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"Time to Prepare a Face": Mythology Comes of Age

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Abstract

Guest of Honor address from Mythcon 47. A study of the place of mythology in ancient, medieval, and modern literature, the responses of Lewis and Tolkien to Modernity, and a meditation on Lewis’s thoughts on joy and the varieties of love in *Surprised by Joy*, the Narnia books, *The Four Loves*, and especially *Till We Have Faces*, for which Lazo offers an insightful reading of the concluding pages.

Additional Keywords

Classical literature; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Susan Pevensie; Lewis, C.S.—Relation to Joy Davidman; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia; Lewis, C.S. “Confession” (poem); Lewis, C.S. The Discarded Image; Lewis, C.S. The Four Loves; Lewis, C.S. “The Planets” (poem); Lewis, C.S. “Re-Adjustment” (poem); Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*; Lewis, C.S. *Till We Have Faces*; Love in C.S. Lewis; Medieval literature; Modernism; Myth in literature; World War I



TIME TO PREPARE A FACE":
MYTHOLOGY COMES OF AGE

ANDREW LAZO

IN T.S. ELIOT'S "THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED DRUPEL," we find in its confused and debilitated main character a Modernist man steeling himself to face a Modernist dilemma:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
.....
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea. (Eliot 3, 4)

In 1954, C.S. Lewis responded, defining in his poem "Confession" a boundary of opposition between two conflicting approaches to the Modernist period:

I am so coarse, the things the poets see
Are obstinately invisible to me.
For twenty years I've stared my level best
To see if evening—any evening—would suggest
A patient etherized upon a table;
In vain. I simply wasn't able. (*Collected Poems* 388)

For the last year, I have considered the question of how to deal with Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Mythology, and how all of these relate to the fairy-tales, legends, the mythopoeic books we in this Society love best. In doing so, we are presented with two problems, and thorny ones at that. In my talk today about *Till We Have Faces* and *The Last Battle*, I propose to posit those

problems and then attempt to essay something of an answer to them. Fundamentally, I see a global problem of positioning, and a local problem of a more personal nature.

Firstly, what are we to do with the problem of period, and the greater problem of genre? Another way to put it might be to query, what is wrong with us? Why don't we grow up and stop reading fairy tales? Or, where do the Inklings fit in the world of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein? Where do the books we love best fit? Do they fit at all? Secondly, and much more specifically, what are we to make of the "Problem of Susan"? You know what I'm talking about—she's so interested in lipstick and parties and nylons that she's kicked out of the club of Narnian Superfriends. Shall we really consign her to hell simply for growing up? And what does Lewis have against women, anyway? And while each of these problems could present more than enough matter for a whole book, I shall attempt to explore and even suggest something of a solution that ties the two together.

In attempting an answer to the twin problems of period and of Susan, I will begin by making the case for why both *The Last Battle* and *Till We Have Faces*, published a mere sixty years ago, are at once Ancient, Medieval, and Modernist.

ANCIENT

Let's start with the indisputable: both books deal with classical Pagan gods. If Michael Ward is right (and for my money he is, by and large, and if you disagree, we can argue about it whenever we meet over a really nice scotch), the classical gods and medieval planets govern the Narniad.

There is no question that Chronos, whom we see asleep in *The Silver Chair*, has awakened to make an end of the Narnian world in *The Last Battle*. And Chronos of course is the Greek name for the Roman god Saturn. Lewis significantly speaks of this father of Jove in his 1935 poem "The Planets":

Up far beyond
Goes SATURN silent in the seventh region,
The skirts of the sky. *Scant grows the light,*
Sickly, uncertain (the Sun's finger
Daunted with darkness). Distance hurts us,
And the vault severe of vast silence;
Where fancy fails us, and fair language,
And love leaves us, and light fails us
And Mars fails us, and the mirth of Jove
Is as tin tinkling. In tattered garment,
Weak with winters, he walks forever
A weary way, wide round the heav'n,

Stoop'd and stumbling, with staff groping,
The lord of lead. *He is the last planet*
Old and ugly. His eye fathers
Pale pestilence, pain of envy,
Remorse and murder. Melancholy drink
(For bane or blessing) of bitter wisdom
He pours for his people, a perilous draught
That the lip loves not. We leave all things
To reach the rim of the round welkin,
Heaven's hermitage, high and lonely.
(*Collected Poems* 318-9, emphasis added)

When the Sun's finger makes the light grow scant, one should certainly hear this poem echo in *The Last Battle* when Chronos "took the Sun and squeezed it in his hand as you would squeeze an orange. And instantly there was total darkness" (197). In the phrase "old and ugly" another echo resounds as Shift the Ape describes himself: "I hear some of you are saying I'm an Ape. Well, I'm not. I'm a Man. If I look like an Ape, that's because I'm so very old: hundreds and hundreds of years old. And it's because I'm so old that I'm so wise" (*Last* 38). When we take this description with the opening paragraph of the book wherein the narrator describes Shift as "the cleverest, ugliest, most wrinkled Ape you can imagine," that resonance is almost complete (*Last* 3).

