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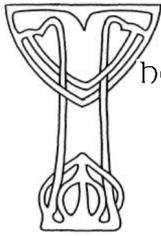
The Face of the Materialist Magician: Lewis, Tolkien, and the Art of Crossing Perilous Streets

Abstract

Plenary address, Mythcon 47. Concerns the character of the “Materialist Magician” (Screwtape’s term) in Tolkien and Lewis—the Janus-like figure who looks backward to magic and forward to scientism, without the moral core to reconcile his liminality. Tolkien’s Saruman and Lewis’s Uncle Andrew and Devine are key specimens of this trope, with Merlin standing as a counter-example.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Andrew Ketterley; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Devine; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Merlin; Lewis, C.S. The Magician’s Nephew; Lewis, C.S. The Screwtape Letters; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy (Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, That Hideous Strength); Liminality; Magic, Magicians, Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Characters—Saruman



THE FACE OF THE MATERIALIST MAGICIAN:
LEWIS, TOLKIEN, AND
THE ART OF CROSSING PERILOUS STREETS

ROBERT BOENIG,¹

BEFORE I KNEW ANYTHING, BACK IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF 1967 when I was a freshman at Rutgers University in New Jersey, two seemingly unrelated things occurred there that changed my life. They both happened on George Street, which runs parallel with the Raritan River, heading, if you are facing south, up towards the bluff where on December 1, 1776, Alexander Hamilton and his troops fired some cannon shots towards the British during the Revolutionary War. A friend from high school, Bill Spencer, who is a year older than I am and was then a sophomore at Rutgers, screeched to a halt in his old Plymouth Barracuda, and registered his delight that we were now back in contact. It was he who, shortly thereafter, first introduced me to the writings of C.S. Lewis. The second event, a few weeks later, was this: I was walking along the same portion of the same street but on its other side, and I happened to look up and spotted a sign in the window of a dormitory that read "Frodo Lives!"² I of course had to find out who that Frodo was and why I should be excited that he was still alive, and so I read *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time, not knowing that Lewis and Tolkien had been friends.

George Street has, in other words, been for me a road that goes ever on, a perilous place, a liminal portal like the wardrobe in Professor Kirke's spare room. Or, better yet, it is for me the Wood between the Worlds from Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*, presenting possibilities that could change my life—some to be rejected, some accepted. It was, in fact, at the same spot in that same liminal year of 1967 that a member of the Rutgers Crew stopped me to see if I wanted to try out for his team; I was, after all, the right height and weight and seemingly in good shape. I reluctantly said no, feeling that athletics would steal time from the books I love so much. But to this day I often wonder who I might have been if I had jumped into that particular pool. A Texan now, my last visit to my alma mater was in 2007, on the way home from a trip to England, to see my other longtime friend, Kevin Mulcahy, who is a librarian there. I carefully chose then

¹ Plenary Talk at Mythcon 47, San Antonio TX, August 2016.

² For the ubiquity of this slogan, see Carpenter 232-3; see also Roszak 40. For an analysis of Tolkien's effect on popular culture, see Rosebury.

to walk along College Avenue instead, which roughly parallels George Street, one block away. It was too dangerous on that other side.

The word “liminal,” usually encountered in Modern English as the last part of the word “subliminal,” is an adjective derived from the Latin word “limin,” which means “threshold.” Thresholds are usually considered everyday things, little bumps of wood over which doors close, things that function merely to keep out the cold and deter the bugs and spiders. But I would argue that they are far more than that. Thresholds are transitional events where we face both ways—sometimes literally, always metaphorically. As Bilbo would remind us, the road that is outside our front door can sweep us away if we are not careful. After all, he first met Gandalf on the threshold of his home on Bag End, and when they faced each other for the first time, it was a moment of monumental change for both of them. I do not know if a literal threshold figured into another first face-to-face meeting, one that occurred in the late 1920s in Oxford, but certainly the lives of both Lewis and Tolkien were changed by it.³

In this article I would like to piece together some ideas having to do with liminal spaces, faces, and facing things. I intend this to illuminate how Lewis and Tolkien co-created a motif that Lewis first named “the Materialist Magician” and to argue for its importance in our attempt to understand their artistic agendas—particularly how those agendas relate to their war experiences⁴ and also to the Arthurian narratives. Here is a first draft of a definition of the Materialist Magician: he is part wizard, part scientist. As such, he faces both ways in time: wizards are associated with the past, particularly with the Middle Ages, while scientists, at least in popular imagination, are the ones whose theories and inventions shape the future. My guess is that the

³ For an analysis of the friendship between Lewis and Tolkien, see Duriez, *Tolkien and C.S. Lewis*; see also Glycer.

