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J.R.R. Tolkien: Narnian Exile - Part II

Abstract

Analyzes a number of explanations proposed by biographers and others for Tolkien's antipathy to Lewis's Narnia stories.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S. Chronicles of Narnia—Attitude of J.R.R. Tolkien towards; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Attitude toward the Chronicles of Narnia

J.R.R. Tolkien: Narnian Exile

by Joe R. Christopher — Part II

V. J.R.R. Tolkien's Own Explanation?

A. The Problem with Dating Lewis' Composition

The main external problem in making a case that Tolkien's letter of "Septuagesima 1948" (No. 113; 125-9) refers to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – rather than to *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*, as Humphrey Carpenter suggests, tentatively, in his headnote to the letter (125) – is its date. Roger Lancelyn Green dates Lewis' reading of the beginning of the book to him as 10 March 1949 (Green and Hooper 240). Tolkien's letter, at first, seems to be a year too early.

A chronology of dates may help. According to the Green and Hooper biography, Lewis wrote one paragraph of a proto-*Lion, Witch and Wardrobe* sometime in the late 1930s or early 1940s. The authors guess that the date is 1939 because it was then that he had children evacuees from London in his home – and in the paragraph, which they quote, four children are sent to live with an old professor in the country (238). Green and Hooper also say that the paragraph is found "in the manuscript of *The Dark Tower*" fragment, and on a sheet with "notes for *Broadcast Talks* on the other end of it." "The Dark Tower" has to follow *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), to which it is a sequel, and *Broadcast Talks* was written in 1941. The evacuees in 1939 are probably the *terminus a quo*; there is not a *terminus ad quem* here, but the probability is that the paragraph dates from the same general period as its surrounding material.

Hooper, in another book, writing by himself, says the same general thing. He comments that the paragraph appears "On the back of another book [Lewis] was writing at the time" (*Past Watchful Dragons* 29). Presumably that is a reference to "The Dark Tower," since the *Broadcast Talks* notes are said above to be on the same side as the proto-Narnian paragraph.

(At this point, an important digression must be added. Katherine Lindskoog, in *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*, argues from stylistic and content reasons that "The Dark Tower" is a fraud, not written by Lewis [Ch. 2]. James T. Como, editor of "C.S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table" and *Other Reminiscences*, told the present writer at a meeting in the fall of 1987 that he has seen the manuscript of "The Dark Tower" – it does exist. If Lindskoog is right, then the manuscript must be forged as well as fraudulently published; but her book allows for the possibility of forgery with other Lewis manuscripts. For present purposes, all this imbroglia means is that there is a possibility that part of the evidence for the dating of the paragraph is false. Does this mean that the paragraph itself may have been forged, if "The Dark Tower" was? Who knows, at present?)

The second step in this chronology is the letter from Tolkien, early in 1948. It is dated "Septuagesima," which is the third Sunday before Lent; in 1948, Septuagesima was 25 January. In the next part of this section, a chronology of the events around Tolkien's upset, detailed in the letter, will be developed. For the present purposes, it is enough to note that, if this letter refers to Lewis' reading of the opening of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, this is where it fits in.

The third step is in the summer of 1948. Chad Walsh was visiting Lewis in preparation of writing *C.S. Lewis: Apostle to the Skeptics*. He writes in his book, "[Lewis] talks vaguely of completing a children's book which he has begun 'in the tradition of E. Nesbit'" (10). Since the Narnian books are in the tradition of Nesbit's *Five Children and It* (serialized in 1902) and its sequels, no one has raised any doubts that Lewis' reference is to the Narnian works. As can be seen, Lewis could be referring either to the single paragraph (if it is not forged) or, possibly, to the chapters that Tolkien had rejected (if they had really been written) – or, of course, to both.