We find another piece of the puzzle Lewis has crafted in his late poem "Re-Adjustment." Notice the mention of apes ("*Hominidae*") and the eschatological and apocalyptic tone and language:

I thought there would be a grave beauty, a sunset splendour
In being the last of one's kind: a topmost moment as one watched
The huge wave curving over Atlantis, the shrouded barge
Turning away with wounded Arthur, or Ilium burning.
Now I see that, all along, I was assuming a posterity
Of gentle hearts: someone, however distant in the depths of time,
Who could pick up our signal, who could understand a story. There won't be.
Between the new *Hominidae* and us who are dying, already
There rises a barrier across which no voice can ever carry,
For devils are unmaking language. We must let that alone forever.
Uproot your loves, one by one, with care, from the future,
And trusting to no future, receive the massive thrust
And surge of the many-dimensional timeless rays converging
On this small, significant dew drop, the present that mirrors all.
(*Collected Poems* 397)

This poem contains the end of several ancient and mythical civilizations: Logres, Troy, and Atlantis, and such ends are signaled by the new apes and devils unmaking language. But perhaps the most stinging loss the speaker looks out on comes from the failure of a "posterity of gentle hearts [...] who could understand a story." Classical gods and the ancient civilizations meet their end in *The Last Battle*, and Lewis continues to echo these themes. We will return to this poem, but first we must consider the Classical nature of *Till We Have Faces*.

In Lewis's last novel, he returns a third time to a book-length treatment of Venus. We have seen Lewis grapple with this goddess before in *Perelandra* and as the governing goddess over *The Magician's Nephew*, the last fiction Lewis completed before writing his "Myth Retold."¹ *Till We Have Faces* is about Ungit and her son, a pair elsewhere known as Venus and Cupid or Aphrodite and Eros. Here, as in many other places, the descent of ancient gods upon Lewis's work cannot be disputed. And not only are these books influenced by the Classical gods, they are in their very creation mythopoeic.

When thinking about mythopoeic literature we do well to remember the etymology of the word, based on two Greek words from which we get "myth" and "poem." The Greek word for myth, Lewis reminds us, means "any sort of story"; a poem comes from the Greek word meaning "a crafted thing" (*Experiment* 42). Lewis outlines the characteristics of myth in *Experiment in Criticism*, noting that myths: 1) are extra-literary, 2) seem inevitable, 3) keep human sympathy for the characters at a minimum, 4) deal with impossibles and preternaturals, 5) whether sad or joyful are always grave and never comic, and 6) are numinous and awe-inspiring. Myth also contains the "Kappa element," a secret atmosphere all to itself.² It draws air from another world. It offers a secondary world that proves logically consistent as Tolkien mentions in "On Fairy-stories" (*OFS* 59, cf. n. 65). Lewis's two books demonstrate again and again these characteristics of the ancient myths Lewis loved so much. We do well to consider them mythic because of the very deliberate technique Lewis so often

¹ Although *The Last Battle* was published last, according to Paul F. Ford, Lewis completed *The Magician's Nephew* last of the Narniad (464). Thus in Lewis's fictional work he begins with *Pilgrim's Regress* with a strong mother image, Mother Kirk. He continues with his maternal portrayal in *Perelandra* when he features Tinidril, who is of course Venus and also "Lady and Mother of this world." Lewis finishes his lifelong depiction of the divine maternal as he tells repeatedly of Ungit who, according to the Fox, "undoubtedly Aphrodite, though more like the Babylonian than the Greek" (*Perelandra* 72, *Faces* 8).

² For an extensive study of the atmosphere and secrecy of Lewis's work, cf. chapter one of Michael Ward's paradigm-shattering *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*, especially the subheading "Literary Reasons for Secrecy."

uses when dealing with myths—he approaches them chiasmatically, flipping them round like the Greek letter *chi*. He makes a kind of X or cross with them.

Examples of this flipping treatment abound in Lewis's work, although I shall only enumerate rather than elaborate on a few instances. In *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* we see Lewis flipping the myth of Narcissus in the character of Eustace Clarence Scrubb (who almost deserved it). In Eustace, we find in some ways the very opposite of Narcissus, watery mirror and all. Narcissus of course catches sight of himself reflected in the water, falls in love with his own beauty, and so dies. But Eustace, who has turned dragon due to his greedy, selfish, dragonish thoughts, sees the ugliness of the image of himself reflected in the water, falls into a healthy self-hatred that leads to three attempts to dig himself out of his skin before he is redeemed. Lewis turns on its scaly head this old myth of what happened to anyone caught in the claws of "the Great Sin," Pride.³ He repeats the story in *Till We Have Faces* as we find another ugly character faced with the mirror image of her own ugliness who also tries (three times) to dig herself out of the mess she has made of herself. Call it the disenchanting of narcissistic ugliness.⁴ And Lewis does this mythic flipping repeatedly. When read carefully, *The Silver Chair* reveals at least three examples including a re-gendered Orpheus, a re-imagined Allegory of the Cave, and even a re-gendered inversion of the Adam and Eve story, with Jill standing in for Adam and the Green Lady as the serpent. Lewis uses ancient myths with reliable consistency, and usually does so by flipping them upside down—or, perhaps more to the point, right side up—and does so with significant purpose in both *The Last Battle* and *Till We Have Faces*.

