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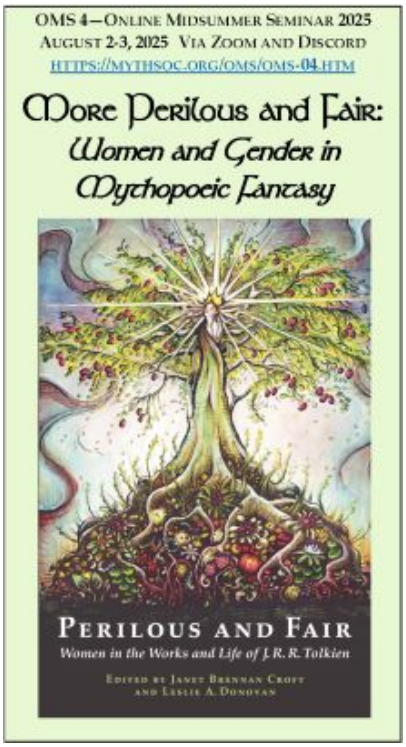

Lewis and Clarke in the Caves: Art and Platonic Worlds in *Piranesi*

Abstract

Susanna Clarke's 2020 novel Piranesi openly acknowledges its debt to C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia. Piranesi's imagined world, the House, is modeled after Charn from The Magician's Nephew in the Chronicles: both feature uninhabited and apparently endless series of halls. Clarke's world is not Lewis's, however. As she puts it, "I always liked Charn better than Lewis liked Charn," and the House in Piranesi is not a cold, dead shell, but the beloved home of the novel's eponymous narrator. Piranesi's handling of the relationship between models (like Charn) and their differing imitations (like Piranesi's House) is important because a theme both Lewis and Clarke explore is the relationship between Platonic ideals and their imperfect copies. Following Plato's Republic, with its hierarchy of intelligible, physical, and mimetic-artistic worlds, both Piranesi and the Chronicles of Narnia are multi-world stories in which one world echoes another. But just as Clarke adapts Charn into the more positively-connotated House, she also adapts Lewis's Platonism. Unlike the Chronicles, which feature a Neoplatonic heaven influenced by Plato's description of the intelligible world, Clarke's novel features a narrator who questions the existence of any higher knowledge at all, and focuses instead on a critique of the relationship between Plato's physical and artistic worlds. In contrast to Plato, Clarke presents artistic work not as an inferior imitation of the physical world, but as an interpenetrating influence on it. By exploring art's influence as it pays fond but

dissenting homage to the inspiration of Lewis's work, Piranesi encourages us to reflect on what, during a time of critical reassessment and canon revision, we owe to the stories that have made us. While Piranesi is far from a morally-relative novel, in the absence of an ethos of perfection, it fixes meaning neither in the works of a nostalgic past nor in those of a progressive present. Past and present, art and society, fantasy and realism are all reciprocally constructive. Understood in static isolation, the worlds of the mind are troubling and perilous. But in our connections to them, they matter, becoming a comfort and light in our own rough times.

Additional Keywords

Mythlore; Lewis and Clarke in the Caves: Art and Platonic Worlds in Piranesi; Julie M. Dugger; Susanna Clarke; Plato; Piranesi; Narnia; art

Lewis and Clarke in the Caves: Art and Platonic Worlds in *Piranesi*

Julie M. Dugger

In September 2020, Susanna Clarke published her second novel, *Piranesi*, to international fanfare. Clarke's first novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, won a Hugo Award and a Mythopoeic Society Fantasy Award, made the Man Booker Prize longlist, sold over four million copies, and was adapted into a BBC miniseries, demonstrating its extraordinary crossover appeal as a work of speculative, literary, and pop-cultural art (Shapiro, Jordan). *Piranesi*, following sixteen years later, was a long-awaited second act—and, according to early reviews, a successful one. The reviewers also noted that the House, the imagined world in *Piranesi*, resembled C.S. Lewis's Charn from *The Magician's Nephew* in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Like the palace of Charn, the House is an uninhabited and apparently endless series of halls. It's an homage Clarke openly acknowledged, both in *Piranesi* and in her interviews upon its release. There are numerous references to the *Chronicles* in her book, and Clarke singled out Charn in particular as an inspiration.

In acknowledging her debt to Lewis, however, Clarke also acknowledged their difference. The palace in Lewis's Charn exists in an expiring world and a "dead, cold, empty silence" (4.43). But Clarke, who in interviews described writing *Piranesi* while suffering from an unidentified illness, had a more positive take on the place: "I always liked Charn better than Lewis liked Charn […]. [While ill,] I found having people in the same street with me quite difficult to deal with. Imagining that I was in Charn, that I was alone in a place like that, endless buildings but silent—I found that very calming" (qtd. in Miller). Clarke's narrator, the eponymous Piranesi, also sees his Charn-like House as a calming, beautiful place, and so Clarke's imagined world and its effect on her characters, while modeled after Lewis's creation, is a significant departure from it.

