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St. Jerome's *Narnia*: Transformation and Asceticism in the Desert and Beyond the Wardrobe

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Abstract

Compares “two exercises in Christian myth-making”—C.S. Lewis’s *Narniad* and *The Life of Paul the Hermit*, the earliest work of the ascetic St. Jerome. Both are entertaining, and even whimsical at times, and feature communication with intelligent animals and a restoration of Paradise. Both also feature characters who model the value of asceticism and the solitary contemplative life.

Additional Keywords

Animals in C.S. Lewis; Asceticism; Jerome, St. *The Life of Paul the Hermit*; Lewis, C.S. *Chronicles of Narnia*



ST. JEROME'S NARNIA:
TRANSFORMATION AND ASCETICISM
IN THE DESERT AND
BEYOND THE WARDROBE

JOHN GAVIN, S.J.

ARTISTIC DEPICTIONS OF ST. JEROME (347-420) over the ages generally portray the great fourth century ascetic, scholar, and translator of the Bible as either a curmudgeon or, to our modern eyes, a fanatic. We see in El Greco's paintings, for instance, both the dour visage of a nightmarish schoolmaster and the skeletal frame in the midst of self-flagellation. Such images do find inspiration in the saint's writings—his works include, beyond the translations and brilliant works of commentary, powerful exhortations to the rigors of monastic life and bitter polemics against his numerous opponents—and thus he perhaps deserves the rather unattractive artistic legacy.

Yet, this often-grumpy Father of the Church also had his delightful side. His letters can display a touching pastoral concern for his interlocutors, a deep love of friends, and an unflagging sense of justice toward the poor. The whimsical Jerome, however, reveals himself above all in his earliest work, *The Life of Paul the Hermit*, one of three short biographies of ascetic heroes.¹ This peculiar composition includes a dangerous quest, mythical creatures such as fauns and centaurs, intelligent birds and wolves, and even a couple of helpful lions. The reader discovers that Jerome, the legendary fount of invective, turns out to be also a teller of entertaining tales; the reclusive scholar in fact displays the wonder of a child.

While Jerome's hagiography was certainly not the inspiration for Lewis's *Narniad*, a comparison between these two exercises in Christian myth-making offers new perspectives for consideration.² In particular, the link between self-discipline and the restoration of creation finds resonances in both authors' tales. In this essay I would like to consider these themes and what they mean especially for our interpretation of Lewis's masterpiece.

¹ The three lives—of Paul, Malchus, and Hilarion—are found in the critical edition of *Sources Chrétiennes* (SC) 508. I cite both the page and line numbers. For the English translation see the edition of Carolinne White.

² These works are both myths above all in their manner of offering "permanent object[s] for contemplation." See McGrath, "Divine Truth" 61.

THE MYTH OF PAUL THE HERMIT

Scholars generally believe that Jerome composed the *Life* during his sojourn in Syria in the mid-370's.³ The motivations behind the composition have puzzled readers, since the work explicitly invites comparison with the wildly successful and influential *Life of St. Antony* by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, an earlier work that contributed to the conversion of St. Augustine. Jerome's *Paul*, for example, claims to surpass Athanasius's *Antony* as the original and exemplary spiritual warrior. Thus it has been read attentively for its insights into Jerome's distinct vision of Christian asceticism and its goals.

While some argue that Jerome sought to provide a Christian hero who would inspire the intellectuals of his upper-class, intellectual circles—the simple, but polished Latin style of the tale and the hero's own familiarity with classical tradition suggest this reading—the popular elements of the story were certainly meant to attract a wider audience.⁴ He clearly drew upon pre-existing stories and legends surrounding the titular saint and presented them in a form that would both entertain and inspire. It has been noted, for example, that Jerome borrows images of the “weird”—bizarre, striking examples of the supernatural and magic found in ancient romances—in order to embellish his tales and enchant his readers.⁵

The story of Paul may be summarized as follows. He was a highly educated and wealthy young man from the Lower Thebaid in Egypt, who initially fled his home to escape the violent third century persecutions. He made his way further and further into the wilderness, until he discovered the ideal residence: a cave shielded by a luscious palm tree and moistened by a fresh spring. He settled in the site and dedicated himself to a simple life of prayer and fasting, renouncing his wealth and dressing himself in palm leaves.