MEDIEVAL

But these two books demonstrate not only Classical origins. In several ways they also show themselves as decidedly medieval. First of all, they both bear evidence of what Lewis repeatedly referred to as the medieval method of authorship. According to several of his scholarly works, medieval authors did not prize originality nearly so much as they did organization. Take, for example, "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages":

Characteristically, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a spiritual adventurer; he was an organizer, a codifier, a man of system. His ideal

³ Cf. *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* chapter seven, as well as *Mere Christianity* Book III, chapter eight.

⁴ Lewis repeats a version of this chiasmic mirror image of beauty and ugliness in Book II, chapter three of *Till We Have Faces* as the ugly Orual mournfully faces her father and his mirror and in essence despairs of her own self-imposed ugliness, a repentance that effectively redeems and beautifies her.

could be not unfairly summed up in the old housewifely maxim 'A place for everything, and everything in its (right) place'. [...] In all these alike we see the tranquil, indefatigable, exultant energy of a passionately logical mind ordering a huge mass of heterogeneous details into unity. ("Imagination" 44)

And so too did C.S. Lewis. Lewis's close friend and literary executor Owen Barfield famously remarked that "somehow what [Lewis] thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything" (Barfield 121-2). And his remark points to Lewis's essentially medievalist approach, given his own gift for "ordering a huge mass of heterogeneous details into unity." Anyone who has read Lewis's scholarship, especially his book-length studies, will recognize just such an author at work. Tolkien too performs similar tasks in similar ways, as *The Silmarillion* and the voluminous *History of Middle-earth* easily attest.

Not only do medieval authors constantly seek to organize and harmonize, they also have a vastly different understanding of what it means to be original. In essence, they seize an older source, chop off those bits that they do not like, add more of the bits that they do, and pass them along. There are nearly no original *Canterbury Tales*; only a handful of Shakespeare's plots can be considered what we would call "original" today. Though an Early Modern writer, Shakespeare's example serves well here, for he was the master of this medieval method of illuminating to life much older material. In many key ways, the Inklings followed suit. While no one can doubt the originality and creative genius of Lewis's work (and of Tolkien's for that matter), many scholars (several of them contributors to this journal) have made a kind of entirely laudable cottage industry out of *Quellenforschung*, diving into the Inklings' work to trace their sources. In transforming his own sources, Lewis makes use of this medieval model all the time.

In *The Discarded Image*, Lewis writes:

One is tempted to say that almost the typical activity of the medieval author consists in touching up something that was already there; as Chaucer touched up Boccaccio, as Malory touched up French prose romances which themselves touched up earlier romances in verse, as Lazamon works over Wace, who works over Geoffrey, who works over no one knows what. We are inclined to wonder how men could be at once so original that they handled no predecessor without pouring new life into him, and so unoriginal that they seldom did anything completely new. The predecessor is usually much more than a 'source' in the sense in which an Italian novel may be the source of a Shakespearean play. Shakespeare takes a few bones from the novel's plot and flings the rest to

well-deserved oblivion. Round those bones he builds a new work whose purport, atmosphere, and language have really nothing in common with his original. (*Discarded* 209)

And we hear clear echoes of this method in Lewis's last novel, particularly in the Note in *Till We Have Faces*, wherein he claims "I felt quite free to go behind Apuleius, whom I suppose to have been its transmitter, not its inventor" (313).

MODERN

So: One can clearly consider the books under consideration as both Ancient and Medieval. But, I argue, they are also characteristically Modernist. I found this out while preparing for my PhD exams on British Literary Modernism. Mindful of my leaning, my advisor forbade me during this time from reading or talking about the Inklings. Go find out what Modernism is, she demanded. And so I did. I turned to the guidebooks and studies, as well as to the authors and critics themselves. And time and again I continued to discover in the midst of the Modernists characteristics and qualities that drove me back again and again to the work and thought of the Inklings. So much did Lewis and Tolkien and their friends embody the characteristics of their literary era, that I soon could not help but see them as a part of their period. And these are the characteristics of Modernist literature I found, shared by the likes of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, along with the War Poets: Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and others:

Despair: Spurred by the forward-looking excitement engendered by Futurism, the Industrial Revolution, Darwinism in many forms, along with worldviews shaped by Nietzsche and Freud, Modernism is born in a kind of *fin de siècle* optimism that gets horribly smashed, along with millions of bodies, in the First World War. The hope for an emergent superman, free of guilt and religion, and spurred to all kinds of progress that would only lead to the progressive enlightenment and inexorable betterment of the human race, comes to a crashing halt in the endless artillery fire on every front. The hope at the turn of the century is eaten from within as surely as the mustard gas that consumed countless young soldiers. In light of the awfulness of the War and the eviscerated expectations, a spirit of despair pervades nascent Modernism. Seen in this light, the gloom of those books belonging to canonical Modernism makes real sense. But if I am correct in my claim that we may detect in the Inklings a kind of mythopoeic Modernism, we should very well see similar sorts of despair in their works. And indeed we do.