⁴ For Lewis’s war experiences, see Green and Hooper 50-5; Sayer 119-40; and Gilchrist, *A Morning After War*; this last a full account of Lewis’s time as a soldier. See also Duriez, “Lewis and Military Service.” Duriez notes that a “typical day” during his military service could have Lewis reading William Morris and *The Song of Roland* (85). See also Ward 46; Gilchrist, “2nd Lieutenant Lewis” and “Continuing Research on 2nd Lieutenant C.S. Lewis.” For Tolkien’s, see Gilbert 114, 131, 140-7, 219-40; Carpenter 80-94; and Garth. For the influence of World War I on the writings of Tolkien and Lewis, see the Introduction and individual essays of Section 1 of Croft, ed., *Baptism of Fire*, 1-164. During World War II, both Lewis and Tolkien served in the Home Guard, a military branch comprised mostly of veterans of World War I who were tasked with missions, including Air Warden service and police work, as they stood in readiness to be the last defenders of England in the event of a German invasion. For the Home Guard, see Longmate 108-13; 181-6.

Materialist Magician first shows up, though only in prototypical form, in the first book of Lewis's Ransom Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*, published in 1938.⁵

Out of the Silent Planet is, of course, a novel full of liminalities. It opens as its main character, Elwin Ransom, whom both Lewis and Tolkien acknowledge as a portrait of Tolkien,⁶ is on a walking trip, proceeding along a road at dusk—two liminalities that herald a moral dilemma. Should Ransom keep a hastily-made promise to find a mentally challenged boy who works in the dark and silent house beyond a hedge and send him home to his anxious mother, or should he not bother and thus hurry away to find some shelter for the rapidly descending night? Moral dilemmas are tropological liminalities, and in this one Ransom works his out in a space that is literally liminal—before a locked gate in a hedge that fences the private space of the sinister home from the public space of the road (10). He throws his rucksack over the hedge and crawls under it—actions that lead to his kidnapping, his subsequent adventures, and also to the liberation of the boy whom Weston and Devine, the house's inhabitants, have intended to offer to aliens named *sorns* as a human sacrifice.⁷

After a journey through outer space in the spaceship devised by the villain Weston for his morally corrupt mission to the planet Malacandra/Mars, the kidnapped Ransom escapes from the evil scientist and his sidekick, the snakelike Devine. When Ransom spots a sorn in the woods during his flight, Lewis describes the creature like this:

⁵ In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis evokes the plot of H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*, arguing against Wells's depiction of outer space as a violent place full of monsters. See Boenig, *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*, 80-8, a revision of Boenig, "Lewis's Time Machine and his Trip to the Moon." See also Neuleib; Downing 124; Myers 39-47; and Filmer 58.

⁶ See Carpenter 173n1.

⁷ Lewis possibly saw a picture of a monster that strongly resembles his sorns in a late fifteenth-century copy of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, a work mentioned in Chaucer's Second Nun's Tale and published in William Caxton's translation by William Morris at his Kelmscott Press in 1892. In British Library MS Yates Thompson 49, Volume I, Folio 34v (See Kempf and Gilbert 66-7), we see a creature who, like the sorns, is covered in feathers and has a conical head. It is red. Though the sorns Ransom encounters are white, near the end of *Out of the Silent Planet* Lewis informs us that on Malacandra red ones can also be encountered: "There is at least one other kind of sorn [...] the *soroborn* or red *sorn* of the desert, who lives in the sandy north. He's a corker by all accounts" (156.) The red sornlike creature there is a monstrous demon who with others is tormenting a fallen saint near a body of water with impossibly high mountains in the background. See also Ford.

He recognized it instantly as it moved slowly (and, he thought, stealthily) [...] the giant stature, the cadaverous leanness, the long, drooping, wizard-like profile of a *sorn*. The head appeared to be narrow and conical [...]. (53)

Wizards often wear conical hats. Notice the adjectives in this passage are negative. Though there is nothing to connect this particular unnamed *sorn* with science, that connection becomes clear after Ransom has various adventures and finally comes “face to face” (91) with the *sorn* Augray, who knows nothing about the demands for human sacrifice and surprisingly befriends him. Augray is described without the negative adjectives; he seems to be covered with feathers, and he is the proprietor of a scientific observatory, where Ransom sees his home planet Earth, the Silent Planet. After Ransom spends a night at Augray’s domicile, Augray summons some other *sorns* and, as Lewis puts it,

[T]he *sorns* had determined that Ransom should not ask, but answer, questions. Their questioning was very different from the rambling inquiries of the *hrossa*. They worked systematically from the geology of Earth to its present geography, and thence in turn to flora, fauna, human history, languages, politics and arts. (102)

The *sorns* are Malacandra’s scientists, while the other two species there fulfill different roles: the *hrossa* are poets and hunters and the *pfifltriggi* are engineers and visual artists.

