believe. If invoking Dante as his sanction for bringing the Greeks into a Christian parable, he must have forgotten that the centaurs of the *Divine Comedy* are not to be found frolicking with Jesus in Paradise but tormenting men in Hell. The make-believe you proselytize to others against God’s law in this life, goes the parable, will be the company you keep in the next.

Whenever a professed Christian feels he must create some wholly other world to explore the meaning of his religion, he is flirting with bad faith. When he fills that world with the make-believes of other religions, he is playing at polytheism. When he further sets sorceresses to rule over it, and werewolves, incubuses, and wraiths, he is dabbling in Manichaean dualism, the idea that standing opposed to God’s good creation is another, separate and equal, or nearly equal, creation given over to evil. Much popular entertainment in the twentieth century has been dualistic. Without its changelings and poltergeists, its vampires, zombies, and other Halloween treats, Hollywood would be hard put to turn a profit. I do not mean to moralize here, having enjoyed such things often enough myself, from the D.C. Comics and ghost stories of my youth to *Nosferatu* and Jack Vance’s gnostic classic, *The Eyes of the Overworld*. But in a culture now awash in such fancies, I must wonder if they might not inure many readers to the superstition that evil is a corporeal reality that rules in the world with a free hand. In the Bible, Satan is a minor presence, either an adversary-at-law in heaven’s court, or, in his fallen state, a seducer obedient to any truly felt command to step to the rear. In no way does he have the power to create anyone or any thing or to destroy anyone save by abetting them with whispers. The darkness that is in the world we are quite adept at casting ourselves, by eclipsing God’s will with our own; and for this, to save us from ourselves and from the excesses of our make-believes, we have the agency of the universal muse, the Holy Ghost. Muse fantasies like “Cinderella,” *The Water Babies*, *The North Wind*, *Pinocchio*, and *The Little Lame Prince* reflect this; they are Christian in spirit. Circular fantasies like *Alice* or closed ones like Tolkien’s, with its pursuit of a personal supernatural power, do not reflect it and are heretical. Narnia is an olio of thoughts somewhere between these realms. On the one hand are Lewis’s syncretic flirtations with paganism; on the other, a number of theological gestures recognizably a part of Judeo-Christian tradition. *The Magician’s Nephew* comprises a Narnian creation myth, with its own Adam and Eve; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* exhibits a crucifixion of sorts; and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* takes us to the beauty of the lilies where Christ was born across the sea. *The Last Battle* is modeled on the biblical apocalypses that gave Lewis his Lion of Judah and on the “wars and rumours of



wars,” the false prophets and Second Coming promised in 24 Matthew. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in short, are one man’s version of the alpha and the omega of the faith, and a new scripture in seven books.

It could be questioned, of course, whether the Last Judgment can ever be a fit subject for a children’s book, particularly when delivered by someone with Lewis’s punitive instincts. His summary damnation of Susan has probably disturbed more readers than anything else in the series. Certainly her apostasy and loss of heaven is unconvincing; worse, it is done without the least suggestion of God’s possible forgiveness. “Her interests” writes Green in defense of the master, “are narrowly confined to the Shadowlands (this world) and she is, of her own free will, ‘no longer a friend of Narnia.’”¹⁶ How casually Saint Jack condemns all normal teenagers to the taste of everlasting death. There is no “free will” in these books. Susan falls away because Lewis has predestined her to fall away. And for what? For the convenience of making a point and the satisfaction of yet again putting a female in her place. It is preposterous to think that anyone would turn apostate who had visited another world and there actually met Christ in the flesh, much less witnessed his crucifixion, wept over him (“The cowards! The cowards!”), and seen him rise from the dead. Lewis would have us believe of this Mary Magdalene that she sloughed it all off shortly thereafter for some lipstick and a pair of nylons.