Take Tolkien for example. More than a hundred times in *The Lord of the Rings* are we met with phrases such as "no hope," "hopes died," "hopeless."

Aragorn brings up the specter of a day coming when the courage of men fails.⁵ In Lewis too we find a Modernistic sense of despair and finality that pervades his works. Orual has no hope for herself, and little enough for Glome. And we know by the fourth word of *The Last Battle* that we have come to “the last days of Narnia” (*Last* 3). The best is behind, both for the Modernists as well as for their mythopoeic colleagues.

Fragmentation: The Modernist *weltanschauung* portrays a world falling to pieces, and we pick up this sentiment of fracture and fragmentation throughout the work of Lewis and Tolkien, and especially towards the end of their writing careers. The disgraced last King of Narnia is tied to a tree for discourtesy, having let go of countless codes of honor. Glome is falling to bits in famine and external threats. Even the uneven pavement of Trom’s castle symbolizes this breaking apart of the old orders. And while Orual later repaves the floor, she can do little enough to restore her minor realm to its modest glory (*Faces* 14-5). In Lewis’s and Tolkien’s work we find such fragmentation of old ways: Tashlan, dwarfs who shoot Talking Horses, Eustace (and Saruman) dreaming of a paved and profitable world, the failing blood of Númenor. And all the while the twilight of the Elves marches steadily by. Night falls on Narnia, and things fall apart. The center cannot hold because, much like Modernist literature, there is no center to hold—or to hold onto. Certainly these worlds too are falling into pieces as clearly as Picasso’s *Demiselles d’Avignon*, Duchamp’s fragmented nude descending a staircase, or those women who come as go while the bald-spotted Fred Prufrock wonders if he dares. Fragmentation characterizes the literature of this era.

World War I: It is perhaps no overstatement to claim that nearly a century after its end, the long shadow of the Great War continues to color all that has come after it. Certainly Lewis’s and Tolkien’s own experiences as soldiers in that conflict make their way into their writing. John Garth has written helpfully about Tolkien as a soldier, and certainly the latter’s experiences in the Somme and elsewhere influenced (if not inspired) many aspects of his subsequent work. As many before, David Bratman again pointed out at Mythcon 47 that Tolkien’s Dead Marshes come from Northern France. K.J.

⁵ While this phrase appears in the movie, the specter of failing courage haunts Tolkien’s book too. In the chapter “The Last Debate,” Gandalf exhorts with grim encouragement “We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dûr be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age.” To this Aragorn replies, “We come now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin” (*LotR* V.9.880). This Ragnarokian sense that the best has passed begins at least as early as the third chapter of *The Lord of the Rings* as Gildor and the Elves, however merrily met, have begun their long journey out of Middle-earth and to the West.

Gilchrist has chronicled the effects of World War I on Lewis, who had nightmares and carried shrapnel from that conflict for the rest of his life. Joseph Loconte too has tried to trace the war's effects on both men's writing. Anecdotally, I once gave Lewis's War poem "French Nocturne (Monchy-Le-Preux)" as a set piece on an exam on Modernist literature; the students read "our throats can bark for slaughter: cannot sing" (*Collected Poems* 75) and knew at once they had something on their hands straight from Sassoon's type of work. Even after his conversion, examples abound of how Lewis often uses military metaphors and casts many of his conflicts in terms of combat: Lewis calls Earth an "enemy-occupied territory" during his war-time talks on the BBC (*Mere Christianity* 47), God is the Enemy in *The Screwtape Letters*, and even his long debate with Owen Barfield about the nature of the universe is called a "Great War." In the books we're considering here, Orual finds both political and personal success by means of her skills as both warrior and commander, and of course the end of Narnia comes about in a Last Battle.

Mythology: Modernists make much use of mythology. Spurred not only by an essential rejection of the Judeo-Christian creation story and sparked by Darwin, Modernist thought and the nascent science of anthropology develops a fascination with primitive cultures and their stories, namely, myths. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* dominates much of the mythic imagination, and authors of this period begin revisioning and revising myths of many sorts. Again, the examples are manifold, be it James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Eliot's classical references to Sybils and the *Aeneid*. Even Yeats's earliest works looked to Irish origins and fairy stories, pointing out a fascination with these ancient sources of inspiration. Mythology pervades the Modernist period. And we wouldn't be a society if the Inklings didn't follow suit, albeit in, thankfully, extremely different ways.