Fast-forward a century. Antony, the great desert ascetic lauded as the first of his kind, receives word in a dream that in fact there exists a monk greater than he. At dawn, the elderly spiritual athlete sets out to find the mysterious Paul, uncertain of his way, but trusting in divine inspiration. Lost, he prays for guidance and receives it in the form of a centaur, who, though bereft of speech, grunts and points Antony in the right direction. Later he encounters a faun, who brings him food and makes the following speech:

³ On the dating of the *Life* see Kelly 60; Rebenich 32.

⁴ On the debate surrounding Jerome's intentions see Coleiro 163; Rebenich 36-38.

⁵ On the “weird” in ancient literature see Coleiro 172-173. René Aigrain classifies Jerome's lives as examples of the “historical novel” in vogue at the time: an edifying work that would mix elements of the fantastic into the tale. See Aigrain 297-298.

I am a mortal creature, one of the inhabitants of the desert whom the pagans, deluded by various errors, worship, calling them fauns, satyrs and evil spirits [*Faunos, Satyros et Incubos*]. I am acting as an envoy for my tribe. We ask you to pray for us to the Lord we share, for we know He came once for the salvation of the world, and his sound has gone out over the whole earth. (SC 160, 10-15; White 78-79)

Antony praises God for allowing the once savage beasts to speak and delights as the faun scampers away.

After days of travel, Antony begins to despair, until he spots a she-wolf entering a cave. He follows her, but stumbles on a stone, causing the resident, Paul, to close the door to his home in fear. Antony calls out to Paul, begging him to open the door and receive him: "If I do not get what I want, I shall die here in front of your door!" (SC 164, 23-25; White 80). At last Paul opens the portal and the two ascetics embrace and begin to discuss spiritual things. At one point a raven delivers a loaf of bread for them to share, and the two enjoy a simple meal complemented by water from the spring.

At last Paul informs his visitor that he is close to death and missions Antony to return home and bring the cloak of the Bishop Athanasius for his burial. Distraught, Antony reluctantly leaves the dying ascetic and sets out for the cloak. During his hasty return to Paul's cave, with only three hours of walking left, Antony witnesses angels bearing Paul's soul to heaven. Weeping, he begins to run and arrives at last to find the dead body in a kneeling position of prayer. After recovering from his grief and exertions, he wonders how he might bury the corpse, when suddenly two lions appear from the desert. Instead of devouring Antony, they proceed to dig a grave with their claws and then seek a blessing for their labors. Antony praises Christ because "dumb animals, too, were able to understand that there was a God" (SC 178, 22-23; White 83). He buries Paul and returns home.

CHRIST, RESTORATION, AND ASCETICISM

What to make of this odd tale? Despite the success of the *Life*—it was soon disseminated in Greek, Syriac, and Coptic translations—even in Jerome's own time it received criticism and derision. Some claimed, as do many modern scholars, that Paul never existed and that the story masked propaganda for a form of asceticism among the elite. Whatever his real intentions were, Jerome does offer some important theological and anthropological reflections through his reworking of the material and selection of images.

First, we find the theme of Christ's restoration of a broken creation. With humanity's fall into sin, creation itself succumbed to the rule of demonic forces and corruption. Christ's victory upon the cross, however, liberated the

cosmos from this subjection and initiated a new reign. In Athanasius's *Life of Antony*, for instance, this theme emerges in Antony's combat with demons and the restoration of created harmony. In the Antony's famous discourse on demonology, the great ascetic proclaims the significance of Jesus's triumph over the usurpers, the demons:

Although he [the devil] speaks such and so many things and is overbold, never mind—like a serpent he was drawn in with a hook by the Savior, and like a beast of burden he received a halter around the snout, and like a runaway he was bound by a ring for his nostrils, and his lips were pierced by an iron clasp. He was also bound by the Lord like a sparrow, to receive our mockery. And, like scorpions and snakes, he and his fellow demons have been put in a position to be trampled underfoot by us Christians. The evidence of this is that we now conduct our lives in opposition to him. (49)

The world has been reclaimed, the occupying forces have been routed, and a new order—a Christian order—has begun.

Jerome's *Life of Paul* is devoid of Athanasius's fascination with demonic combat; yet the theme of Christ's victory manifests itself in another form. Antony's journey to find Paul takes him into the untamed regions that civilization had cordoned off in both fear and wonder. As Patricia Cox Miller writes, "Enticing *and* forbidding, the desert was a place both of refuge and temptation, where the howling of wild beasts was heard along with prayers of the monks. Angels might dwell there, but so also did demonic forces" (209, emphasis in original). The desert wilderness represented the fallen creation into which the grace of Christ had penetrated.