The crucifixion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is equally specious, a transmogrification of the Passion into a pagan sacrifice with sadomasochistic overtones. Critics have called it variously “fresh and powerful . . . most moving” and “unpleasant.”¹⁷ As a travesty of the true crucifixion it is twice-over blasphemous, being in the first instance as poorly written as the wretched Gwendolen episode and in the second a misappropriation to tell of Lewis’s own discomfort under the eyes of the Judases at the Socratic Club while Elizabeth Anscombe, “working and twitching with passion,” brought her argument to its climactic “despair and die.”

For eight years his parable had lain in a drawer. Only following the Anscombe debacle did he understand where to go with it. And it was the wrong place, and he went for the wrong reason, to proclaim himself a true martyr for the faith, “neither angry nor afraid, but a little sad” at being a victim of Woman the Anti-Christ. It was easily done, of course. In the Manichaeian adventure *The Magician’s Nephew*, he could yet claim the last word in the debate by revamping the witch who had unmanned him as Jadis, “the Queen of the World,” boasting of her destruction of “the city of the King of Kings” and how “[a]ll in one moment one woman blotted it out forever.” The world was going to hear from the resurrected warrior just how wicked a thing it had been to offer this “dem fine woman” a Socratic forum in which to exercise a Reason that was not among her sex’s natural or rightful faculties.

This is how the muse came to be portrayed in her own literature in the twentieth century, then, not as a renewal of the inspiration of Perrault,

Kingsley, MacDonald, Collodi, and Craik, but, in a stunning reversal of the whole tradition, as a throwback to Andersen's Snow Queen and the muse as Christ-killer. In setting man against woman in a Christian muse parable, Lewis in effect created an allegory in which Son and Holy Ghost are at odds with one another and the Holy Ghost basely traduced by an up-and-coming apostle. Only a contortionist at exegesis could extract a credible precedent from Scripture to support this nonsense. Christ—how can I put this strongly enough?—**Christ was not crucified by a woman.** Or, since make-believe can put up a very obscuring haze, by Woman. There is nothing—nothing—in Scripture to encourage such a bizarre extrapolation. To redress an imagined wrong against himself, Lewis turned mankind's crime against God into a little thing and a false thing and a hateful thing. **He equated himself with the crucified Christ and flattered himself with the witness of credulous children. The crucifixion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a tutorial designed to pillory Elizabeth Anscombe and then to rub Lucy's and Susan's noses in the wickedness of their sex.**



How Lewis came to portray himself as a Fallen Warrior wept over by girls can be found nicely spelled out in his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1955). Like Tolkien, he was an ardent Wagnerian, a devotee of what they together called "Northernness." In boys' make-believes this term might translate as a kind of they'll-be-sorry-when-I'm-dead fantasy, the bang-bang-they-got-me Game of Falls aggrandized to tragic dimensions. This lifelong mind-set had begun very early, when Lewis first read the words,

*I heard a voice that cried,
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead—*

and "uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described. . . ." **Northernness claimed him again at puberty,** this time through an edition of *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*, illustrated by that poseur of the Dark Sublime, Arthur Rackham. Setting his emotional dial permanently on Wagner, the neophyte pagan surrendered himself to the secret pursuit of "ecstasy, astonishment, 'a conflict of sensations without a name.'"

Some of these sensations do have a name, actually. In the Christian story they are the sensations of Simon Magus, the aspiring wonder worker who tried to buy the gifts of the Holy Ghost from St. Peter, so as to have wings to soar with the gods. Dreams of glory of course are quite normal in youth; Lewis's were a classier version of our century's favorite gnostic fantasy, the comic-book superhero. Prolonged into maturity, however, the pride of the imagination can lead only to a spiritual and intellectual pratfall. *Surprised by Joy*, I should say, is a reasonably honest chronicle of the process. If the story of Lewis's spiritual development suffers at all, it suffers from a reflective intellectualization that is not always convincing. When he tells us, for example, that **in his enslavement to Northernness he was meant "to acquire**

some capacity for worship against the day when the true God should recall me to Himself,” I am not persuaded. This is precisely and wholly the purpose of make-believe, in fact, but we have no testimony other than Lewis’s that God ever deals in raptures of this ilk, and when Lewis later converted to Christianity he did not, as one would expect, abandon Northernness as an example of man worshipping his own make-believe but brought it with him into his new faith in Christ and into his new Christian parable.