Though the *sorns* wrongly appear evil at the beginning, they are in reality good, helpful, generous, and inquisitive. And Augray is, of course, a full-grown supernaturalist, a profound believer in the literal existence of what cannot be seen, a believer in Maleldil. But the wizardlike scientist must have remained in Lewis’s mind, for he soon begins to exploit the inherent evil he detects in magicianlike scientists who reject religious belief. First published in 1943, at the height of World War II, *The Screwtape Letters*⁸ offers a more sophisticated definition of the Materialist Magician than the one I earlier drafted. It is here that Lewis launches this term, and he does it through the mouth of the devil Screwtape, who, as usual, is fond of setting his nephew and protégé Wormwood right:

My dear Wormwood,
I wonder you should ask me whether it is essential to keep the patient in ignorance of your own existence. [...] Our policy, for the moment, is to conceal ourselves. Of course this has not always been so. We are really

⁸ See Brown 186.

faced with a cruel dilemma. When the humans disbelieve in our existence we lose all pleasing results of direct terrorism, and we make no magicians. On the other hand, when they believe in us, we cannot make them materialists and sceptics. Alas, not yet. I have great hopes that we shall learn in due time how to emotionalize and mythologise their science to such an extent that what is, in effect, a belief in us (though not under that name) will creep in while the human mind remains closed to belief in the Enemy. The "Life Force," the worship of sex, and some aspects of Psychoanalysis may here prove useful. If once we can produce our perfect work—the Materialist Magician, the man, not using, but veritably worshipping, what he vaguely calls "Forces" while denying the existence of "spirits"—then the end of the war will be in sight. (32-33)

Slightly later, in *Perelandra*⁹ (published in 1943), Lewis tries out the full-blown Materialist Magician as a fictional character for the first time. The villain Weston, who lands there in another spaceship he has built, has changed since his appearance in *Out of the Silent Planet*. His scientific magic tricks are still there, but he has gained some sort of quasi-religious devotion to a vague entity—or is it a concept?—that he terms the Life Force. He worships this impersonal concept but condemns in no uncertain terms traditional religion (90-93). Here is a sample of this pseudo-scientific, pseudo-religious blather that dominates his conversation at the beginning of *Perelandra*:

The conflicting views of those who drew a sharp line between the organic and the inorganic and those who held that what we call Life was inherent in the matter from the very beginning had not interested me. Now [after recovering from an illness after the return from Malacandra] it did. I saw almost at once that I could admit no break, no discontinuity, in the unfolding of the cosmic process. I became a convinced believer in emergent evolution. [...] The majestic spectacle of this blind, inarticulate purposiveness thrusting its way upward and ever upward in an endless unity of differentiated achievements towards an ever-increasing complexity of organisation, towards spontaneity and spirituality, swept away all my old conception of a duty to Man as such. Man in himself is nothing. The forward movement of Life—the growing spirituality—is everything. (90-1)

⁹ For a comprehensive treatment of all aspects of *Perelandra*, particularly its theology, see the individual essays in Wolfe and Wolfe, eds., *C.S. Lewis's Perelandra: Reshaping the Image of the Cosmos*.

When his ego-maniacal soul is devoured and possessed by the devil, we witness the first instance of what Screwtape hopes will happen to all humanity.¹⁰

The third of the Ransom Trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, is Lewis's fullest and deepest treatment of the Materialist Magician.¹¹ In that book, his name is Legion. Belbury, home to the despicable N.I.C.E., is a hive of Materialist Magicians—some fully absorbed into their creepy ideology, most in various stages on the way towards full initiation. The four at the top of this hierarchy, the fully initiated Wither and Frost and the next “class,” Straik and Filostrato, illustrate the wide variety of the post-Weston Materialist Magician. Straik is a defrocked clergyman professing some sort of demythologized religious faith while he serves as the prophet for the scientific agenda of the N.I.C.E.—eugenics, cruel experimentation on both human and animal subjects, absolute subjection of a public deceived into ignorant compliance, totalitarian rule, and so forth. It is, of course, the same agenda as practiced so monstrously by the Nazis. *That Hideous Strength* was written in 1944 and published shortly before World War II ended. Filostrato is a scientist, a eunuch who wants to sterilize the earth of all organic life. It is he who ostensibly keeps the N.I.C.E.'s “Head”—the severed head of the criminal Alcasan—alive.¹² Unlike Filostrato and Straik, Frost and Wither know that Alcasan as Head of the N.I.C.E. is a sham, that the real power that is keeping the severed head alive is that of the “macrobes,” whom they envision as material rather than spiritual beings. Thus they are fully initiated.

