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Abstract

A close look at the stylistic and structural characteristics of Aslan's speeches in the Chronicles of Narnia.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Aslan; Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia

“The whole art and joy of words”:

Aslan’s Speech in the Chronicles of Narnia

Joy Alexander

THERE are many instances in literature of characters stepping out of the books which create them. What I mean is that many people recognise and know about Robinson Crusoe, Oliver Twist, or Peter Pan who have certainly never read the stories in which they feature. Another example is Aslan, who is widely known to be a lion and can perhaps be associated with Narnia even though little else about the Narnian Chronicles may be known. Nor is there likely to be much argument that he is the dominant character in the Narnian tales.

C. S. Lewis always resisted making any simple equation that Aslan is Jesus Christ. In his first novel, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, he came closest to allegory but he spent the remainder of his prolific career retreating from anything so explicit. He discussed the specific case of Narnia on several occasions in his letters. For example, on May 29, 1954, he wrote to some fifth-graders:

You are mistaken when you think that everything in the books ‘represents’ something in this world. Things do that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* but I’m not writing in that way. I did not say to myself ‘Let us represent Jesus as He really is in our world by a Lion in Narnia’: I said ‘Let us *suppose* that there were a land like Narnia and that the Son of God, as He became a Man in our world, became a Lion there, and then imagine what would have happened.’ If you think about it, you will see that it is quite a different thing. (Hooper 425)

Although allegory is disavowed, Aslan is clearly a character redolent of divinity and with godlike connotations. This is explicitly reinforced by Lewis when, less than a month after writing to the fifth-graders, on June 19, he replied, when the idea of a cartoon version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was suggested to him: “I am sure you understand that Aslan is a divine figure, and anything remotely approaching the comic (above all anything in the Disney line) would be to me simple blasphemy” (438). It is obvious that C. S. Lewis took the character of Aslan very seriously and intended that he should be suggestive of the Christian Son of God. Consequently as a writer he placed himself under extraordinary constraints in depicting such a character when inappropriate treatment would

apparently be construed by him as blasphemy. It is interesting therefore to study Aslan's appearances and speech in the Narnian Chronicles and to consider the special ways in which he is presented.

Given his dominance in the reader's memory of the tales, it may come as a surprise to realise that Aslan's appearances are actually strictly limited:¹

	Number of pages in book	Pages where Aslan is physically present
<i>Magician's</i>	9–171	108–71
<i>Lion</i>	9–171	117–65
<i>Horse</i>	11–175	128–72
<i>Prince</i>	11–190	124–87
<i>Voyage</i>	7–189	123–88
<i>Silver</i>	9–191	23–27, 186–89
<i>Last</i>	7–172	139–71

What is immediately evident is that Aslan is actually present in the stories relatively little—at most for one third of the novel, but more often for much less. Of course, for a number of these pages even though he is present, he may be taking little part in what is happening. On the other hand, during the substantial parts of the tales where he is not present, he is often referred to and spoken of, so that he is never forgotten about for long. However, what the table above also shows is that Aslan's appearances are, with one exception, reserved for the final stages of each story. The Chronicles have an essentially simple structure and Aslan is used right at the very end to sort things out and to bring closure, a *deus ex excelsis* rather than a *deus ex machina*. The sole exception is *The Silver Chair*, a quest story where Aslan sets the children off on their journey, giving Jill Pole four signs to guide them, their ultimate successful completion of the quest being rewarded by Aslan's re-appearance to provide some final assistance. For the most part, though, the children must manage for themselves because in this book Aslan's presence is at its most fleeting.

If Lewis maintained a divine aura around Aslan by limiting his appearances, he also seems to have kept to a minimum the words that he speaks:

	Number of words of direct speech by Aslan
<i>Magician's</i>	1914
<i>Lion</i>	922
<i>Horse</i>	556
<i>Prince</i>	1105
<i>Voyage</i>	389 (+47)
<i>Silver</i>	824
<i>Last</i>	187 (+173)

The words noted in brackets refer in the case of *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"* to words spoken by an Albatross (*vide* Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) and by a Lamb (*vide* the New Testament Revelation of St. John, chapter 5), which are *personae* of Aslan, and in the case of *The Last Battle*, to a conversation reported by Emeth in which he quotes what Aslan had said. It is surely worthy of note that the leading figure of Narnia speaks only some hundreds of words in each story. By not having Aslan speak much, Lewis avoided committing what by his own admission might be blasphemy.