Blown in through the window reopened by the Anscombe affair, the idea of Northernness everywhere chills the air in Narnia. At a very obvious level, it can be seen in Lewis’s oafish prejudice against all things Southern. Below are some remarks about the Calormen (callow colored men?) from *The Horse and His Boy* and *The Last Battle*:

What you would chiefly have noticed if you had been there was the smells, which came from unwashed people, unwashed dogs, scent, garlic, onions, and the piles of refuse which lay everywhere.

Then the dark men came round them in a thick crowd, smelling of garlic and onions, their white eyes flashing dreadfully in their brown faces.

. . . all of them, both men and women, had nicer faces and voices than most Calormenes.

“This boy is manifestly no son of yours, for your cheek is as dark as mine but the boy is fair and white like the accursed but beautiful barbarians who inhabit the remote north.”

This last remark is no more plausible in context than if a Polish Jew were to pause before boarding the cattle car to admire the accursed but beautiful barbarians of the Waffen-SS. It is Lewis again spreading the gospel of Northernness. The armchair warrior’s need to dominate the landscape, and not the humility simply to live in it, is what animates these chronicles of Christ in His Kingdom. In his critical writings Lewis liked to commend the child mind over the adolescent, but it is the voice of the teenager we hear in the land, and the clash of arms rather than the still, small voice of vision. Lewis was baptized by the banks of not one but two rivers, the Jordan and the Rhine, and, like Tolkien, he spent most of his imaginative life camped by the latter, enraptured by Wagner’s fanfares to pagan glory. His tragedy was that it need not have been, as it was, too little agape too late to matter. He had known true glory from the age of five or six, when he experienced a profound visitation of what I have tried to suggest by the term “allsense.” What he describes in *Surprised by Joy* is the kind of universal awakening of a meaning that obviates any and all understanding of the world as North and South or male and female. It came to him, as these things often will, in two stages. First came the object of his desire, when his brother

brought into the nursery the lid of a biscuit tin which he had covered with moss and garnished with twigs and flowers so as to make it a toy garden or a toy forest. That was the first beauty I ever knew. . . . I do not think the

impression was very important at the moment, but it soon became important in memory. As long as I live my imagination of Paradise will retain something of my brother's toy garden.

The desire itself arrived on a summer day years later when, standing in a garden, Lewis was suddenly overwhelmed by a memory of the toy garden and bathed in a sensation he would compare to "Milton's 'enormous bliss' of Eden." This second stage he called a memory of a memory, meaning that he understood the first stage Platonically, as a memory in itself—of Paradise. Memory may in this first instance be an arguable term; knowledge is perhaps better. His first knowledge of Paradise was complemented at the time by another poignant acquaintance with heaven's shadows on earth, the green, distant hills that were visible from his nursery window. The sight of them "taught me longing . . . made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary of the Blue Flower."

Here again is Novalis's blue flower—a discovery, perhaps, from his reading of MacDonald. Like Novalis, Lewis would make a life's pilgrimage of pursuing "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy. . . . it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief." Or, as he later put it, an "inconsolable longing."