Frost is a psychoanalyst, and the description of his face (127), replete with neat, pointed beard and pince-nez glasses, is strongly evocative of that of Sigmund Freud. It is he who expounds on what he and his colleague Materialist Magicians at the N.I.C.E. actually believe in:

“You have probably not heard of macrobes.”

“Microbes?” said Mark in bewilderment. “But of course--”

“I did not say *microbes*, I said *macrobes*. The formation of the word explains itself. Below the level of animal life, we have long known that there are microscopic organisms. [...] I have now to inform you that there are similar organisms *above* the level of animal life. [...] When I say that it is above the animal level, I mean that it is more permanent, disposes of

¹⁰ See Downing 50-1; Chapman 14; and Gibson 55.

¹¹ Written in imitation and homage to Charles Williams, *That Hideous Strength* evokes the genre of the “supernatural thriller” invented by Williams, who often depicts magic in his own books. For Lewis's appropriations of Williams's themes, including magic, see Schakel 118-119; Myers 85-89, 99-102; Murphy 62; Filmer 6, 34-35, 67-68, 100-101; Downing 127, 132-133; Jacobs 200-201; and Adey 132-136.

¹² See Downing 137-8.

more energy, and has greater intelligence. [...] The *macrobe* is more intelligent than Man. (256-7)

Here the supernatural is thus reduced to the scientific, a reduction that allows the scientists at the N.I.C.E. to perform their morally repugnant deeds without any God to judge them.

Wither, a scientist turned administrator, is a natural mystic—but one who is not grounded in the supernatural as are the mystics who grace most religions, Eastern as well as Western. He is adept at separating his spirit and body—but not for the same reason as the religious mystics. All is *self* for him, and he longs for nothing in the way of contact with the transcendent and personal Other:

[Wither] hardly ever slept. When it became absolutely necessary for him to do so, he took a drug, but the necessity was rare, for the mode of consciousness he experienced at most hours of day or night had long ceased to be exactly like what other men call waking. He had learned to withdraw most of his consciousness from the task of living, to conduct business, even, with only a quarter of his mind. [...] That detachment of the spirit, not only from the senses, but even from the reason, which has been the goal of some mystics, was now his. (250)

Three of the four—Wither, Filostrato, and Straik—end up worshipping the macrobes by chanting “Ouroborindra!/ Ouroborindra!/ Ouroborindra ba-ba-heel!” (354-5) and murdering each other with knives. The survivor of this worship of the macrobes, Wither, is subsequently killed by Ransom’s bear Mr. Bultitude. Frost survives only by not attending this worship service. Concluding that there is no reason to human existence, he ends up burning himself to death and setting the fire that consumes Belbury (358).

Lewis suggests in *That Hideous Strength* that one can avoid becoming a Materialist Magician if one has this tendency. I am not now speaking of Ransom and most of the other “good guys” at St. Anne’s. But if you have a tendency towards materialism and the talent to become a magician, you do not have to fall into the disguised worship of the devil, as Screwtape has described it. The two examples are the scientist Bill Hingest, who before he leaves the N.I.C.E. and is murdered by the “bad guys” announces that he “came here because I thought it had something to do with science” (70). Since it goes beyond pure science into morally suspect areas, he resigns. One way to avoid becoming a Materialist Magician is thus to keep your science pure. McPhee, Ransom’s hyperlogical atheist friend patterned after Lewis’s old tutor William Kirkpatrick, has the logical mind of a scientist and refuses to believe anything

he cannot see. He simultaneously resists belief in both religion and also the devil worship disguising and deluding itself as materialism.