The question that arises at this point is, how should a divine being speak? One possibility might have been to use a heightened, courtly style with archaic diction and elaborate formality. This would differentiate Aslan’s speech from that of other characters and might fittingly recall the language of the King James Authorised Version of the Bible. It would extend Lewis’s tribute to one of his favourite works, Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, on which, as Doris T. Myers has convincingly argued, the Narnian Chronicles are patterned. C. S. Lewis uses just such language at various points in the tales to suggest royalty and wise courtesy. However, this is not the manner in which he chooses to have Aslan speak.

Before examining the way in which Lewis resolved this matter, it should be noted that this was not for him an incidental feature of his narrative. Myers’ book, *C. S. Lewis in Context*, is a study of Lewis’s interest in contemporary language theory and in the use of language, as manifested in his writing. In *Out of the Silent Planet* there is some exploration of the language of Malacandra, Old Solar, supposedly the language spoken before the Fall. In *That Hideous Strength*, language is again a central concern, but this time the focus is on the potential for the misuse and corruption of language, a theme George Orwell also scrutinised in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published four years later in 1949, a matter of months before the first of the Narnia stories appeared. We can be sure that Lewis the writer selected the appropriate form of speech for his characters with some deliberation, and particularly so for Aslan representing Christ, one of whose names is *Logos*, or “word.”

The study of Aslan’s direct speech does indeed reveal a consistent and distinctive style, unremarkable only because it is restrained and undemonstrative, but on closer inspection eloquent in its simplicity and transparency. In general terms Aslan’s form of speech can be described as plain and direct, but heightened by a certain formality. There is a simple clause structure; sentences are non-adjectival; characteristically Aslan states what is the case. His words, though child-like, are

authoritative; his tone, though gentle, is on the whole unemotional. As for the content of what he says, he takes the initiative in beginning action, he defines what is reality, and he apportions praise and blame. Taken as a body of prose, there are few lapses displayed in Aslan's form of speech, a difficult enough feat in such a lean, spare style especially when it is embedded in a narrative with a fairly informal, conversational tone. Even though it is only a crude measure, it is instructive to use SMOG grading to calculate the reading age for Aslan's speech as compared to the reading age for the entire book within which that speech occurs. (This is a formula for calculating the appropriate reading age for a piece of text by counting polysyllabic words.) Speech is of course commonly more simple than narrative prose, but even so, the results are a broad indicator of Aslan's directness. The reading age for Aslan's speech in all the novels is 11, except for *The Horse and His Boy*, where it is 10—possibly because in it Aslan is presented at his most gentle and simple. The reading age for *The Magician's Nephew*, *The Horse and His Boy*, *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* and *The Silver Chair* is 14, for *Prince Caspian* and *The Last Battle* it is 13 and for *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* it is 12, the latter being pre-eminently the tale of an easy, friendly storyteller talking straight to the reader.

Aslan is at his most anthropomorphic in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He functions much more than in the other novels as a participant in the plot, becoming at times a fellow actor alongside the other characters: "Oh, children, catch me if you can!" (148), and "Look alive, everyone. Up stairs and down stairs and in my lady's chamber!" (155). The revived stone lion takes great pride in Aslan's phrase, "us lions," but there are occasions when the close identification with the other *dramatis personae* results in Aslan sounding inappropriately colloquial: "That'll be all right [. . .] Hi! You up there [. . .] What's your name?" (156), and "Look lively and sort yourselves" (158). It could perhaps be argued that Aslan's chattiness is allowable in a novel which is representing Christ's incarnation—"down-to-earthness"—but it is probably more pertinent that this was the first of the Chronicles; Aslan's speech undergoes development through the sequence of seven books, becoming virtually always more distanced and formal. It can be seen at its most developed in the final Chronicle, *The Last Battle* and in *The Magician's Nephew*, the last to be completed, although the first chronologically. As has been seen, in *The Last Battle* Aslan practically withdraws altogether as a voice in the text, whereas in *The Magician's Nephew* he has by far the greatest spoken involvement compared with all the other stories. Roger Lancelyn Green,

who himself became a highly regarded children’s writer and who read all the Narnia chronicles in manuscript, recorded in his diary that *The Magician’s Nephew* “seems the best of the lot” (Hooper 405). More poignantly, nine years before his death C. S. Lewis finally confronts in it and fictionally reverses the most devastating event of his life, the death of his mother when he was nine years old. The Narnian apple, whose core when planted grew into the tree from the wood of which the Wardrobe was made, accomplished a more wonderful feat in restoring Digory’s mother to health when she ate it. For all these reasons, the depiction and speech of Aslan is in this novel at its richest and most assured.