Rejection of the Past: With the Modernists, this mainly appears in its sometimes virulent rejection of the nineteenth century, and is often directed at Realism and Romanticism. But this very act of rejection requires careful consideration, for if Modernists define their period in terms of a rejection, by necessity they essentially, even fundamentally, include what they have rejected if they are to make any sense. To define one era at least in part as a perpendicular response to a previous period makes it essential to understand what is rejected in order to comprehend the very constitution of the period we consider. And if we must understand Romanticism and Realism to understand the Modernists, so too must we know the Modernism that Lewis and Tolkien rejected in order to understand their own work. Tolkien makes this implicitly clear in a 1967 letter wherein he recalls that "L. said to me one day: 'Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves'" (*Letters* 378). It seems clear therefore that Lewis's and Tolkien's own

creative efforts came as a sort of rejection of the rejection. Not for nothing do both Edmund and Eustace exclaim “Great Scott!”, an implicit vindication of the Romantic writer whose work Lewis admired so much. And this reference leads to another clear point of similarity.

Innovation: The heady and forward-looking optimism of the turn of the century informed Modernism deeply. Perhaps the title of Ezra Pound’s 1934 collection of essays sums up this Modernist ideal best: “Make It New.” And this cry for innovation reverberated through much of Modernist sensibilities. Lewis and Tolkien answered in kind, even while rejecting this exhortation to make things new. For, as Tolkien points out in “Mythopoeia” and elsewhere, man is “sub-creator” endlessly combining the light that comes from the Creator (87). Tolkien and Lewis saw their work not as innovative, but as renovative. In 1916 as Futurism, Acmeism, all the -isms have started to swirl, the stage was set for Ezra Pound to clamor for artists to “Make it new!” Tolkien foresees the futility of it, and instead urges Geoffrey Smith to the shared task of the TCBS, which, he deemed “had been granted some spark of fire—certainly as a body if not singly—that was destined to kindle a new light, or, what is the same thing, *rekindle an old light* in the world” (*Letters* 10, emphasis added). Indeed, five years after Pound published his collection, Lewis followed suit with his first volume of academic essays titled, pregnantly, *Rehabilitations*. In it, Lewis published an essay on William Morris, a version of one of two papers on the author that he presented to the Martlets, an Oxford literary society, and a writer that Modernism had largely dismissed. Their attitude towards myth and some of their favorite writers of the previous century wholly makes sense in light of Lewis’s and Tolkien’s renovative, rehabilitative Modernism.

The City: A key tenet of Modernism focuses on the importance of the idea of The City, which rises to both imaginative and practical prominence early in the twentieth century, due in large part to industrialization. Any doubt that the Modernists held this idea highly can be quickly dismissed with the most cursory look at some of their key works. For of course in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of Modernism, Leopold Bloom wanders Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* even as Eliot chronicles the fragmentation of the “Unreal City” of “The Waste Land” (Eliot 39); three years later we find Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway wandering London looking for flowers and the past for the length of a book. In 1949, W.H. Auden dedicates his poem “Memorial for the City: In Memoriam Charles Williams, d. April 1945 [sic]” to one of the Inklings (Auden 591).⁶ And here too

⁶ According to Walter Hooper and Roger Lancelyn Green, Auden attended meetings of the Inklings in the late 1940s (Green and Hooper 158). Further, Auden was a former student of Tolkien’s, a correspondent of Joy Davidman, and a visitor to the Kilns. And in a poem from 1973, Auden reflects in his poem “A Thanksgiving” that “Wild *Kierkegaard*,

we find a Modernist interest deeply shared by the Inklings. For in *Return of the King*, where does the King return to but the White City of Gondor? And when Orual claims "I did and I did and I did" (236), what did she do if not for the city of Glome? Certainly, the idea of the City remained an imaginative center for the mythopoeic as well as the canonical Modernists.

Language: Those who have read Joyce in *Finnegan's Wake* or Gertrude Stein's work are certainly aware of the Modernist fascination with language, which in some ways comes out of many of the other elements and interests of Modernism. And it is no long journey to see how Lewis and Tolkien shared this fascination. Tolkien invented a dozen languages in making his mythopoeia, and seems to believe in the inherent power of language, even if untranslated. Sam needs speak no Sindarin to cry out "*A Elbereth Gilthoniel*" into the darkness; nor does his mind need to comprehend what he pronounces for the words to have a powerful effect. Nor will Gandalf despoil the peace of the Shire by uttering the language of Mordor written on the One Ring. And while Ruth Noel and the various groups given to learning Elvish have their place and their point, Tolkien seems to imply that the very nature of language itself essentially contains a power of its own. In expecting us, the readers, to gain benefit or avoid bane from words we cannot even understand, he makes an essentially Modernist move. Lewis is not so obvious but nevertheless clear, however subtly so. For Orual's nickname is "Maia," and in Greek mythology Maia is the mother of Hermes, the inventor of language. Lewis at the very least suggests that his anti-heroic, even Modernist, protagonist who consistently tells lies is herself the mother of language.