In the wilderness Antony encounters two beasts that epitomized savagery for the ancient world: the centaur and the faun, symbolic of humanity's bestial tendencies and unfettered passions. It should be noted that Jerome and his contemporaries believed in the existence of these beings that were noted for their libidinous nature and, exceptions such as the wise Chiron notwithstanding, uncivilized manners.⁶ Yet, in his meetings with these hybrids Antony is shocked to discover a transformation in their characters: not only do they exhibit signs of intelligence, but they also assist him in his quest to find the Holy Man. One even demonstrates the ability to speak and to praise Christ. Thus Antony discovers that a new Eden has begun to flower in the desert realm, extending the gift of speech and praise to the mute creatures of myth and legend. The prophecy of Isaiah regarding the defeat of Babylon and the

⁶ In the narrative Jerome even refers to the mummified body of a faun that had been brought to the emperor Constantius for inspection.

establishment of a new order is fulfilled before Anthony's eyes: "But wild beasts will lie down there and its [Babylon's] houses will be full of howling creatures; there ostriches will dwell, and there satyrs will dance" (Is. 13:21).⁷ All has been redeemed in Christ.

This transformation extends itself beyond the most exotic denizens of the desert. All of nature has become docile and even beneficent in Christ's name. Paul's enclave is a paradise in miniature, with its bubbling spring and shade of palms. A she-wolf becomes a guide, birds deliver sustenance, and even lions desire blessings. Jerome's description of the feline gravediggers' arrival demonstrates that the wilderness has a new Lord:

They came straight towards the corpse of the blessed old man and stopped there; wagging their tails in devotion they lay down at his feet, roaring loudly as if to show that in their own way they were lamenting as best they could. They began to dig the ground near by with their paws: vying with each other to remove the sand, they dug out a space large enough for one man. They then went straight up to Antony, their necks bent and their ears laid back, and licked his hands and feet as if demanding a reward for their hard work. He realized that they were asking him for a blessing. (SC 176-178, 10-21; White 83)

Antony was the witness of a new heaven and new earth in the making.

Yet, the reclaiming of creation, before the second coming of Christ, had not yet reached its fulfillment and thus a struggle for dominance still remained. This second theme—the transformative power of asceticism—emerges from this Christian teaching. *Askesis*, the Greek word for "exercise," came to encompass those disciplines that liberated one from disordered passions and inculcated the virtues for a deeper union with God. Prayer, fasting, deprivations of various kinds, solitude for prayer, and growth in virtue became the spiritual regimen of the desert warrior. The legendary practitioners of these arts—Antony, Evagrius Ponticus, Pachommius, Symeon the Stylite and others—inspired thousands of followers to seek God in remote regions of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Jerome himself spent some time in the demanding school of Syrian monasticism, isolating himself in a cave and imitating the monks around him.⁸

These ascetics struggled not only for their own perfection, but also for the liberation of creation. Their personal victories also represented a reconquest of nature, rendered visible in the harmony that surrounded their

⁷ On this theme in Jerome see Harvey 45-47.

⁸ Though, as Kelly notes, Jerome himself admits that he had brought his extensive library with him and enjoyed weekly visits from friends. See Kelly 46-52.

immediate environs. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* contains the story of a visit from the devil himself to the monk's cell. Satan laments the loss of his power due to the exercises of the ascetics now populating the wastes. "I no longer have a place—no weapon, no city. There are Christians everywhere, and even the desert has filled with monks. Let them watch after themselves and stop censuring me for no reason!" (62).⁹ The dwellings of the desert monks were considered places of peace and wisdom, entry points for the divine on earth.

Jerome's own life of the monk Hilarion tells of some of the healings attributed to the holy man. In one case, a blind woman is brought to Hilarion, who begs him to save her from her affliction. The monk "spat on her eyes and at once the same miracle of healing occurred as when the Saviour did this" (SC 236, 7-9; White 96). Thus the ascetic continues the healing signs of Jesus and becomes a divine instrument for the restoration of the fallen world.