In an essay on Protestant mystics, W. H. Auden has nicely explained the risks inherent in all such experiences. They were risks that Lewis understandably could not see in childhood and which I think he imperfectly understood as an adult. Such Platonic visions

are, in themselves, blessings and a good; there is nothing in any of them that is contrary to Christian doctrine. On the other hand, all of them are dangerous. So long as the subject recognizes them as totally unmerited blessings and feels obligated by gratitude to produce, insofar as it lies in his power, works which are good according to their kind, they can lead him towards the Light. But if he allows himself either to regard the experience as a sign of superior merit, natural or supernatural, or to idolize it as something he cannot live without, then it can only lead him into darkness and destruction.¹⁸

The votary of the blue flower who longed for the paradise of the little garden and for the hills beyond would come to locate the seat of what he could not live without in the idea of Northernness and in Wagner and the Eddas. The emptiness left by a vanished childhood bliss found an analog in the vast physical absences of the pagan North, and Lewis called the two things one. It may or may not seem odd, then, that when he converted—first to theism, then to Christ—it was through a long process of intellectualization in which Joy played no part whatever. I am not at all sure what to conclude from his failure to return from the back of the north wind with good news like MacDonald. Perhaps associating Joy with the Dark Sublime of things pagan and, in truth, brutal rendered him incapable of comprehending it in the end, so that finally he could only give up on it (or it on

him) as sterile. The autobiography closes with the surprising and dispiriting conclusion “No slightest hint was vouchsafed me that there ever had been or ever would be any connection between God and Joy.” I can only suppose from this that it was out of some stubbornness against the Spirit that Lewis failed, or refused, to distinguish between the Joy of the tiny garden and the pangs of his later discoveries. After his conversion, he should have known that God was never going to “vouchsafe” his pagan enthusiasms a second visitation. Why then, too, he would not have granted God authorship of the first vision dumbfounds me. As Auden stated, and as visionaries have attested, such a gift is a call to service. Its purpose is to deliver such a blow of bliss that the recipient, usually a child, will not fail to understand in due course of time what the imprinting of such a vision must suggest—that there is a God in heaven; that some kind of Platonic relationship between heaven and earth does obtain; that Creation is good and dualism therefore a fallacy; that there is a grace which is freely given; and that this grace being the cause of his gladness, the duty of the scribe, and his joy, is to awaken others to it through his art. This is Christ’s charge to the instructed scribes in Matthew 13 and the pledge of Psalm 26, “to publish with the voice of thanksgiving.” Again, Auden:

The vision of the splendor of creation . . . lays a duty upon one who has been fortunate enough to receive it, a duty in his turn to create works which are as worthy of what he has seen as his feeble capacities will permit. And many have listened and obeyed . . . for it is the wonder which is, as Plato said, the beginning of every kind of philosophy.¹⁹

The ability to obey as an artist—to say something for children as simple, perhaps, as “Great is the sun, and wide he goes/Through empty heaven without repose”—calls for a large humility before God and the world. Lewis resisted his story’s tropism to return to its original, Edenic state, and thus he failed to envision Narnia in the spirit of that first knowledge of creation. Over time the parable of the toy garden became refracted by Wagner and things Northern, and, seeing, Lewis saw not and, hearing, he heard not. Northernness, by now an habitual bias, lingered on after the fading of the glory to inform *The Chronicles* as an aesthetic and racial ideal and from habit followed the distortion of the Christian message the work presumably had been written to announce. The Christ of Narnia is not the Jesus of the Gospels but a new Messiah for a Lewis who continued to see through a glass darkly—a Christ given to rambles with fauns one moment and a leonine godhead for a storybook warrior cult the next. The first portrait is merely foolish; the second presents us with a more commonplace and more dangerous slippage from the truth. The moment of betrayal comes at the end of *The Silver Chair*, when Aslan permits Prince Caspian to accompany Jill and Eustace back to that mixed-up school whose head bully was, by the way, a woman. There, in order “to set things right” with



these “cowards and children,” the Lion of Judah commands the boys to take up their swords and Jill to cut herself a switch. Putting “the strength of Aslan in them” for the coming fight, he then turns his back to the scene—signaling that his own eternal rules are now suspended—and releases the children to charge into their schoolmates. “Jill plied her crop on the girls and Caspian and Eustace plied the flats of their swords on the boys so well that in two minutes all the bullies were running like mad. . . .”