But the best way to avoid being a Materialist Magician is to be a real magician, like Merlin, who comes back to life after sleeping for fifteen hundred years under Bragdon Wood. As a true magician, he faces backwards in time, while, as already said, the Materialist Magician faces forwards in time. Much can be said¹³ about Lewis's construction of this most famous of all magicians, this central character in the early part of the Arthurian narrative. But for our purposes, Merlin's significance is that he is a "dinosaur" from the past revived to defeat present day Materialist Magicians at something akin to their own game. For Lewis, he represents nature and true religion, and is empowered by Maleldil through his servants, the *oyarses* that guide the planets through the heavens—unashamedly supernatural, spiritual beings, not devils disguised as macrobes. Merlin wins, with a little help from his friend the bear Mr. Bultitude, hands down. Past conquers future, regress progress,¹⁴ and faith materialism.

The magician Uncle Andrew and his nephew Digory of course share the title of the book, *The Magician's Nephew*, but of course they have a very uneasy relationship, for near the beginning of the book Uncle Andrew sends Digory's unwilling friend Polly into the Wood Between the Worlds as part of an experiment he is conducting, mainly with guinea pigs. Digory protests, eliciting from him a long winded jaw (23), as Digory puts it, in his own defense. It concludes this way:

My earlier experiments were all failures. I tried them on guinea pigs. Some of them only died. Some exploded like little bombs— (20-1)

Uncle Andrew knows that what he is doing is magic, not science, but he casts his description in scientific language and even uses the favored animal victims of the scientific community. Digory, like Lewis an opponent of vivisection,¹⁵ angrily protests and then points out the obvious—that Polly is not a lab animal to be sacrificed and that he should have sent himself into the void, not Polly. Uncle Andrew responds with anger:

Bless my soul, you'll be telling me next that I ought to have asked the guinea pigs' permission before I used *them!* No great wisdom can be reached without sacrifice. But the idea of my going myself is ridiculous. It's like asking a general to fight as a common soldier. Supposing I got killed, what would become of my life's work? (22-3)

¹³ See Boenig, *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*, 111-30; 146-50.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, "The Funeral of a Great Myth." See also Kuteeva 276; and Christopher 248.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, "Vivisection." See also Downing 86.

Uncle Andrew here sounds suspiciously like Weston with a very liberal dose of cowardice added. Lewis, always fond of metaphors and analogies drawn from World War II, sums up his *apologia pro vita sua* with a sentence that could have been uttered by Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. The larger point is that Uncle Andrew acknowledges magic but likes to dress it up in the fancy clothing of military heroism on the one hand and academic science on the other.

Later, when Uncle Andrew, Polly, Digory, and the Witch-Queen Jadis arrive in Narnia to witness its creation in response to Aslan's song, Lewis makes it clear that Uncle Andrew rejects any supernatural or miraculous explanation for what is going on. Here is an example. Jadis has taken the bar of the London lamppost she was grasping when summoned to Narnia and thrown it viciously at Aslan, hitting him on the forehead. He is unharmed, and the piece of the lamppost bounces to the ground where it immediately functions in contact with Narnia's miraculously fertile earth as a seed that sprouts a growing baby lamppost (p. 108). Uncle Andrew's response is this:

"Remarkable, most remarkable," muttered Uncle Andrew. "Even I never dreamt of Magic like this. We're in a world where everything, even a lamp-post, comes to life and grows. [...] They laughed at my magic. That fool of a sister of mine thinks I'm a lunatic. I wonder what they'll say now? I have discovered a world where everything is bursting with life and growth." (111)

Note that Uncle Andrew, who has seen with his eyes Aslan's creation of Narnia, prefers a natural, pseudo-scientific explanation of what has happened: the rich soil makes everything grow. Note also that he sounds very much like Weston's greedy sidekick Devine. In case one misses the point about Uncle Andrew, who uses magic but rejects the supernatural, Lewis makes him conclude in a way that leaves no doubt:

Of course I shall have to let a few people into the secret. The first thing is to get that brute shot. (111-2)

That "brute" is of course Aslan, and Uncle Andrew the would-be theocide shows how important abolishing the supernatural is to him. He is in an odd way an ally of the God-is-dead demythologizers of some branches of academic theology in the mid-twentieth century.

Lewis says goodbye to Uncle Andrew, the Chronicles of Narnia's showpiece Materialist Magician and Lewis's last major attempt to elaborate this motif, with a summarizing generalization. When Aslan grants to chosen animals the gift of speech, Uncle Andrew is a witness, but he has willfully made himself incapable of understanding it—an irony of the first order, since magicians and

scientists alike seek not only power but understanding. Here is Lewis's comment:

When the great moment came and the Beasts spoke, he missed the whole point, for a rather interesting reason. [...] [W]hen the sun rose and he saw the singer was a lion ("only a lion," as he said to himself), he tried his hardest to make himself believe that it wasn't singing and never had been singing—only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. Of course it can't really have been singing, he thought. I must have imagined it. I've been letting my nerves get out of order. Who ever heard of a lion singing? And the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. [...] He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song. Soon he couldn't have heard anything else even if he had wanted to. And when at last the Lion spoke and said, "Narnia, awake," he didn't hear any words: he heard only a snarl. (125-6)

The damnation of this Materialist Magician is complete. Facing simultaneously towards the past and towards the future, he is left with nothing, not even the present. Only Screwtape and his kin can applaud.