Paul's discipline and struggle also contributed to Christ's transformation of creation. Jerome describes Paul's wilderness sojourn as "the heavenly life on earth" (*coelestem vitam ageret in terris*), the fruit of his solitude, prayer, discipline and the reception of divine aid (SC 156, 1-6; White 78). Antony's journey reveals not simply a desert transformed by Christ, but a land that bursts with esteem for its holy resident. Beasts direct Antony every step of the way and animals now live in harmony with the anchorite, even providing him with his needs. It is as if the holiness radiating from Paul's cave both attracted and elevated the natural world around him.

Jerome wanted to impress upon his readers that this ascetical transformation in Christ's name was a hard-won accomplishment. At the same time, however, he taught that a "reordering" of the human person and environs occurs through human discipline and, above all, the influx of divine grace. Asceticism is not an end unto itself, but a heroic quest for divine union and universal restoration in Christ.¹⁰ The fairy-tale like presentation of Paul's life is designed both to awaken wonder and to stimulate imitation.

NARNIA AND THE RESTORATION OF EDEN

Photos of C.S. Lewis present a much more genial figure than St. Jerome. Yet I would like to suggest that two had more in common in their Christian vision than meets the eye. The two themes highlighted in this examination of the *Life of Paul*—the restoration of creation in Christ and the

⁹ Regarding the liberation of the desert see Harmless 86.

¹⁰ Unfortunately Jerome's radical tendencies would often lead him into confrontations and, in the case of the Jovinian controversy, a position bordering on heresy. Yet, despite the problems, the essential theme of restoration and transformation in Christ remains constant and one can see a growing moderation in Jerome's thought. On Jerome's conflicts see Hunter 231-242.

transformative power of asceticism—also come to the fore in the world beyond the wardrobe.

Lewis gives us a Narnian protology in his *The Magician's Nephew*. Aslan calls forth a new creation and grants it a harmony that evokes images of paradise from the *Book of Genesis*. He bestows the gift of speech and intelligence upon some of the animals and places the whole of this new world in their care:

“Creatures, I give you yourselves,” said the strong, happy voice of Aslan. “I give you forever this land of Narnia. I give you the woods, the fruits, the rivers. I give you the stars and I give you myself. The Dumb Beasts whom I have not chosen are yours also. Treat them gently and cherish them but do not go back to their ways lest you cease to be Talking Beasts. For out of them you were taken and into them you can return.” (71)

Aslan's exhortation contains two fundamental principles that shape all of the other tales in the Narniad. First, Aslan is both the creator and the sustainer of Narnia's peace and harmony: it is he who gives all goods and it is the gift of himself that maintains the tranquility of creation. Second, from the beginning Narnia has the potential for both glory and corruption. Such a precarious existence emerges naturally from the free will of its denizens, who may choose to live either as reflections of Aslan's own dignity or to descend to the level of inarticulate beasts. The interruption of Jadis—the serpent and tempter of this alternate Eden—into the tranquility of Narnia will exploit this inherent freedom for good and evil.

It should be noted that Aslan's providence embraces not only what we would consider the natural world—the animals, the humans, the flora—but also what we would consider the mythical, or even pagan, world. The lion's voice calls forth marvelous creatures of all kinds: “gods and goddesses of the wood; with them came Fauns and Satyrs and Dwarfs. Out of the river rose the river god with his Naiad daughters” (71). Thus even Fauns and Satyrs, hybrids traditionally associated with intemperate tendencies in humanity, find themselves under Aslan's elevating gaze and therefore may share in his glory.¹¹ In the Lion's presence, nothing is profane.

All of the Narnia books celebrate the restoration of this pristine harmony through Aslan's transformative presence: in Aslan the fall from grace becomes a return to glory. Alan Jacobs writes of the dueling sovereignties found in Lewis's tales: the realm of the true king, Aslan, and the various

¹¹ Regarding those who critique an “incoherent” mixture of mythologies in Narnia see Williams 24-25.

usurpers—or would-be usurpers—that drag the world into subjection. Narnia “is a realm in which authority is contested, in which the present and visible Queen of This World ‘isn’t a real queen at all’ but rather a usurper, while the rightful King is frequently absent and invisible—but liable to return and assert his sovereignty” (274). Jadis, Miraz, the Queen of the Underland, Shift the Ape, and the tragic Puzzle the Donkey threaten to overthrow Aslan’s authority and, in most cases, impose a tyrannical, even demonic, rule upon the land.