A correction to one account must be inserted at this point. In *Clive Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life*, William Griffin says that Lewis

wrote some chapters [of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*] last summer [in context, the summer of 1948] and read them to Tolkien who, flushed with the publication of his own *Farmers Giles of Ham*, thought them dreadful. (295-6)

In reply to a letter from the present writer, Griffin indicated that his authority for this statement that the opening chapters were written during the summer of 1948 was Chad Walsh's account of Lewis having "begun" the book (letter of 27 June 1987). Thus, his book gives Griffin's estimate of what the evidence points to, but it is not based, in this passage, on original research.

The fourth step, indicated in the earlier discussion of Green's explanation of Tolkien's reaction, is the reading of "two chapters of a story for children" (perhaps not yet titled) to Green on 10 March 1949 (Green and Hooper 240). Green only mentions two chapters, whether or not Lewis had written more of the book at that point; certainly it was not finished, for Lewis did not have "the complete story ready" until the end of March (241). For some writers, to finish a children's book in about twenty days – during a period of other work – would be unlikely; but Lewis wrote quickly. For example, he wrote all of *The Pilgrim's Regress* in two weeks – of vacation, admittedly (128). This finishes the chronology of composition.

Laid out this way, the possibility of Lewis having written the opening of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in 1948 does not seem so unlikely as it does when one just reads the account in the Green and Hooper biography. If Lewis read those chapters to Tolkien at an Inklings' meeting, and if the letter does refer to the incident, then the most probable date for the incident is 8 January. It is also possible that Lewis did not read the chapters at a meeting of the Inklings. These possibilities will be considered below.

B. The When and Where of the Upset, with a Rejection of OHEL as a Cause

Humphrey Carpenter writes in his headnote to this letter, "it seems that Tolkien and Lewis had been corresponding about criticisms that Tolkien had made of a piece of Lewis work read aloud to the Inklings" (125). This reading to the Inklings and the possible chronological evidence for it must be considered.

The place to begin is with the date of the letter: as was said above, the date of the letter, Septuagesima, refers to 25 January in 1948. Tolkien indicates at the end of the letter that he has delayed "nearly a week in sending" his letter (129, stress added); this and the phrase "as you will see" suggest the letter was mailed about 31 January.

But the significant chronology moves in the other direction. The Thursday before a 25 January Sunday is 22 January; since the Inklings met on Thursday evenings, this is the basis of the next step. In the same postscript that said he had delayed a week in sending the letter, Tolkien states, "I have missed three" Inklings "recent[ly]" (129). If one assumes those are the three most recent, they would be 29 January (since the postscript *probably* is written on 31 January), 22 January, and 15 January. This suggests that the last Inklings Tolkien attended was 8 January. On one point here, there is outside evidence. W. H. Lewis' published diary indicates that Tolkien did not attend the meeting on 22 January and did attend (since it was in his university room and since W. H. Lewis notes that both J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien were there) a meeting on 1 January. Because W.H. Lewis' diary describes the 1 January meeting as "pleasant," this suggests that Tolkien was not upset with C.S. Lewis at that time (*Brothers and Friends* 217). Unfortunately, the diary does not give any information for the other pertinent dates.

The argument so far suggests the following chronology:

- 1 January 1948: a pleasant meeting of the Inklings;
- 8 January: a possible date for Tolkien's upset with some thing C.S. Lewis read;
- 15 January: Tolkien did not attend (tired [*Letters* 129]);
- 22 January: Tolkien did not attend (domestic reasons [*Letters* 129]);
- 25 January: Tolkien wrote his letter;
- 29 January: Tolkien did not attend (his daughter could not stay in [*Letters* 129]);
- 31 January (*circa*): Tolkien added his postscript and mailed his letter.

This list seems to establish a likely date for the letter's source of upset. But nothing is quite that simple.