In many ways Lewis's agenda in the Chronicles of Narnia is the opposite of that in *That Hideous Strength*. In the earlier book he had composed variants on the theme of the Materialist Magician like Beethoven composing his *Third Symphony*. But in the Chronicles of Narnia and his great book *Till We Have Faces* soon to follow, he varies the counter-theme instead: alternatives to the Materialist Magician. First on the list is Digory himself. In *The Magician's Nephew*, he starts out very much like Uncle Andrew himself, though he is in conflict with him. How so? Early on Digory is as interested in doing morally suspect experiments as is his uncle. This is most clearly evident in the chapter "The Bell and the Hammer," where his curiosity incites him to ring the one with the other, even though he knows it is both dangerous and stupid to do so. This awakens the Witch-Queen Jadis and causes, as John Milton might have put it, all our woe. Lewis makes sure we understand the similarity between the two in Chapter XI, aptly titled "Digory and His Uncle are Both in Trouble," where Aslan's relentless pastoral care and counselling leads to Digory's repentance. Digory grows up to be Professor Kirke, who of course in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is a famous professor who demands logical thought from the Pevensie children—as a twentieth-century scientist might—yet encourages Peter and Susan to take Lucy's supernatural explanation about her

disappearance through the back of the Wardrobe as truth (pp. 44-7).¹⁶ Professor Digory Kirke of course is also one of several characters in Lewis's imaginative works who are loosely based on William Kirkpatrick, Lewis's own tutor, whose logic was as relentless as his atheism, but who dressed up in his best clothing to work in his garden on Sundays. We have already seen how McPhee in *That Hideous Strength* is one of the Kirkpatrick characters. So is the George Macdonald character in *The Great Divorce* and the Fox in *Till We Have Faces*. One way to escape being a Materialist Magician, then, is to serve Aslan/Maleldil/God even though you might have doubts or even lack religious faith entirely.

The dwarf Trumpkin in *Prince Caspian*,¹⁷ in Chapter VII, "Old Narnia in Danger," reveals himself to be a sceptic in the mold of William Kirkpatrick. There he scoffs at the supernatural and, by extension, the existence of Aslan himself: "[Y]our Majesty knows I think the Horn—and that bit of broken stone over there—and your great King Peter—and your Lion Aslan—are all eggs in moonshine. [...] There's no good raising hopes of magical help which (as I think) are sure to be disappointed" (90). But when no one volunteers to go on the journey to find King Peter and his siblings, surprisingly this creature who has no belief volunteers to go out of loyalty to his earthly King, Caspian, and in resolution to do the good that needs to be done even if no supernatural reward is forthcoming: "'Thimbles and thunderstorms!' cried Trumpkin in a rage. 'Is that how you speak to the King? Send me, Sire, I'll go'" (92). When Caspian wonders why someone who has no belief in Peter or Aslan would go on such a mission, Trumpkin replies, "No more I do [have faith], your Majesty. But what's that got to do with it?" (92). Through the greatest of perils he accomplishes the mission that contributes mightily to the salvation of Old Narnia—even if he rejects Old Narnia's belief.

But perhaps the most powerful variation on this theme is Puddleglum from *The Silver Chair*.¹⁸ He is more than a comic incarnation of Lewis's glum gardener, Fred Paxman. And though he has abundant though not optimistic faith in Aslan, he seemingly lapses into doubt and disbelief at the very turning point of this book. But it is not intentional disbelief or wavering, for he falls under the spell of the Green Lady, the Witch-Queen who has kidnapped Prince Rilian. In Chapter XII, "The Queen of Underland," she throws green powder into a fireplace and its fumes enchant the newly recovered Prince Rilian along with Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum. Then she chants, "There is no land called Narnia" (152) and finally "there is [...] no Aslan" (157). The first three are powerless to withstand her, but a woozy Puddleglum somehow summons up

¹⁶ See Edwards 65.

¹⁷ See Edwards 71-2.