And if all of this is not enough, as I discovered in "Early Prose Joy," Lewis himself lays claim to the term when he describes his intellectual development by at one point proclaiming "I had joined the moderns" (25). Clearly, the Inklings must be at least considered within the context of literary Modernism, if not counted as a sort of movement of their own, which I have chosen to call Mythopoeic Modernism.

Returning to Lewis's statement to Tolkien "there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves" (*Letters* 378), I find a key concept. Because this indictment of Modernism in the phrase "too little" is a rejection of the direction and forms of Modernist literature, Tolkien and Lewis seem to have conscripted themselves into the war over the era in order to address this problem of period. Lewis spoke of this matter in his great inaugural address at the founding of the Chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature for him at Cambridge. In 1954 Lewis said,

Williams, and *Lewis* / guided me back to belief" (Auden 892). Auden also wrote an introduction to the 1956 edition of Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*.

“roughly speaking we may say that whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three—the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the post-Christian” (“*De Descriptione Temporum*” 5). He notes that “modern poetry is not only a greater novelty than any other ‘new poetry’ but new in a new way” (9). And so he sets about doing something about it.

TOWARDS A RE-ENCHANTED AGE

Looking to Lewis’s own thoughts while attempting to solve the problem of period brings to mind Lewis’s categories for them in the seldom-read “Talking about Bicycles.” In that 1946 essay, Lewis defines four ages: “the Unenchanted Age, the Enchanted Age, the Disenchanted Age, and the Re-enchanted Age” (“Talking” 68). This of course will not only apply to our understanding of the Modernist period, but will bring us back to *The Last Battle* where, in the roll call of the heroes of Narnia, we meet “King Rilian the Disenchanted” (205). And this talk of enchantment brings us round to Lewis’s 1941 sermon “The Weight of Glory,” where Lewis reminds us that “[s]pells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years” (*Weight* 31).

So how do the Inklings break that spell of misguided Modernism? They made myths. They wrote fairy stories. The twin problems of period and genre need not trouble us. Lewis and Tolkien were Modernists. Of course they were. That was their Period—what else could they be? But let me make it clear that they battled with the trends of their period, and in some ways they seem hopelessly out of step with it. Their fight to have English literature curriculum end in 1830 ultimately failed. They lost the battle. But perhaps they are winning the war. I shall move to the next great distinction: Old and Young. Lewis and Tolkien perhaps found Modernism too concerned with being grown up, and so they set out to show them how and where to draw the distinction. Their effort is embedded in the contrast of “old” and “young.”

OLD AND YOUNG

In the opening lines of *Till We Have Faces*, Orual begins her book with the phrase “I am old now” (3). And as we have already seen, at the outset of *The Last Battle* Narnia too is old. Pressing to point to Lewis’s compatriot, we see the marks of imagined age all over Middle-earth. Yet Lewis concerns himself throughout his work with the idea of what it means to be young, most commonly with regards to Tinidril (and here it will prove helpful to remember that Tinidril = Venus = Aphrodite = Ungit = Orual). Tinidril tells us that to

become wiser and smarter means to "grow older" (68). And Lewis condemns in several places the idea of growing up to appear grown up. Once he has finally come to some sense and even salvation, Mark Studdock

found a serial children's story which he had begun to read as a child but abandoned because his tenth birthday came when he was half way through it and he was ashamed to read it after that. Now, he chased it from volume to volume till he had finished it. It was good. The grown-up stories to which, after his tenth birthday, he had turned instead of it, now seemed to him, except for Sherlock Holmes, to be rubbish. (*That Hideous Strength* 358)

In Mark's choice of reading we should of course hear clear echoes of Lewis's own statement "When I was ten, I read fairy tales in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty, I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up" ("On Three Ways" 34). And this discussion of Old and Young brings us directly to the Problem of Susan.

In dealing with this thorniest of issues, I begin with a general word of caution. In my experience of navigating many of Lewis's most challenging passages, I often find the baby discarded with the bathwater by the simple failure to read meticulously. And any careful reader of Lewis will attest to the fact that he writes with a complex deliberateness that demands a reader's full attention. In most cases, I have found that the lion's share of supposed problems with Lewis shrink from mountains to molehills if one will simply read carefully and in context what Lewis has actually said. This especially applies here.

In that spirit, consider very carefully the following controversial passage from *The Last Battle*:

"My sister Susan," answered Peter shortly and gravely, "is no longer a friend of Narnia."

"Yes," said Eustace, "and whenever you've tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, 'What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.'"

"Oh Susan!" said Jill. "She's interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up."