Lewis titled this satisfying little episode “The Healing of Harms.” But what Christ is it that heals with the sword? It can hardly obtain that the recipients of this schoolyard justice are themselves bullies or that no one actually gets gut-stuck in the melee. The matter here is that Christian teaching has reverted to the Dirty Harry theology of the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Lewis has contrived a Christ willing to turn his back while his chosen children, in the name of vengeance, beat up another group of children. We have seen this puppet Christ often enough before, marching at the head of innumerable armies and mobs convinced that they and they alone have been sanctioned by God “to set things right” in the world. The scribe from Belfast has here succumbed to the universal temptation to reject a scene from Scripture that is found to be neither congenial nor even reasonable. The scene in question—the only scene in the Gospels that could possibly apply—is the aborted fight in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Peter takes up the sword to hack off the ear of the temple servant Malchus. If you will not hear the truth, the gesture seems to say, what need have you of an ear? Jesus’s interdiction, “they that take the sword shall perish with the sword,” so disarms the disciples that they can only do what most men would do when denied the release of a fight—they run. Knowing that he was denied the sword by faith, Lewis ran from the cross as well—but only to reemerge in Narnia, a make-believe land where he could announce with disgruntled Christians all through history that pacifism was too hard a commandment, even a contemptible one. Surely it could not apply to this circumstance or to him (for he was no coward); surely God meant it to apply to that one event alone. Look, here are some bullies: if we rough them up for Jesus’s sake, all will be well.

Whatever a Christian’s personal lapses, pacifism is an ideal that he is bound by faith to honor whether it suits him or not. To scorn it before children is corrupt. Lewis’s asides on the subject are the cunning insinuations of Matthew’s “false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves.” Pacifism to Lewis was the kind of cowardly waffling you could expect from the likes of a “puny little person” such as Eustace Scrubb, who, when threatened, will squeal, “I’m a pacifist. I don’t believe in fighting.” Against Eustace’s contemptible example in *The Dawn Treader* Belfast Jack set his ceremonious hall proctor, Reepicheep the Mouse, that tiny champion whose threats had caused Eustace to make his craven excuses. Reepicheep is Lewis’s idealized Grail Knight. When

he embarks for Aslan's country beyond the world's end, Lewis paints his departure in a romantic haze, complete with the Malorian gesture of returning the good sword to the baptism of the waters:

. . . They helped him to lower his little coracle. Then he took off his sword ("I shall need it no more," he said) and flung it far away across the lilled sea. Where it fell it stood upright with the hilt above the surface. . . . hastily he got into his coracle and took his paddle, and the current caught it and away he went . . . and since that moment no one can truly claim to have seen Reepicheep the Mouse. But my belief is that he came safe to Aslan's country and is alive there to this day.

This last sentiment is an unmistakable paraphrase of the stoical closings to *The North Wind* and *The Little Lame Prince*. The sanctimonious Reepicheep, however, is really only a hypocrite with delusions of grandeur. The message he bears, unlike the good news of those earlier books, contradicts everything that Jesus taught. He is proud, vain, judgmental, and quick to anger, and he lives by the sword. His final surrender of the weapon is the empty gesture of his reactionary maker, who in real life liked to brag in barrooms that no nation could ever have enough nuclear warheads at the ready.

This is what you do when your God asks things of you that are unthinkable; you create another world where you can sneak in your complaints under the guise of make-believe. Your readers will not mind, for people, as you well know, come to make-believe with the smiles of trusting presupposition on their faces and, charmed, tend to approve whatever they find. What Lewis here wants his prerogative audience to sanction is the notion that violence, being intrinsic to man's nature, is permissible if conducted properly—under civilized rules, against mutually agreed upon enemies, preferably by knights—rather than being the sorriest of all specimens of original sin. What we see him doing at the end of *The Silver Chair* is really quite stunning. I cannot imagine a betrayal of one's faith more complete than this last picture of Christ at the playground, putting weapons into the hands of children.