Each story presents a paradise lost not only on account of a corrupt usurper, but also because of the willing cooperation of Narnia’s own citizens. The dignity of freedom bestowed upon Aslan’s creation often assents to the twisted designs of the false overlords. Thus dwarves serve the White Witch, Shift the Ape betrays Narnia for his own pleasures, and the calculating Ginger the Cat collaborates with the Calmorenes. Others simply abandon their inherent worth and slink shamelessly into the ranks of mindless beasts. Lucy, lamenting the self-denigration of so many Narnians, says, “Wouldn’t it be dreadful if some day in our own world, at home, men started going wild inside, like the animals here, and still looked like men, so that you’d never know which were which?” (*Prince Caspian* 371).¹²

Aslan’s irruption into the disorder of Narnia restores the intended harmony of the realm. The most famous example comes from his self-sacrifice in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and his triumphant liberation of Narnians trapped by Jadis’s spell: “Everywhere the statues were coming to life. The courtyard looked no longer like a museum; it looked more like a zoo. Creatures were running after Aslan and dancing round him till he was almost hidden in the crowd” (188). Touched by lion’s breath, the dead live and the dumb speak; the winter desert begins to bloom.

Another brilliant example is Aslan’s triumphant procession through Narnia in *Prince Caspian*. Not only are the usurpers defeated, but Aslan also transforms everything he passes. Creatures endowed with reason are invited to join freely his parade. Some abandon their shackles—imprisoned animals break their chains, children and adults once confined to gradgrindian institutions now frolic in the open air—while others prefer the false security of their beastlike state. The return of the ruler effects a metamorphosis in the land: what was barren becomes fecund, what was bitter becomes sweet.

Most of the people fled, a few joined them. When they left the town they were a larger and merrier company. They swept on across the level fields on the north bank, or left bank, of the river. At every farm animals

¹² This descent into the bestial state and the loss of speech also struck the supporters of N.I.C.E. in *That Hideous Strength*. See 340-356.

came out to join them. Sad old donkeys who had never known joy grew suddenly young again, chained dogs broke their chains, horses kicked their carts to pieces and came trotting along with them [...]. (408)

It should be noted that Aslan's influence encompasses even Bacchus, Silenus the satyr and the Maenads. Far from being the presider over shameless debaucheries, Bacchus now offers a wine that inebriates spiritually and rejuvenates the sick. Fruitfulness follows in his wake and his inspired revelries now express a happiness unleashed as praise for creation and the Creator. Once again the lion restores an order to the pleasures bestowed upon all creatures and domesticates even the once bracketed desert of the pagan myths for service to authentic joy.

The transformation of Narnia into a New Eden therefore belongs to the Christian tradition found in Jerome's *Life of Paul*. The often criticized "jumble of myths" found in the Narniad reflects neither an incoherent vision on the part of Lewis nor, as Laura Miller suggests, an attempt to return to the beloved pagan world under the cover of a Christian allegory.¹³ Just as Jerome's helpful centaur, articulate faun, and intelligent animals reveal the transformative power of Christ in the desert, so also do Lewis's kindly Mr. Tumnus and reveling Bacchus demonstrate the restored authority of Aslan. The ancient myths find new and authentic life in the Christian world.

NARNIA AND THE FRUIT OF DISCIPLINE

Lewis is generally not associated with asceticism. When he became an international figure, gracing the cover of *Time* magazine, a published reference to the "ascetic Mr. Lewis" amused J.R.R. Tolkien, who recalled his friend's capacity to down pints in quick succession (McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life* 240). His Christianity celebrated the goodness of created pleasures—beverages, friendship and song—in the vein of such English writers as G.K. Chesterton or Hilaire Belloc.¹⁴

Yet the popular image of the Inklings creating their worlds in the festive atmosphere of the Eagle and Child should not deceive us into thinking

¹³ Regarding the ancient myths, Miller writes: "Some of these were items he'd stashed away before his conversion, things belonging to his old 'secret, imaginative life,' treasures he wished to keep even though they couldn't be reconciled to the new regime. Their recalcitrance was part of their charm, the really wonderful thing about them" (L. Miller 269). A comparison with Jerome's work, however, reveals that the ancient myths had long been "reconciled to the new regime." The wonder of Lewis's vision, like Jerome's, is grounded in the transformative embrace of Christ's presence.