¹⁸ See Edwards 80-4.

the resolve to do so: “But Puddleglum, desperately gathering all his strength, walked over to the fire. [...] With his bare foot he stamped on the fire, grinding a large part of it into ashes on the flat hearth” (158). This brave deed breaks the spell and the four of them regain their belief in Narnia and Aslan. Lewis suggests that if you have lost your faith, do what is good anyway.

One final variant in the Chronicles of Narnia is worth mentioning here. Roonwit, though only a minor character in *The Last Battle*, nevertheless is a powerful exponent of the Kirkpatrick/Trumpkin method of rejecting the role of the Materialist Magician. He is a centaur who, like Trumpkin, goes on a perilous mission to save Narnia. His name Roonwit is actually simple Old English, where *run* means “secret” and “wit” means knowledge. Since hardly anyone in Anglo-Saxon England knew how to read runes, the word “rune” acquired a secondary meaning. The one who uses wit to decipher runes is thus a “secret knower”—that is, a magician and/or counsellor. In *Beowulf* the thane Aeshere, who is slain by Grendel’s Mother, is described as King Hrothgar’s *runwita*—his counsellor. The name of Lewis’s character Roonwit is thus his one-word resume. But he nevertheless fails to accomplish his mission, for he was killed by a Calormene arrow shortly before arriving at his destination. Roonwit is in some ways the opposite of Trumpkin—he has belief but his mission does not vindicate that belief by supernatural intervention. But it is a good and heroic deed nevertheless. Roonwit and Trumpkin actually are Lewis’s variants on the same theme. Even in a losing battle faith and faithfulness are necessary.

All of this leads, of course, to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, where we find one of the best examples of the Materialist Magician in his character the fallen wizard Saruman. Saruman is more than proponent of unrestrained industrialism¹⁹ at the expense of the natural environment, for he has also given up his faith in Ilúvatar and the Valar yet continues his wizardry, dabbling in eugenics as he prepares for sudden, all-out war—Blitzkrieg, as it was known in the 1940s. He deludes himself that he can outwit Sauron, though he has paid him some sort of homage. He tortures and enslaves others. All of this comes from *The Two Towers*. In *The Return of the King*, released from captivity, he sets up a fascist dictatorship in the Shire before Frodo and his hobbit companions return, and the enslavement, kidnapping, and theft of valuable property from his victims together with his petty list of regulations and his secret murders of those he has imprisoned comprise the small-scale though temporary fulfillment of his political goals delineated in *The Two Towers*.²⁰

Both Lewis and Tolkien deny that Lewis had much influence on *The Lord of the Rings*. I think that our acceptance of these denials needs to be nuanced.

¹⁹ See Flieger, *Splintered Light*, 26.

²⁰ See Chance 104-6.

Lewis complained that Tolkien either ignored criticism or went back and wrote something over from the beginning, and Tolkien maintained that Lewis functioned as a midwife for his great work and little else. But the two men spent a large part of their lives hatching collaborative plans. They began by plotting the rewriting of the Oxford English Syllabus by omitting modern works, planned a book about the connections between myth and language, tried to revive Old English meter as a model for Modern English poetry, and, after deciding that there were not enough people who were writing the kinds of stories that they liked, divvied up their assignment, with Lewis writing a book about space travel and Tolkien attempting to write one about time travel. In an effort to face the present as well as the past, I suggest, they also collaborated on exposing the villain with a dozen faces, the Materialist Magician. It was Lewis's idea originally, but Tolkien perfected it.

Tolkien issued denials about how much *The Lord of the Rings* reflects World War II, and Lewis was eager to back him up. Tolkien admitted that the Battle of the Somme, in which he fought in World War I, contributed to his depiction of the Dead Marshes that Frodo, Sam, and Gollum encounter on the journey towards Mordor, but World War II? No, says Tolkien with Lewis cheering him on, the Ring is not an allegory of the Atomic Bomb that finally facilitated the end of that biggest of all wars, for the Ring was conceived considerably before the Atomic Bomb.²¹ It is, of course, impossible to argue against them.

Authors can get riled up when others discover influences and sources on the one hand or suggest totalizing interpretations on the other. William Morris, the favorite author of both Lewis and Tolkien, was notorious for this. While Lewis does not deny the influence of World War II on his works, both Lewis and Tolkien say that they do not like allegory, and these statements also must be nuanced.²² Lewis was doubtless the greatest literary expert of his generation about allegory, as his scholarly book *The Allegory of Love* attests. Both men themselves wrote imaginative allegories, Lewis *The Pilgrim's Regress* and Tolkien *Leaf by Niggle*. Lewis suggested, however, that Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is not meant to be an allegory of Christ, preferring the slippery word "applicability" to allegory. What both men are doing is using a narrower definition for allegory than is currently in use: allegory as a reductive, one-to-one totalizing interpretation.