However, if we turn to *The Horse and His Boy* we can see exemplified some of the most notable features of Aslan’s style of speech. Most characteristic of all is his preference for plain, unadorned statement. He states what is or will be the case; he names things as they are; he is the one who defines reality. In a typical exchange, he leads Shasta through a process of understanding: not giant—not ghost—was lion—I was lion:

“But I am not like the creatures you call giants.”

[. . .]

“There [. . .] that is not the breath of a ghost.”

[. . .]

“There was only one lion.”

[. . .]

“I was the lion.” (*Horse* 129)

Over and over again Aslan gives straightforward explanations—this is that—frequently built around some form of the verb “to be.” Many of his conversations with individuals aim to assist them to recognise and know him, playing with the name with which God revealed himself in the Old Testament, “I am,” and taken up by Christ in the New Testament, “I am the Way, the Door”: “I am the great Bridge-builder” (*Voyage* 188). Aslan also often issues commands, usually in a natural, matter-of-fact tone rather than in a peremptory or imperative manner:

“Bring out that creature.”

[. . .]

“Sleep.”

[. . .]

“Carry him aside [. . .]”

[. . .]

“Rise up [. . .] Be just and merciful and brave.”

[. . .]

“Look!”

[. . .]

“Go. Pluck her an apple from the Tree.” (*Magician's* 157-63)

Aslan's role within the Chronicles could be described as tying the narrative together. Though there are occasions when he plays a more active role, Aslan is more narrator than actor. That is why he always makes his appearance towards the end of each book and is often associated with set-piece scenes in which he is the focal character. He tells individual characters what their story has been and he also fulfils a prophetic function, foretelling what will happen or dispensing judgement: “You and your brother will never come back to Narnia” (*Voyage* 188). He is, in fact, the great story-teller who, like Prospero, seems like a covert stage-manager. This is entirely appropriate for a series of tales which reveals to us at the very end that life and story are indistinguishable:

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 for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before. (*Last* 171-72)

In Aslan's form of speech there is also at times something suggestive of Biblical language, the words of a higher being with divine wisdom. He says to Shasta, “Tell me your sorrows” (*Horse* 129), and later to Hwin, “Joy shall be yours” (158), and to Rabadash, “Justice shall be mixed with mercy” (171). The forms of address Aslan uses also distinguish his style from that of any other character: Creatures, Little friend, Child, Dear Heart, Human Child, Son of Adam, Daughter of Eve, Son of Earth, Little ones. Most noteworthy of all are the questions Aslan asks. As the omniscient Storyteller, he never asks questions which imply that he does not know the answer. The purpose of his questions is not his need to know but the respondent's need to frame the answer. When he questions Jill Pole about Eustace Scrubb at the beginning of *The Silver Chair*, it is clear that although he knows what happened he is drawing Jill into a confession about her own behaviour:

“Human Child [. . .] Where is the Boy?”

“He fell over the cliff.”[. . .]

“How did he come to do that, Human Child?”

“He was trying to stop me from falling, Sir.”

“Why were you so near the edge, Human Child?”

“I was showing off, Sir.”

“That is a very good answer, Human Child. Do so no more. And now [. . .] the Boy is safe.” (24)

At other times questions are used to catechise or to encourage others to discover their better selves, as in *The Magician’s Nephew*, first in Aslan’s conversation with Digory:

[. . .] “I think I was a bit enchanted by the writing under the bell.”

“Do you?” asked Aslan; still speaking very low and deep.

“No,” said Digory. “I see now I wasn’t. I was only pretending.” (126)

or again in the series of questions to Frank the Cabby which culminate in Aslan anointing him as the first King of Narnia:

“And you wouldn’t have favourites either among your own children or among the other creatures or let any hold another under or use it hardly?”

[. . .]

“And if enemies came against the land (for enemies will arise) and there was war, would you be the first in the charge and the last in the retreat?” (129-30)

In finding an appropriate style for Aslan’s speech, Lewis had of course the model of Christ in the New Testament. He especially draws on the last two chapters of the Gospel of John which cover the period between the Resurrection and Ascension, when Jesus is presented as God-man, in the same way that Aslan is a lion but also *the* Lion. The breakfast on the beach at the end of *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* is taken directly from this source. Aslan’s words to Bree in *The Horse and His Boy*—“Touch me. Smell me. Here are my paws, here is my tail, these are my whiskers” (158)—recall the invitation of Jesus to doubting Thomas in John 20 to touch his hands and side. The repeated advice that no-one is told any story other than their own is based on Jesus’s conversation with Peter in John 21. Such indirect echoes of the words of Jesus can be heard in what Aslan says.