¹⁴ Screwtape advises his nephew to prevent his patient from experiencing *real* pleasures that actually draw persons out of themselves and toward God (151).

that Lewis did not see the importance of spiritual exercises, or disciplines, in the living of the Christian life. Unmitigated pleasures corrupt and decay; ordered pleasures infuse life. Even Screwtape recognizes that “when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s ground” (143). Lewis’s asceticism therefore sought to avoid the unhealthy extremes—perhaps found all too often even among the ancient holy athletes of desert—that ultimately become a dualistic rejection of creation. This becomes clear in his discussion of the virtue of temperance in *Mere Christianity*:

Temperance is, unfortunately, one of those words that has changed its meaning. It now usually means teetotalism. But in the days when the second Cardinal virtue was christened “Temperance”, it meant nothing of the sort. Temperance referred not specially to drink, but to all pleasures; and it meant not abstaining, but going the right length and no further. (49)

Sacrifices and denial should not become ends unto themselves, but rather are an essential and healthy means for the ordering of a virtuous life toward God.¹⁵ Lewis was no Pelagian, burdening the Christian with the impossible task of self-perfection and the rejection of all pleasures before the stern gaze of the Creator. Rather, the modern spiritual athlete’s struggle is to inculcate those qualities or virtues from which God’s grace draws the infinite borders of heaven. Again, we hear this point in *Mere Christianity*:

The point is not that God will refuse you admission to His eternal world if you have not got certain qualities of character: the point is that if people have not got at least the beginnings of those qualities inside them, then no possible external conditions could make a “Heaven” for them—that is, could make them happy with the deep, strong, unshakable kind of happiness God intends for us. (50)

So would Lewis have rejected the radical efforts of an Antony, Paul, Hilarion or Jerome as imbalanced extremes? Perhaps not. He soundly recognized that multiplicity of paths to sanctity and the varied needs of individuals in their quest for divine union. In a letter to Mrs. Jessup, he wrote of the varied forms of asceticism for individuals:

About the question of abandoning the “World” or fighting right inside it, don’t you think that both may be right for different people? Some are

¹⁵ Gilbert Meilander notes that for Lewis, the disorder in creation is “apparent even apart from any theological explanation” (124).

called to the one and some to the other. Hence Our Lord, after pointing the contrast between the hermit and ascetic John the Baptist, and Himself who drank wine & went to dinner parties and jostled with every kind of man, concluded, "But Wisdom is justified of *all* her children": meaning, I take it, both these kinds. I fancy we are all too ready, once we are converted ourselves, to assume that God will deal with everyone exactly as He does with us. But He is no mass-producer and treats no two quite alike. (425-6)

The essential point for Lewis is the disciplined ordering of created talents and pleasures toward the growth in virtues and the authentic participation in God.¹⁶ The disciplines of the Christian life—including essential moments of self-denial—will vary upon the strengths and weaknesses of the individual and the divine call.

What of asceticism in Narnia? Does Lewis continue to incorporate the traditions found Jerome's *Life of Paul*? This alternate world does boast at least one solitary in the tradition of Antony and Paul: the hermit of the Southern March from *The Horse and His Boy*. We know little of this enigmatic figure—of his motivations or distinct practices—but he has clearly chosen the life of an anchorite for the silence and pursuit of wisdom. He has lived to the great age of one hundred and nine years and his home on the border of Archenland, north of the Great Desert, serves as an oasis for the weary. The tranquility of his surroundings seems to emerge from his sagacity, the fruit of his chosen solitude and reflection. He demonstrates a deep friendship with animals and exhibits miraculous, magical powers. Aravis calls him "father"—the equivalent of the title "abba" for the ancient desert monks—and he gracefully imparts wisdom to his visitors. In short, this ascetic has not only grown in the virtues, but he also transforms the world around him both physically and spiritually. He has become, in effect, an instrument of Aslan's providence through exercise and grace.¹⁷

¹⁶ On Lewis's understanding of participation through the Incarnation see Jensen 53.

¹⁷ The hermit kindly corrects Aravis when she speaks of "luck" as instrumental in her survival. He speaks rather of "providence": "I have now lived a hundred and nine winters in this world and have never yet met any such thing as Luck. There is something about all this that I do not understand: but if ever we need to know it, you may be sure that we shall" (*The Horse and His Boy* 274).