Does the letter say anything to suggest Lewis' reading was at an Inklings' meeting? The truth is that it does not say anything about the original occasion very clearly; there is no reference of the "when I said this, and Hugo said that, and Warnie said something else" sort. Indeed, there is no certainty that the Inklings met on 8 January; from mid-December to mid-January was between terms, and possibly there were not enough Inklings available to have a meeting. Further, as is clear from the "Introductory" to *Arthurian Torso*, occasionally (between terms) Tolkien and Lewis (and, on the occasion described, Charles Williams) got together to hear something someone had written (2). Despite these reminders of the limits of historical knowledge, the *probability* remains with an Inklings meeting, as will become clear.

The letter does mention the Inklings—in four of the nine paragraphs of its body. In the third paragraph, Tolkien denies he is a critic—although he has been "galvanized into [criticism] by the strongly 'critical' tendency of the brotherhood" (126). (The word *brotherhood* may suggest that Tolkien thought of the Inklings as something approaching the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: it may suggest that he saw something more significant in the meetings than Carpenter takes them to have contained in *The Inklings*.) In the seventh paragraph, Tolkien comments, in an parenthesis, that his whispered asides at meetings are done out of "a fear of being laughed at by the general company" (128).

The material in the eighth and ninth paragraphs is more complicated. Lewis evidently asked him in a letter whether or not Tolkien thought the Inklings meetings were too noisy and too vulgar: he denies thinking the first, with a reference to Hugo Dyson, at the first of the eighth paragraph and denies thinking either of them, except when he is tired, at the end of the ninth—although he oddly shifts the latter passage to a reference to the meetings at the Eagle and Child pub on Tuesdays, rather than to the Thursday Inklings proper (128-9). Three other points of interest occur in these two paragraphs. First, he refers to Lewis' "presidency" of the Inklings (8th paragraph; 128). (This suggests something at least slightly more elaborate than Carpenter's "group of friends" [*The Inklings* 153, 161, 161n, 171].) Second, Tolkien refers again to the Inklings as a "brotherhood," says he things on-the-spot criticism is dangerous, and asks Lewis to bring out *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* for reading (8th paragraph; 128). Third, Tolkien speaks of the possibilities of being bored and boring others with readings at the Inklings, with references to Dr. Havard ("our beloved and esteemed physician") and Hugo Dyson (9th paragraph; 128). This passage about boredom grows out of the mention of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*—called "OHHEL" by Tolkien, since it was a volume in the Oxford History of English Literature. Carpenter, in his headnote, suggests

that perhaps an earlier reading of this volume set off the contretemps between Tolkien and Lewis; but there is nothing which clearly supports that in the passage.

This last point may be developed further. Tolkien writes, "Let us listen again more patiently. And let me beg of you to bring out OHÉL, with no coyness" (128). If, as Carpenter hypothesizes, probably based on "with no coyness," the original upset had been over this book, what had caused it? There is nothing in the letter to suggest that the trouble was over religious differences, so the passages in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* dealing with Roman Catholicism and/or Anglicanism during their century of separation seem not to have been the cause; not even Lewis' odd decision to call the Catholics "Papists." Of course, anyone could conjecture one passage or another might have upset Tolkien. One example – as good as any – is the discussion of the fragmentary nature of *The Faerie Queen* (378-80), since it discusses Spenser's piece-meal composition and (hypothesized) revisions; this sounds much like Tolkien working on *The Lord of the Rings*. Even though by early 1948 Tolkien had finished the first draft of that work (cf. Carpenter, *Tolkien* 203-4), revisions remained and many of the earlier manuscripts of Middle-earth were fragmentary. Any ingenious reader will find other possibilities in Lewis' book.

But the context in Tolkien's letter does not support Carpenter's guess. After asking Lewis to "bring out OHÉL," Tolkien goes on, "But I warn you, if you bore me, I shall take my revenge" (128) – that is, he promises to be boring in return, with some works (not specified) other than romances and verse. He does not say anything about suppressing or controlling any irritation. Indeed, by analogy, this passage supports an upset over *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* more than one over *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*: Tolkien, in asking Lewis to turn from reading a child's book to reading a scholarly book, risks boredom, and threatens (with a touch of humor), if he is bored, to do the same thing – to switch from reading Middle-earth material to (possibly) philological material. Thus, the likeliest reason for Lewis to have been coy about reading from his Oxford History volume is simply that others had found it boring in the past.