Another influence on Aslan’s form of speech is rhetoric, in the art of which Lewis with his classical knowledge was of course very well versed. Doris Myers says that “Aslan’s ordinary English is heightened by rhetorical figures at times of extreme emotion” (Myers 164). The examples she gives are of *antimetabole*—“Do not dare not to dare”—in *The Horse and His Boy* (158) and the memorable use of

anaphora, i.e. a repeated opening phrase, when Aslan is speaking to Shasta in the same story:

“I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you.” (129-30)

Doris Myers is right to draw attention to the use of rhetoric by Aslan, but she is less accurate in speaking of “Aslan’s ordinary English.” That ordinariness is deceptive, for Aslan’s speech is uncommon not because of its imagery but because it is enhanced by the colours of rhetoric, with cadence and balance in the shape of its sentences. A passage such as the following from *The Magician’s Nephew* is not everyday English though it is typical of the simple grandeur with which Aslan speaks:

“Creatures, I give you yourselves,” said the strong, happy voice of Aslan. “I give to 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. Do not so.” (109)

Both the content and the manner of speech here are startlingly unusual. As Lewis himself wrote, if the speaker does not have the sovereignty and authority he claims, he must be bad or mad (*Mere Christianity* 43). This is the language of someone who takes it for granted that the kingdom, the power, and the glory are his. The voice in which Aslan speaks is appropriate to the eloquence he utters. His voice is described as “deep and rich” (*Lion* 117); “not loud, but very large and deep” (*Horse* 128); “the voice was not like a man’s. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice” (*Silver* 23).

In narratives the first and last words of a character are often accorded special significance and in the case of Lewis’s construction of Aslan’s character this is particularly so since, as has been seen, the chronologically first and last books in the sequence were written last when Lewis’s crafting of Aslan was at its most complete and accomplished. Aslan’s earliest words, chronologically, call Narnia into being. They come at the end of two chapters in *The Magician’s Nephew* in

which Aslan’s song creates a world, an example of Lewis’s writing at its finest, and one of the set-piece scenes featuring Aslan which can be found in each of the *Chronicles*: “Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters” (108). This is characteristic of Aslan’s speech: the musicality, the commands, the use of the verb “to be,” the rhetorical use of repetition, the sense of living nature, the unadorned spareness, the power of naming, and the primacy of love.

Aslan’s last words come at the end of *The Last Battle*: “There *was* a real railway accident [. . .] Your father and mother and all of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning” (171). The final paragraph of the novel, which follows these words, functions as a coda; it is full of the conventions which signal the wrapping up of a story. This direct speech is the true climax of the *Chronicles*. Aslan is given the last word in these quiet but emphatic lines. He is the ultimate arbiter of reality: “There *was* a real railway accident.” Plato, in addition to the Christian tradition, lies behind the closing chapters of *The Last Battle*. The references here to the Shadowlands and to the dream refer back to an earlier explanation by Digory, now the Lord Digory:

[. . .] that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia, which has always been here and always will be here: just as our world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan’s real world. [. . .] [O]f course it is different; as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream. [. . .] It’s all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools!” (159-60)

From beginning—end we move in Aslan’s final words to end—beginning: “The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning” (171). The punctuation is careful, with colons and not semi-colons, so that the second half of each sentence is not equivalent to, but is an antithetical confirmation of, the first half. “Dream” is set in opposition to “morning”; we might have expected “night-time” or “shadows” to be opposed to “morning,” but instead we are given “dream,” whose opposite, “reality,” is therefore equated with “morning.” This is the ultimate in plain words, in straight speaking. These are to be understood as definitive statements of fact, built around the verb “to be.” Beyond such bare articulation you pass beyond speech altogether. It takes a reading of all the Narnian stories to hear the eloquent grandeur in the utter truth of “this is the morning.”

The very greatest scenes in Narnia take place in the morning—Aslan singing Narnia into existence in *The Magician’s Nephew* or the Resurrection romp in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Just before speaking these final words, as “the light ahead was growing stronger,” Aslan arrived, “leaping down from cliff to cliff like a living cataract of power and beauty” (*Last* 171). Similarly in John 21.4—that seminal passage again—Jesus is associated with morning light: “when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore.” The simile of the “living cataract” recalls John 4.10, 6.35, and 7.10, where Jesus presents himself as living water, an image developed by John in Revelation 22.1, where the Lamb is connected with “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal.”