Perhaps another semi-solitary is the retired star, Ramandu. Like Paul, his needs are provided by the natural world around him:

"But Lucy, looking out from between the wings of the birds that covered her, saw one bird fly to the Old Man with something in its beak that looked like a little fruit, unless it was a little live coal, which it might have been, for

Asceticism is also necessary in Narnia for overcoming the deceptions of the usurpers and obtaining a clear vision of the truth. All of the adventures in Narnia demand sacrifices and self-denial on the part of the heroes in order to reach their desired goals. Most of all, in order to see Aslan and to know his will, a certain dying to self must take place, accompanied by a well-ordered life according to the virtues. As we hear in *The Magician's Nephew*, "For what you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are" (75). Aslan often remains invisible to the protagonists, until they convert and grow above all in the virtue of humility. This is no easy struggle, since, as Aslan declares, "Oh, Adam's sons, how cleverly you defend yourselves against all that might do you good!" (*The Magician's Nephew* 98). Yet, determination and discipline often cooperate with grace for the purification of sight.

The most striking example of this clarity through ascetic practice takes place in *The Silver Chair*. The heroes have penetrated the Underworld and now confront its Queen. Through her magic she begins to seduce them into believing that the upper world is an illusion and that her cavernous realm is the Truth. Before they all can succumb to the spell, Puddleglum boldly thrusts his foot into the fire. The pain "made Puddleglum's head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic" (633). The Marshwiggle's heroic act should not be called masochistic, but rather a freely chosen alarm to awaken the spiritual senses. Like fasting and sacrifices, his brief moment of pain liberates him from deception and leads to the salvation of Narnia itself.

Finally, ascetic practice is essential for not falling back into the bestial state. During periods of crisis many of Narnia's citizens choose to collude with the enemy by joining the ranks of dumb animals.¹⁸ Instead of struggling, they prefer oblivion, thereby proving Lewis's maxim, "Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed" (*The Magician's Nephew* 75). Ginger the Cat, who reached the heights of stupidity by rejecting Aslan and joining the invaders, becomes an inarticulate feline: "It can't talk," cry the Narnians. "It has forgotten how to talk! It has gone back to being a dumb beast. Look at its face" (*The Last Battle*

it was too bright to look at. And the bird laid it in the Old Man's mouth. Then the birds stopped their singing and appeared to be very busy about the table. When they rose from it again everything on the table that could be eaten or drunk had disappeared" (*The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* 521).

¹⁸ We hear, for instance, of the poor "Lapsed Bear of Stormness, which was really a Talking Bear, but had gone back to Wild Bear habits" (*The Horse and his Boy*, 310). He was ultimately killed by Corin Thunder-Fist.

727). Only the creatures who remain true to Aslan and cultivate virtuous lives maintain the dignity of their reason.

Yet, ascetic practice can lead to a recovery and a new hope, even for the bestial. Eustace, in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* becomes a dragon through his vices and greedy thoughts. He weeps because he "was a monster cut off from the whole human race" and yearns for human contact again. The experience inspires a gradual conversion in his heart and authentic desires—virtuous desires—begin to emerge. His attempts to peel away the scales and restore his humanity fail, since the dragon hide immediately grows back. Finally Aslan builds upon his feeble efforts and strips the repentant child of his scales. Yet this is not a transformation devoid of pain, as Eustace himself describes:

The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling the stuff peel off. You know—if you've ever picked the scab off a sore place. It hurts like billy-oh, but it *is* such fun to see it coming away. (474)

The restored Eustace has also experienced a personal metamorphosis and will become one of the heroes of the Narniad. His transformation therefore changes those around him and contributes to the salvation of all.

The case of Eustace also reveals the fundamental principle of Lewis's asceticism: human exercise is essential for spiritual growth, but in the end it is God who liberates, restores and elevates the person. "God knows our situation; He will not judge us as if we had no difficulties to overcome. What matters is the sincerity and perseverance of our will to overcome them" (*Mere Christianity* 59). Because of our fallen state, struggle and even pain accompany the Christian journey, but God never abandons the athlete and complements the feeblest attempts at perfection.



Despite the temporal and cultural divide, Jerome's fanciful *Life of Paul the Hermit* and Lewis's enchanting *Narniad* share a common vision of the Christian struggle in a creation groaning for redemption. In both worlds, Christ or Aslan recover a paradise that had been long subjected to corrupt, demonic despots. The good inhabitants of these places contribute to the victory through their heroic efforts of transformation, aided and accomplished through divine aid. Self-denial, solitude for reflection and prayer, disciplining the will, and growth in virtue reform not only individual persons, but also

contribute to the restoration of the surrounding environment. Whether we are considering *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or the lions, the monk and the cave, the exercises for spiritual perfection remain an essential part of the human and Christian adventure.

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