What has this investigation of the dates of Inklings' meetings decided? Only that, if the upset was at an Inklings, the likeliest date is 8 January. The probability must remain with that occasion. But there is the possibility that the quarrel occurred at a private meeting. The date for that could have been later than 8 January, as the internal chronology from the letter in the next subsection will suggest. Admittedly, any conjecture of a non-Inklings' meeting implies that Tolkien is answering two unrelated matters in his letter: an upset between himself and Lewis, and a question about his attitude toward the Inklings. That is possible, but probability (as has been said) is that one matter grows out of the other, and thus 8 January 1948 is the most probable date of the argument.

C. The Letter's Obscure History of Events

No critic will quarrel. The letter is *highly* obscure. What follows is an attempt to work out what seems to have happened. Tolkien, of course, was writing to one who knew the chronology of events and did not need to have things explained to him. A later reader can only follow the hints.

One begins with the bothersome point: there is no evidence in the letter that it was something which Lewis read which caused the upset. It may well have been something which Tolkien read which Lewis orally attacked. The phrase which seems to be pertinent here is this:

...I felt myself tingling under the half-patronizing[.] half-mocking lash, with the small things of my heart made the mere excuse for verbal butchery. (1st paragraph, 126)

These seem to be the possibilities here: (1) Lewis read the opening of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which Tolkien took as being almost a parody of his type of romance; (2) Lewis read something else that Tolkien took to be an attack; (3) Tolkien read something, perhaps a revision of part of *The Lord of the Rings*, to which Lewis took objection; (4) Lewis read something, perhaps the Narnian opening, to which Tolkien objected (for not treating myths seriously, for instance) and to which objection Lewis replied with a verbal onslaught. The use of the word *verbal* in Tolkien's letter makes the latter two possibilities more likely than the first two, even though *verbal* may refer to written communication.

A critic can make a case for the third of these possibilities, and it is well to examine it. This critic may conjecture that Lewis suggested that too many of the hobbits who were part of the fellowship survived; artistically, it might be better to have Merry or Pippin (or both) killed in the wars. This would explain why Tolkien wrote about Lewis later, after mentioning he cut some hobbit conversation which Lewis found tiresome in *The Lord of the Rings* manuscript: "To tell the truth [Lewis] never really like the hobbits very much, least of all Merry and Pippin" (No. 294; 376). In this interpretation, Tolkien's reaction to Lewis' criticism is what is referred to in Lewis' letter in 1949, after Lewis had read the complete typescript of *The Lord of the Rings*,

There are many passages I could wish you had written otherwise or omitted altogether. If I include none of my adverse criticisms in this letter that is because you have heard and rejected most of them already (rejection is perhaps too mild a word for your reaction on at least one occasion!). (Carpenter, *Tolkien* 204)

What is particularly attractive about this interpretation is that it sets up an incident that certainly could have aroused Tolkien's emotions, while it is difficult to find a passage in (for instance) *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* that seems *highly* like to have done so; even being bored by it seems unlikely to arouse a strong protest from Tolkien originally. In this interpretation, Tolkien's request

for Lewis to bring out and read from his Oxford History is a request for Lewis to continue as a critic, but in safer areas.