However innocent its beginnings, the story of Narnia was animated by one compelling need following the Anscombe debacle. It was not a need to reveal Christ to children but to have a place where Lewis could pass judgment on people with impunity. *The Chronicles*, after all, are exactly that, the story of a world created and a world destroyed, with some saved and many damned. It was a poor enough choice of subject for a children's parable; the one figure that make-believe least needed revived in a scribe was John of Patmos; but, worse, it was a dangerous choice, for the fatal temptation in writing about final things will always be that itch to make the Last Judgment oneself. Any scribe foolhardy enough to attempt it must at least take care to recognize in himself and edit out any baser instincts that

might compromise the work. The humility to do this is what is so lacking in the Apocalypse According to Saint Jack. **Lewis was as empty of true sympathies as he was full of shabby opinions.** Browsing on his pipe and winking out at his readers, he knowingly played the bully to the end, revising nothing, blithely grading people and assigning the best rooms in heaven and in hell. He fancied himself the blue-eyed boy chosen to cast the first stone, and he came to the work mindful of deserving targets and with his pockets laden with ammunition. The first stone and the last judgment are so much the agenda for Narnia that they seem the only real reason for its existence in the end. Here Lewis would have all to himself a land not to be peopled and celebrated, like, say, an Oz, but to be destroyed when he was done with it, in his own personal Day of Wrath.

Perhaps cloistered dons who spend their lives in a state of intellectual make-believe should be discouraged from recycling their reading into children's books. What Tolkien and Lewis contrived for themselves were new corners of that same land into which Dodgson had fallen in his diffidence, the land of "Oldwivesfabledom," as Kingsley said it from 2 Timothy, "where the folks were all heathens." The three dons sprang from the zeitgeist and they fed the zeitgeist, pleasing a vast audience of readers both secular and Christian alike. The day was theirs among fanciers of make-believe, for, as Paul saw must happen repeatedly throughout history,

the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

Dodgson had meant his fable as a more or less secular joke on his own little corner of the world, and his Wonderland theologically a place of No Other Gods save the demiurge of his own genius. **Tolkien and Lewis** were more knowing and deliberate in the ways they skirted the First and Second Commandments. Giving over their Secondary Worlds to pagan make-believes, and charming the ears of children and the gnostic disaffected with unsound doctrine, **these two alienated reactionaries may, as a consequence, have done as much to diminish their faith as any two Christians who ever lived.** That fundamentalists could work such a wonder is not a paradox, I think, for, while in some ways dissimilar, the fundamentalist and the gnostic have succumbed to the same spiritual temptation. Each is possessed of a discontent with God for the state of His world, and each has resolved to do something about it, with one choosing a public means and the other a private. The gnostic takes from Scripture what he needs and chases off after special revelation in the fancies of the moment, looking for ever more grandiloquent metaphors to express his own specious godhead; the fundamentalist, blinding himself to the possibility that God might indeed be at work somewhere in the fictions of the present, clings with literalistic zeal to the inerrancy of a particular text and to whatever polity he thinks it

implies. The gnostic daydreams of being a Merlin or a Superman and writes theological science fiction; the fundamentalist would deny man a creative role in understanding and perpetuating sacred truths and frets, rather, how through corporate political action or personal violence, he might deny others the exercise of a free will he everywhere sees abused. In short, the one fortifies the walls, while the other flies over them to his own personal Oz. What they share is a dualistic pessimism about the world, an itch for power, and a mistrust of God.