"Grown-up, indeed," said the Lady Polly. "I wish she *would* grow up. She wasted all her school time wanting to be the age she is now, and she'll waste all the rest of her life trying to stay that age. Her whole idea

is to race on to the silliest time of one's life as quick as she can and then stop there as long as she can." (*Last* 158-9)

Let us dismiss right away the supposed problem of gender that sometimes may arise here from a too-cursory reading. The problem stems not at all from the fact that Susan likes "nylons and lipstick and invitations." Consider carefully Eustace's words, for he wisely diagnoses the real problem here: Susan doesn't want to talk about Narnia. I cannot conceive how this has anything to do with gender, all the more because her judgment is pronounced by Queen Lucy and Lady Polly. No question, Lewis's ideas and practices concerning this matter are complex—complex enough to merit an entire book.⁷ But Susan's problem is the problem of another Lucy—Lucy Barfield. The reader perhaps will recall how the entire series of Narnian stories started, in the Dedication to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: although Lewis suggests that Lucy Barfield, the dedicatee, is "already too old for fairy tales, and by the time it is printed and bound [she] will be older still," he holds out hope that "some day [she] will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again." Susan's problem stems directly from the fact that she is not grown up *enough*. Lewis suggest that the marker for being properly grown up is in fact a readiness to read fairy stories. One here will remember what Tolkien said in "On Fairy-stories" that these tales are consigned to the nursery not because they belong there, but because they have fallen out of fashion (50). Susan's problem springs not from loving lipstick—it springs from not loving Narnia more. She has a problem with what she loves.

With all respect due to a past honoree of Mythcon, *pace* to Neil Gaiman, whose adult Susan says, "A god who would punish me for liking nylons and parties by making me walk through that school dining room, with the flies, to identify Ed, well . . . he's enjoying himself a bit too much, isn't he?" (187). But Lewis proposes an astounding answer, taken from letters he received about Susan's fate: "The books don't tell us what happened to Susan. She is left alive in this world at the end, having by then turned into a rather silly, conceited young woman. But there is plenty of time for her to mend, and perhaps she will get to Aslan's country in the end—in her own way" (*Collected Letters* III.826). Susan, clearly, needed to attend Mythcon (and linger long at the book table). She should love better what endures longer. She embodies more poignantly than almost anyone else in Lewis's fiction (except perhaps Orual) the fatal confusion between what Lewis calls "First and Second Things."⁸

⁷ *Women and C. S. Lewis*, to which I was honored to add a small chapter.

⁸ Cf. the essay of the same name in *God in the Dock*, pp. 278-81.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

It will repay us to attend very carefully Lewis's method in resolving the problem of Susan—he starts at the end of his books in a way that clearly points to a new beginning. At the very end of *The Last Battle*, Lewis actually points to the very beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. And where else does Lewis do this, one might ask? Nearly everywhere, it seems.

Take for example *Perelandra*: Ransom, at the end of the book, speaking to Tor, says:

"[W]hat you call the beginning we are accustomed to call the Last Things."

"I do not call it the beginning," said Tor the King. "It is but the wiping out of a false start in order that the world may *then* begin. As when a man lies down to sleep, if he finds a twisted root under his shoulder he will change his place—and after that his real sleep begins. Or as a man setting foot on an island, may make a false step. He steadies himself and after that his journey begins. You would not call that steadying of himself a last thing?"

"And is the whole story of my race no more than this?" said Ransom.

"I see no more than beginnings in the history of the Low Worlds," said Tor the King. "And in yours a failure to begin." (212-3)

The end of *Perelandra* points to the beginning of a tale.

In similar way, in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis ends his book-length study of joy by asserting that it doesn't matter:

But what, in conclusion, of Joy? for that, after all, is what the story has mainly been about. To tell you the truth, the subject has lost nearly all interest for me since I became a Christian. I cannot, indeed, complain, like Wordsworth, that the visionary gleam has passed away. I believe (if the thing were at all worth recording) that the old stab, the old bitter-sweet, has come to me as often and as sharply since my conversion as at any time of my life whatever. But I now know that the experience, considered as a state of my own mind, had never had the kind of importance I once gave it. It was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. (290-1).

Again, Lewis ends his book by pointing to a beginning. But he points to something far more important as well, and herein lies perhaps Lewis's greatest tale.

One must attend with enormous care to catch what Lewis is subtly suggesting, for at the end of *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis sees joy itself as pointing to

something other and outer—but what could he possibly mean is more important than joy? A hint comes when we remember who typed up the manuscript of that book—Joy Davidman? And Joy brought him something past joy—she brought to him “in my sixties, the happiness that passed me by in my twenties” (qtd. in Coghill 63). Apparently J.K. Rowling was right. It looks like it's more than an enchanted Snitch holding a Resurrection Stone that “opens at the close” (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*). So too did C.S. Lewis's heart. We shall return to this theme very soon.