Against this suggestion for the incident are references that indicate Tolkien seems to have been acting as a critic:

...as for your feelings about me as a 'critic', whether exercising the function wisely or foolishly[,] I am not a critic. I do not want to be one.... I am not really 'hyper-critical'. For I am usually only trying to express 'liking'[,] I not universally valid criticism. (3rd paragraph, 126)

And again:

Doubtless, as you say, I have as a member of the brotherhood a right to criticize, as I please. But I shall not lightly forget my vision of the wounds; and I shall be deterred from rash dispraise, for myself. Indeed, I do not really think that for any man valuable 'criticism' is usually to be attained hot on the spot: it is then too mixed with mere reaction. (8th paragraph, 128)

Both of these passages sound much more like Tolkien reacted against *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* at a meeting of the Inklings ("brotherhood") than like Lewis against the hobbits. If a critic wishes to save the hobbit thesis, then he or she will argue that Tolkien's criticism appeared at the next step, not at the original meeting (whether of Lewis and Tolkien alone or of the Inklings).

The sequence of events which followed the "verbal butchery" is clearer than what let up to it. Tolkien seems to have reacted with a letter, attacking Lewis:

I have been possessed on occasions (few, happily) with a sort of *furor scribendi*, in which the pen finds the words rather than the head or heart; and this was one of them. (2nd paragraph, 126)

Tolkien seems to have handed the letter to Lewis, for he seems to have watched Lewis' reaction; it is possible, however, that he merely met Lewis very soon after Lewis had received the letter:

I regret causing pain, even if and in so far as I had the right; and I am very sorry indeed still for having caused it quite excessively and unnecessarily. ...The vividness of the perception [of the pain] was due, of course, to the fact that you, for whom I have deep affection and sympathy, were the victim and I myself the culprit. (1st paragraph, 126)

...nothing in your speech or manner gave me any reason to suppose that you *felt* 'offended'. Yet I could see that you felt – you would have been hardly human otherwise – , and your letter shows how much. ... There may have been one or two of my comments that were just or valid, but I should have limited myself to them, and expressed them differently. He is a savage physician who coats a not wholly unpalatable pill with a covering of gall! (2nd paragraph, 126)

...I shall not lightly forget my vision of the wounds.... (8th paragraph, 126)

The second of these passages indicates "one or two.... comments" which were valid in Tolkien's letter; but they may have been moral comments about Lewis' "verbal butchery," not critical responses to Lewis' criticism, so the historical critic who wishes to establish Tolkien's criticism as taking place at this point will have an argument to present. Even the statement "I am not really 'hyper-critical,'" quoted earlier in this subsection, is not perfect evidence for the critic, for it may refer back to the meeting, rather than alluding to something which was written in Tolkien's first letter.

The third passage quoted above, by itself, might be taken to refer to some type of oral argument at which Tolkien saw the wounding of criticism, for he goes on to say (as appeared in the previous subsection), "...I shall be deterred from rash dispraise[*for*] I do not really think...valuable 'criticism' is...to be attained hot on the spot." Indeed, Tolkien seems to slide from the "wounds," due to his own letter, back to the "verbal butchery" by Lewis, to reach his moral about delayed criticism. This is bothersome for the present argument, but it is part of the reason the letter is not easily interpreted.

The next step after Tolkien's letter and his seeing Lewis' reaction is another letter from Tolkien; after his statement that "I regret causing pain," he goes on:

My verses and my letter were due to a sudden very acute realization (I shall not quickly forget it) of the pain that may enter into authorship, both in the making and in the 'publication', which is an essential part of the full process. (1st paragraph, 126)

In short, Tolkien, after he realized he had caused Lewis pain in his angry letter, wrote another and enclosed some poems in order to make up for it. Also, it is noticeable in the language of this sentence that a thesis of the starting cause being something Lewis wrote fits Tolkien's meaning best. The "publication" of the work, with *publication* in quotation marks, seems to refer to reading a work before the Inklings (or possibly just before Tolkien); the pain of this authorship refers to Lewis' reaction to Tolkien's attack on the work, most probably, in his first letter. This idea is further developed in the sixth paragraph of the letter, in which Tolkien denies that worldly reaction to a written work has any ultimate significance: Christ is "[t]he only just literary critic" (128). (Tolkien's example of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Catholic, telling this to Canon Dixon, an Anglican, parallels the situation in which Tolkien, a Catholic, tells it to Lewis, an Anglican.)