In Tolkien and Lewis we can see both these tendencies at play. The apostate dreamer in Tolkien, hoping not to give offense, hid his pagan world away in as remote a pre-Christian past as he could imagine. Lewis, unlike Tolkien, or Dodgson for that matter, who both at least suspected the truth about their work, remained oblivious to himself as a shareholder in man's common stock of bad faith and announced his fancies as a superior wisdom. Out of a distaste for Irish Women and Blue Fairies, who made unreasonable demands, and out of a stubbornness that the source of his longing must lie among legends where not even a North Wind could stir him, he abandoned tradition and pitched his battle tent by a mythical and oh so sweetly musical Rhine. There he sulked like some Teutonic Achilles and forged a kingdom in his own image, without charity, where he might tutor children in the ways of the slur and the sword. His pursuit of a private Joy and a private Apocalypse led the century's most popular Christian apologist to close his mind to that standard Protestant handbook, the Epistle to the Romans. There it is written that understanding lies nowhere else but in "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." The reason the reader will not find any of Lewis's Joy in Narnia is rather simple, I would suggest, when understood in a Christian context. It is missing because nowhere in these facile pages is there the least evidence that the parablister was ever willing, like Pinocchio, to cough up his last forty pence for the muse.

Where the Wild Things Are (1963)

American children's books were a literature at ease in Zion at mid-century. Picture books were in the main wholesome, pleasant, civic-minded. Longer works like *Rabbit Hill*, *Johnny Tremain*, *Charlotte's Web*, and the novels of Laura Ingalls Wilder reflected a comfortable middlebrow populism and a modest sense of mission. The central figure in the little renaissance to follow was Maurice Sendak (1928–) and the central book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Like Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*, published four years earlier, Sendak's "wild rumpus" marked a break with the complacent work of the period and a revival of the more fractious spirit of Perrault and Mother Goose, Collodi, Lear, and the German cartoonist Wilhelm Busch.

The arc described by this circular fantasy is the simplest line that a story could ever take: a child leaves home, has a brush with the world, and

Chapter 5

1. Selma Lanes and Margery Fisher have both noted a likely secondary source for *Sambo* in Heinrich Hoffman's famous collection of cautionary tales, *Der Struwwelpeter* (1846). In "The Story of the Inky Boys" some local bullies are given their comeuppance for abusing a "black-a-moor." Bannerman's illustration of an innocent out walking with his green umbrella is almost identical to Hoffman's.
2. Edmund Wilson, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs!" *The Bit Between My Teeth* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), p. 327.
3. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf*, p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
7. Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Harvest, 1976), p. 252.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 238.
9. Pyle, *Mother's Nursery Tales*.
10. William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell," *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *The Portable Blake* (Viking, 1946), p. 254.
11. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 37.
12. Green and Hooper, *C. S. Lewis*, p. 213.
13. A. N. Wilson, *C. S. Lewis* (Norton, 1990), p. 213.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
15. Green and Hopper, *C. S. Lewis*, p. 252.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
17. Townsend, *Written for Children*, p. 239, and M. Fisher, *Who's Who*, p. 29.
18. W. H. Auden, "The Protestant Mystics," *Forewords & Afterwords*, p. 57.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
20. See, for example, Selma G. Lanes, *The Art of Maurice Sendak* (Harry N. Abrams, 1980), pp. 85-96.
21. My thanks to Jane Conger for bringing this to my attention.
22. Virginia Haviland, *Questions to an Artist Who Is Also an Author* (Library of Congress, 1972), p. 273.

Chapter 6

1. The title page reads 1881 and I have referred to *Songs & Sayings* throughout this study as an 1881 book.
2. Angus Wilson, *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling* (Viking, 1978), p. 44.
3. Leslie Linder, ed., *The Journal of Beatrix Potter, from 1881-1897* (Warne, 1966), p. 103.
4. This is pure speculation, of course, and has been disputed.
5. The editions of *Uncle Remus*, in order of publication:

Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings, ill. Frederick S. Church and J. H. Moser (D. Appleton, 1881). New and revised edition with illustrations by Arthur Burdette Frost (D. Appleton-Century, 1895).

Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation, ill. F. S. Church and William Holbrook Beard (James R. Osgood, 1883).