Here's the difference: no one would say that *The Lord of the Rings* is only an allegory of World War II, but that does not mean that World War II is absent

²¹ See Flieger, *A Question of Time*, 171-2.

²² See Shippey, *Roots and Branches*, 352-3.

from that book entirely.²³ Saruman's secret armament, his sudden unleashing of Blitzkrieg, his eugenic experiments, and his later fascist dictatorship in the Shire, where citizens disappear, all recreate Nazi ideology. There is much, much else in *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, that does not evoke World War II, but Tolkien joins his contemporaries like George Orwell and Aldous Huxley to warn us of the creeping dangers of neo- and pseudo-fascist dystopias.²⁴

This brings us, albeit in a roundabout way, back to King Arthur. The imaginative works of both Lewis and Tolkien abound in Arthurian references, of course, and this and the recently published Tolkien fragment, *The Fall of Arthur*, attest to their constant engagement with the Arthurian narrative. Not only does *That Hideous Strength* bring Merlin back to combat the Materialist Magicians of the N.I.C.E., but Denniston's first name Arthur, the town Cure Hardy, the use of "Pendragon" for Ransom's title, to say nothing of his actually being King Arthur's successor, all align that book with the Arthurian narrative. In *Perelandra*, Ransom is brought to *Abhalljin* or Avalon on that planet to be healed.²⁵ The King who returns to save his people is a motif of both *Prince Caspian* and, no surprise, *The Return of the King*. As both Malory and T.H. White remind us, King Arthur is *rex quondam rexque futurus*, the once and future king.

The Arthurian narrative is about many things, but one of the most important of them is how the past can return to the present to insure a safe future. Sometimes my students ask me what they can do with their major in English. I do provide some practical answers: good writing is marketable in the business world, English is a preferred major for some professional programs like law schools and theological seminaries—that kind of thing. But I also tell them that English, indeed the humanities in general, can serve as culture's memory and even culture's conscience. Lewis's and Tolkien's engagement with World War II works like that. The references to that war not only explain things about that perilous time back in the 1940s but also serve as invitations to be engaged with our own present. We can't just mutter "It can't happen here" or "It can't happen now," for it can. Like Gandalf, we must summon the wisdom to thwart the would-be dictator on the rise or find the courage to do the right thing, even though it may be convenient not to do it. Tolkien's game, Lewis's game is to put characters in difficult moral dilemmas—like Sam agonizing about whether to assume the burden of the Ring or go back to find and help the fallen Frodo or like Ransom deciding whether to climb through that liminal hedge to help a mentally impaired boy. But this is not simply to give their characters

²³ See Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth*, 168-72.

²⁴ See Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 115-7.

²⁵ See Downing 78.

something to do but also, mythically, to give us narratives when we face the scary liminalities of our own moral decisions.

Indeed, both Lewis and Tolkien looked at their anti-Modernist artistic agenda²⁶ as facilitating the past to redeem the present and secure the future. Sometimes they admittedly went down the wrong path, like the young Lewis's antipathy towards T.S. Eliot, whom he believed ruined modern poetry. But mostly, as least the way I see it, Lewis and Tolkien were right on target. Through the horrors of the two World Wars and the Cold War and now the War on Terror that followed, they remind us that we can still believe in courage and honor and still write narratives that appeal to everyone and anyone, unlike those disjointed and despairing novels and poems that only academics now like to read, thinking them so important.

In "*De Descriptione Temporum*,"²⁷ his Inaugural lecture delivered when he accepted his Professorship at Cambridge, Lewis, provocative as always, claimed he could read past literature and interpret past culture with native immediacy rather than academic distance. He said that he was a "dinosaur" come back to the present to help their understanding. At the end of my book about Lewis, I suggested that he himself was Merlin in *That Hideous Strength*. Now I want to add that he, together with his friend Tolkien, were even more than that. I almost feel like saying something about "the once and future king" here. But they didn't want to be kings—who would? Instead, I'll regress to my childhood in a blighted and violent neighborhood across the river from Manhattan, when I learned that sometimes you have to face both ways when crossing a dangerous street.



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²⁶ See Mortimer.

²⁷ For a brief survey of the lecture and its influence, see Danielson 199.

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