The fourth step in this process – the meeting, the first letter from Tolkien and Lewis' reaction, the second letter from Tolkien – is a letter from Lewis. Tolkien begins, "It was good of you to write in return" (1st paragraph, 125). In a later passage, already partly quoted, he speaks of Lewis revealing in his letter how much he had felt Tolkien's attack in the first letter: "...I could see that you felt – you would have been hardly human otherwise – , and

your letter shows how much" (2nd paragraph, 126). Most of Tolkien's epistle is taken up with discussions of issues raised in Lewis' letter: a discussion of being pained instead of offended (125); a denial of his being a critic, as Lewis had called him (126); a statement that he has not been offended by any of Lewis' behavior as president of the Inklings (128); and a denial that he has been offended by the noisiness and/or vulgarity of the Inklings' meetings (128-9). The latter two points arising from Lewis' letter, in which he seems to have been worrying about additional reasons for Tolkien's reaction, do not seem to pertain to the main concern of the literary upset.

The final step in the process is simply this letter by Tolkien, in reply to Lewis' letter. Obviously the process may have taken from 8 January to the writing of Tolkien's third letter on 25 January; but, if the process started with a private meeting, the time could be much condensed: a meeting, at which Lewis engaged in "verbal butchery"; Tolkien's furious letter, sent or given to Lewis; if sent, then Tolkien's meeting with Lewis and noting his pain; Tolkien's letter of rapprochement, with verses; Lewis' letter in reply; Tolkien's final letter (No. 113). That Tolkien held the final letter "nearly a week" may be an argument for the slower version of the process; but, like many things connected with this letter, it is not certain.

D. An Upset over *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*?

The foregoing subsections have surveyed the (contradictory) evidence. Here, briefly, it is enough to set forth a possible reading of these materials in terms of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, with one final passage from the letter which helps them to some degree.

The events begin at a meeting of the Inklings on 8 January 1948 (or possibly a private meeting of Lewis and Tolkien later that month). Lewis has finished two chapters of what will become *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which he thinks of as a book in E. Nesbit's tradition. Tolkien objects to it when he hears it, perhaps because he thinks the mythology is being misused. Lewis replies to his objection(s) with an attack, something Lewis was liable to. Like Dr. Johnson, Lewis tented to argue "for victory" (Lawlor 76). Tolkien feels "the small things of [his] heart" have been butchered – perhaps Lewis attacked his understanding of the romance form or of the fairy-tale; perhaps he counterattacked at some of Tolkien's fiction – possibly an overenjoyment of hobbitry – in response to Tolkien's objections.

Tolkien goes home upset; and later that night (if it was at an Inklings' meeting) or the next day, or at least very soon, due to his anger, he writes Lewis a furious letter. The contents may have something to do with the Narnian story, but more likely they are based primarily on Lewis' verbal attack. He mails the letter on Friday or Saturday, one would conjecture (after a Thursday night Inklings). Lewis would have received the letter before the usual "Bird and Baby" Tuesday get-together. That would be on 13

January.) Possibly it is there that Tolkien sees Lewis, who does not indicate he is offended by the letter, but who, Tolkien decides, is hurt by it.

Tolkien, this time taking more time, writes another letter and copies (or creates) some verses for Lewis. He misses the Inklings' meeting on 15 January, but gets off the new letter (at a conjecture) on the sixteenth or seventeenth. Lewis has the letter on Monday the nineteenth and replies quickly; he indicates he was hurt by Tolkien's first letter and asks (perhaps based on something Hugo Dyson has said) about Tolkien's feelings about the Inklings' meetings. Tolkien receives his reply, misses the Inklings on 22 January, but writes his third letter on Sunday, 25 January. At this point, Tolkien delays mailing the epistle, misses the Inklings on the twenty-ninth, and adds a postscript to the letter, mailing it about the thirty-first.