The Four Loves once more ends with a beginning:

And with this, where a better book would begin, mine must end. I dare not proceed. God knows, not I, whether I have ever tasted this love. Perhaps I have only imagined the tasting. Those like myself whose imagination far exceeds their obedience are subject to a just penalty; we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there. And if I have only imagined it, is it a further delusion that even the imagining has at some moments made all other objects of desire—yes, even peace, to have no more fears—look like broken toys and faded flowers? Perhaps. Perhaps, for many of us, all experience merely defines, so to speak, the shape of that gap where our love of God ought to be. It is not enough. It is something. If we cannot “practise the presence of God,” it is something to practise the absence of God, to become increasingly aware of our unawareness till we feel like men who should stand beside a great cataract and hear no noise, or like a man in a story who looks in a mirror and finds no face there, or a man in a dream who stretches out his hand to visible objects and gets no sensation of touch. To know that one is dreaming is to be no longer perfectly asleep. But for news of the fully waking world you must go to my betters. (140-1)

We might well remember here how Lewis describes his conversion to Christianity at the end of *Surprised by Joy* as “more like when a man, after long sleep, still lying motionless in bed, becomes aware that he is now awake” (290). So what news does Lewis bring us of the waking world?

He starts by presiding over the “Funeral of a Great Myth,”⁹ the myth of Evolution (not, however, of scientific theory). The last evolutionary scene reverses all previous progress, plunges us into a kind of Ragnarok. While in “*De Descriptione Temporum*,” Lewis admits that he does not know if we are in the last act or the first act of the great tragicomedy of history, he shows how the myth

⁹ Cf. the essay of the same name, in *Christian Reflections*, pp. 82-93

of Evolution ultimately frustrates. And so too, with a typically Lewisian chiasmic flipping, Lewis inverts the evolutionary myth. Where Western society grows progressively better, but in the last scene of evolutionary history the world is destroyed by the sun exploding, Lewis flips this modernistic myth. His Narnian world grows worse and worse in its last days. And then that world ends with Chronos helping to wipe out Narnia as the sun expands to swallow the moon. All the witnesses to night falling on Narnia weep as that country ends, and then King Peter locks the door. But then they find themselves in Aslan's country, which at once contains Narnia and England. The myth of evolution ends in destruction. Lewis's reversal of it ends in paradise. But he's not even finished there.

According to medieval sensibilities (as Lewis records in his 1935 poem "The Planets"), the planet Saturn's metal is lead. But the god Saturn, Chronos, presides in mythology over the Golden Age. Look at what sort of medieval magic Lewis has achieved: he manages to cure the Modernist Chronological Snobbery by performing a kind Chronological Alchemy, where the last age has turned from lead to gold. The end of the evolutionary earth is destruction, but the end of the Narnian Earth goes through destruction to a glorious renovation, a rehabilitation. Lewis has managed to fuse the fondest goals of medieval science and magic as well.

And then what happens?

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (228)

What does He look like at the end of all stories and the beginning of the Great Story? What is that something "outer and other" in *Surprised by Joy*? Let me answer it all, and make sense of Susan, with one last riddle.

Orual too ends her book with a beginning: "I must unroll my book again. It would be better to rewrite it from the beginning, but I think there's no time for that. [...] Since I cannot mend the book, I must add to it. To leave it as it was would be to die perjured" (*Faces* 253). And how does she end it?

"I ended my first book with the words *no answer*. I know now, Lord [here she speaks to Cupid, Eros, the God of Love], why you utter no answer.

You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? Only words, words; to be led out to battle against other words. Long did I hate you, long did I fear you. I might —“ (*Faces* 308)

But Lewis ends with an em dash and words, as Arnom the Priest describes, which are written but unable to be seen beneath Orual’s bowed head. What “might” she feel or do towards Love Himself?

A clue comes from the end of *The Last Battle*. As the animals file out of fallen Narnia, they face Aslan and a decisive moment of transformation. Lewis writes:

[A]s they came right up to Aslan one or other of two things happened to each of them. They all looked straight in his face, I don’t think they had any choice about that. And when some looked, the expression of their faces changed terribly—it was *fear and hatred*: except that, on the faces of Talking Beasts, the fear and hatred lasted only for a fraction of a second. You could see that they suddenly ceased to be *Talking Beasts*. [...] But the others *looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened* at the same time. And all these came in at the Door, in on Aslan’s right. (175-6, emphasis added)

Orual closes with her own beginning: “Long did I hate you, long did I fear you. I might —” Might what? The answer seems clear. “Love you.”

What is the supreme happy ending, in Lewis’s life, and hopefully for all of us? What is the answer to all of these (if I may) “Riddles in the Light”? Love. Love. How do Lewis and Tolkien face the hatred and conceit of Modernism and war? They write mythopoetically—they write what Tolkien calls eucatastrophe, and evangelium. And what is the ultimate happy ending? What in Lewis’s and Tolkien’s estimation is the great evangelium, the good news, the “Great Story” in which every chapter is better than the one before? Love. Of course.

I will let Orual end this discussion here, for she wisely asks how can the gods “meet us face to face till we have faces?” (*Faces* 294). And who are these gods she would meet? Ungit and her son. Aphrodite and Eros. The God of love and the son of the God of love. And what is upon Orual’s face, inked with words written but kept from our gaze? “Love you.” “You love.” In Hebrew, the word for the presence of God is “panayim,” literally, “faces.”

And so too for us. In this age of mythopoetic Modernism, this time is our time to prepare a face to meet the faces that we meet. The face of Love.



NOTE

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