This view of these lines is not shared by Philip Pullman, the children’s author, who, in a newspaper article during Lewis’s centenary year, describes them as “one of the most vile moments in the whole of children’s literature.” His reason for this opinion is as follows: “To solve a narrative problem by killing one of your characters is something many authors have done at one time or another. To slaughter the lot of them, and then claim they’re better off, is not honest story-telling; it’s propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology.” Pullman’s basic objection here is that it is dishonest to smuggle “life-hating” Christianity into the story and certainly, from that perspective, the entire Chronicles lose their right to exist, along with much else in the *corpus* of English literature. It brings to mind Lewis’s own comment in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* that “many of those who say they dislike Milton’s God only mean that they dislike God” (126). The rather petulant exaggeration that Aslan’s words are “most vile” and “nauseating drive!” ignores the immediate context of the novel’s last chapter which is all about life rather than death but also overlooks the child-like style of Aslan’s speech which points to artful simplicity rather than to a simpleton’s babble, two very different things.

John Goldthwaite in *The Natural History of Make-Believe* acknowledges Lewis’s difficulty in depicting Aslan:

His central problem in building the parable had always been the difficulty of portraying his Lion of Judah, Aslan, in such a way that the Christ figure would speak with the needed authority yet without intimidating the tale back into those stained-glass and Sunday School associations Lewis wished to avoid. The odds against him were long, and he did not really surmount them—or, rather, he surmounted them and toppled over onto the other side of good judgement. (222-23)

The one example Goldthwaite cites at this point to support his claim is: “‘Wow!’ roared Aslan half rising from his throne [. . .],”² of which he rightly says: “Even a child might question the ‘real potency’ of a Christ given to yelling ‘Wow!’” Goldthwaite has a tendency to take a small point and build a very elaborate case out of it, but he does not do so here, going on to present a reasonably balanced point of view: “His reason had seemed clear enough—to portray Christ so vividly in make-believe terms that children would know him as ‘bright and real and strong’—and there are moments when he does approach this end. There are many more, however, when the Lion of Judah simply looks goofy.” The one example Goldthwaite gives of incongruity in portraying Aslan is taken from the American edition. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Aslan comes to a private agreement with the White Witch and she asks how she can be sure that the promise he has given her will be kept, the original (British) version reads: “‘Haa-a-arrrh!’” roared Aslan, half rising from his throne [. . .]” (131). Since 1994 all editions have been standardised according to the original British edition. In adjudicating between “Wow!” and “Haaa-a-arrrh!” I think it has to be conceded that Lewis’s first thoughts were best. Nevertheless, it is the only instance Goldthwaite gives of Aslan appearing to be “goofy.” I agree with him that the odds against Lewis successfully depicting Aslan were long, but the conclusion I have come to is the exact opposite of Goldthwaite’s. I find Lewis’s portrayal remarkably successful, increasingly so through the series of chronicles, and the slips, of which there are certainly some, are surprisingly few. My chief evidence for this is Aslan’s speech, which is easy to pass over because it seems unremarkable, but a closer look reveals it to be thoughtfully and meaningfully constructed.

As has been seen, the style in which Aslan speaks throughout the *Narnia Chronicles* is deliberately crafted. It is straightforward, direct, declarative, and definite. Rhetoric and transparency underpin its credal affirmation; clarity and profundity are combined. In the year after completing the seven *Narnia* novels, Lewis wrote his last work of imaginative fiction, *Till We Have Faces*, which he thought “much my best book,” his “favourite of all my books,” and “far and away the best I have written” (Hooper 243). Doris Myers shows how the narrative voice of the central character, Orual, is purposefully constructed. Orual uses “semiobsolete, dialectal, and marginally standard words”; she uses “functional shift in a way that gives an Elizabethan flavour”; she uses “the schemes of classical rhetoric” (199-200). Even so, her style “seems sparse and plain overall,” and the deliberate use of language is “unnoticed in a first reading” (202-03). It seems that

Lewis may have learned from his shaping of Aslan's speech and was applying his experience to suit this later novel. Orual at the end of the story recalls what her tutor used to tell her: "Child, to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that's the whole art and joy of words" (*Till We Have Faces* 305). It is this art that Lewis enters into when creating an appropriate style for Aslan. He aims to write for Aslan the form of pure speech towards which all communication should aspire. His success in this reveals C. S. Lewis as a greater stylist in the Chronicles of Narnia than he is often given credit for.

Notes

¹ Note: In this article I have followed the ordering of the books in the 1980 Collins edition. Whether or not this is the best/correct order is not of great relevance to the issues the article addresses.

² *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1970): 141. This is the American printing to which Goldthwaite refers.

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