In this letter, Tolkien, while talking about his not being a critic, adds some comments which reflect (in a deliberately not-quite-direct manner) on his original reason for getting upset over *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe*:

...I have something that I deeply desire to *make*, and which is the (largely frustrated) bent of my nature to make. ...I think this prevents me from being a critic worth considering, as a rule; and it probably makes me at my worst when the other writer's lines come too near (as yours do at times): there is liable to be a short circuit, a flash, an explosion – and even a bad smell, one ingredient of which may be mere jealousy. (3rd paragraph, 126-7)

(The application of this to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is mere conjecture, but the possibility does enlarge the discussion of Tolkien's reactions to those chapters.) What sort of creative frustration Tolkien was suffering from at the time is uncertain. Probably, it was the not-yet-polished state of *The Lord of the Rings*. He had been working on the book since 1937, and it was finished in the fall of 1947 (Carpenter, Tolkien 203). However, since Carpenter points out that *The Lord of the Rings* was not finally typed for submission "until the autumn of 1949" (204), it would still have been a burden to Tolkien in January 1948 – particularly if there were other problems at the time. Tolkien's missing of the Inklings' meetings suggests any difficulties then were domestic.

But this passage seems to suggest something more than mere jealousy of others' works in Tolkien's area. It also suggest that, like many artists, Tolkien was not sympathetic to material outside his own art:

...I have something that I deeply desire to *make*, and which is the (largely frustrated) bent of my nature to make. Without any vanity or exaggerated notion of the universal importance of this, it remains a fact that other things are *to me* less important. ...it would be fairer to say of me not that I tend to be imprisoned in my own taste (as perhaps Lewis said in his letter, or perhaps had said earlier in the "verbal butchery"), so much as to be burdened with my own small but peculiar 'message'. In fact, suffer-

ing (for a variety of reasons, not all blameworthy) from 'suppressed composition'. Indeed a savage creature, a soreheaded bear (if I can liken myself to anything so large), a painful friend. (126-7)

Perhaps this is nothing more than Tolkien said in his letter quoted at the first of this paper – Narnia was "outside the range of [his] sympathy" – but it complements the other statement. If they apply to Lewis' Narnia chapters, Tolkien says (1) you got too close to my material and I reacted with jealousy, but (2) I am not good at judging others' works because I am too involved in my own creation. Logically, not emotionally, these are contradictory: how can he realize something is close to his works without judging it? Emotionally, however, the reaction against the work comes first: then he realizes he may be jealous and may be too involved in his own work to look impartially at another's.

At this point, the material of this subsection has been covered; but it will do no harm to continue the series of events. Lewis, after Tolkien's explosion involving the Narnian work, does not try to continue it immediately; but he does mention it to Chad Walsh the next summer. He reads the two chapters to Roger Lancelyn Green the next March (1949) and, under Green's enthusiastic approval, completes the book. Tolkien, before the completion, sees Green and mentions the artistic problem of misused mythology. (This is a more objective comment, after a year, than jealousy permitted at the time; but it may well be the same sort of point he tried to make in the first discussion.) Lewis writes a reply to Tolkien's objections into the second Narnian book. Possibly he gives Tolkien copies of the first two books, so he can judge of the reply. Tolkien (again a conjecture) reads them, may or may not be impressed by the reply, but decides the books are too thematic, too allegorical.

The above narration does not *prove* anything; it simply clarifies the possibilities of the letter, with its indication of an emotional explosion, being related to Tolkien's rejection of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

VI. An Explanation Which Explains Nothing?

The purpose of this paper has been three-fold: to discount some popular explanations of Tolkien's dislike of the Narnian books and to raise questions about Carpenter's two explanations, on which the popular writings are based; to draw attention to the two explanations which give Tolkien as their authority, particularly the lesser known one; and to investigate the possibility of an obscure letter from Tolkien to Lewis having to do with Tolkien's rejection of Narnia. (The paper has also discussed a number of points – e.g., allegory – along the way.)

The first of these purposes, as has been said, in so far as it involved Carpenter's books is perilous, for Carpenter may have had authorities for his accounts whom he did not cite. Certainly his statement of Tolkien's irritation and

annoyance playing a part is close to the letter's jealousy. But Carpenter's explanation in *The Inklings*, at least, sounds closer to extrapolation from "On Fairy-Stories" than to first-hand information.

The second of these purposes is bothersome in a different way, for the two accounts disagree. They can be reconciled by any of three assumptions: (1) Tolkien changes his mind about why he disliked the Narniad while continuing to dislike the books, (2) he always had more than one reason for disliking them, mentioning one time one reason, another time another, or (3) he disliked the first chapters he heard for their sentimentalized mythology and disliked the books generally, after reading some of them, for being allegorical. (There is no *certain* evidence, however, that he read any of the books.)

The third purpose cannot end in certainty, for the letter is too obscure. As has been shown, an explanation of parts of the letter can be made in terms of Lewis attacking something in *The Lord of the Rings*; this is attractive because Lewis, in a letter, refers to a violent reaction by Tolkien to some of Lewis' criticism. But a reading of the letter in terms of an upset over *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* certainly explains more of the letter than do readings in terms of *The Lord of the Rings* and of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama*. But no amount of likelihood is proof positive.

Perhaps this paper has settled nothing; however, if it has unsettled some things, that is enough. Perhaps Carpenter will reply to it; perhaps others who knew Tolkien will add to the authoritative statements of his comments on Narnia. At least scholars will be wary about their comments on the topic.

Once upon a time (one may conclude), there were two gardeners. Both of them liked romantic gardens, not classical ones; but one of them thought that a unity of English flowers and plants best represented God's intention for an English garden. The other was quite eclectic and ordered seeds and bulbs from around the world, whatever struck his fancy as being interesting in his garden, for he thought God had created with fecundity and a bit of this an bit of that best represented God's intentions. The second gardener was also given to placing plants with religious names – Angel's Trumpet, Canterbury Bells, Crown of Thorns, Glory Bush, Jacob's Ladder, Easter Lily, Passion Flower, Rose of Sharon, Solomon's Seal, and Star of Bethlehem – in prominent places in his garden. The first gardener was so irritated with the other's lack of decorum that he refused to enter his garden, while the second was quite enthusiastic about the garden of the first. This difference between them was a pity, so far as their own earlier friendship was concerned; but both of their gardens have been bequeathed to the public since their deaths, and many people go with delight to one garden or the other, and many go to both. It is also true that horticulturalists

sometimes prefer one garden or the other, and some horticulturalists think they are both good in their different ways. The arguments (when there are arguments) do not seem likely to be settled; but still the gardens thrive. ☿

Bibliographical Note

The present writer first suggested, in a rather confused way, that Letter No. 113 was related to Tolkien's rejection of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in a checklist annotation of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* in "An Inklings Bibliography" (21), "Mythlore 9:2/32 (Summer 1982), 42-6. He first argued that the end of *Prince Caspian* was an answer to Tolkien's objections to the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in "The World of Narnia," *Niekas* No. 32 (Winter 1983 [pub. late 1984]), 46-57. The second of these is a minor point in this essay, and the first is greatly corrected by its original appearance.

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A Marker Stone along the Road

November 22, 1988 marked the 25th anniversary of the passing of C.S. Lewis. Because of the public's attention focused on the tragic death of John F. Kennedy, many didn't learn of Lewis' death until much later. I learned it from a magazine six months after the fact. It seems almost as if he, in his humility, chose to quietly slip away when the world's attention was occupied with other events. His rich varied legacy remains for us today. -G.G.

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