This question of models and departures is all the more important because a theme both Lewis and Clarke explore is the relationship between Platonic ideals and their imitations. Following Plato's *Republic*, with its hierarchy of intelligible, physical,[1] and mimetic-artistic worlds, both *Piranesi*

[1] The translation of *Republic* used for this essay uses "visible" instead of "physical" to talk about the earthly world that can be perceived by the senses, and C.S. Lewis uses "natural."

and the *Chronicles of Narnia* are multi-world stories in which one world echoes another. But just as Clarke adapts Charn into the more positively-connotated House, she also adapts Lewis's Platonism.

Unlike the *Chronicles*, which feature a Neoplatonic heaven influenced by Plato's description of a higher intelligible world, Clarke's novel features a narrator who questions the existence of any higher knowledge at all, focusing instead on a critique of the relationship between Plato's physical and artistic worlds. In contrast to Plato, Clarke presents artistic work not as an inferior imitation of the physical world, but as an interpenetrating influence on it. And *Piranesi*, by exploring art's influence while it pays fond but dissenting homage to the inspiration of Lewis's work, encourages us to reflect on what, during a time of critical reassessment and canon revision, we owe to the stories that have made us.

SHADOWS AND GOLD: PLATONISM IN THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

Allusions to the *Chronicles of Narnia* in *Piranesi* are many and difficult to miss. In addition to the resemblance of the House to Charn, the cover of the first hardcover edition of *Piranesi* features the statue of a faun modeled after Mr. Tumnus in the *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Further, "the Other," who is at the start of the novel the only person in *Piranesi's* House besides the narrator, is eventually revealed by his real name: Valentine Andrew Ketterley. That name associates the Other, a magician who has sent the narrator to another world, with Andrew Ketterley of *The Magician's Nephew*, a magician who sends his nephew Digory Kirke to another world—and who is quoted in the epigraph to *Piranesi*. Lewis's magician appears to be the father of Clarke's, since Valentine Andrew Ketterley is the "[s]on of Colonel Ranulph Andrew Ketterley, soldier and occultist" and too young to be the man from Lewis's book. But the connections between the two characters are clear, and underscored even further by the Other's birthdate, 1955: the year *The Magician's Nephew* was published (167).

Just as Narnia is an explicitly-invoked context for *Piranesi*, so too Plato is explicitly invoked in the Narnia books, in which the magician's nephew Digory, grown up into Professor Kirke, explains that the multi-world scheme of *The Last Battle* is "all in Plato" (15.170). Commentators have cited *The Republic*, and especially its Allegory of the Cave, as the most obvious Platonic source for

I have kept Lewis's "natural," since he wrote in English, but have substituted "physical" for "visible" in this essay because "visible" becomes too confusing when trying to distinguish the earthly world from the visual arts that portray it. (While it's true that the visual arts are also physical objects, since we don't call them the physical arts, this seemed the best compromise.)

the *Chronicles*.[2] In the Allegory, Plato's Socrates describes prisoners in a firelit cave (representing the physical, earthly world). The prisoners accept the puppet-shadows on their cave-wall as reality, and are initially confused when they ascend to the sunlit world above (representing the intelligible world of true and ideal forms) (209-12). Images from the Allegory that resurface in the *Chronicles* include firelight and shadows, worlds enclosed within worlds, and the confusion experienced by characters as they move out of one world and into the next.[3] These images are prominently featured not only in *The Magician's Nephew*, Clarke's cited source, but also *The Silver Chair*, in which characters literally trapped in a cave discuss another, better, overland world above,[4] and *The Last Battle*, in which characters die and move on to a heavenly world, and the earthly worlds they leave behind are described as "Shadow-Lands" (16.172).

There are indeed so many Allegory allusions through seven *Chronicles* published over six years and encompassing multiple worlds that the references become complicated, possibly even contradictory. Scholars have spent considerable time attempting to sort out the tangle of which world in Lewis's books represents which part of the cave allegory, since Lewis, unlike Plato, did not follow his descriptions with a handy in-text answer key. One difficulty in the sorting is that the lineup of Narnian worlds isn't necessarily consistent. The Narnia that may appear to be an improvement on England in *The Magician's Nephew*, for example—the sunlit world to England's shadow-world (Joeckel 9)—is a shadowland itself in *The Last Battle*.

Samuel T. Joeckel solves this problem with his model of "progressive cognition," arguing that worlds in Narnia are progressively layered so that, for example, earthly-Narnia is more real than earthly-England, but less real than heavenly-Narnia. Tumnus the faun, Joeckel notes, offers the image of an onion for this layering in *The Last Battle*:

> "I see," [Lucy] said. "This is still Narnia, and, more real and more beautiful than the Narnia down below, just as *it* was more real and more

[2] See for example Johnson and Houtman (76). While the Allegory of the Cave is a prominent Platonic influence on the *Chronicles* (as well as elsewhere in Lewis's writing—for more examples see Richard Clarke, 49-50), it's not the only one. For example, the idea of the physical "world of change" as an imitation of the divine also appears in Plato's *Timaeus* (42), and Lewis himself cites *Timaeus* in *The Discarded Image* for its description of the creation of gods as "animated stars"—an image that reappears in *The Voyage of the* "Dawn Treader" (16.208-9) and *The Last Battle* (14.151).

[3] See Johnson and Houtman on light and shadow imagery, and Joeckel on worlds within worlds (10) and the confusion experienced by characters as they move between them (9).

[4] Simmons and Simmons and also Johnson and Houtman offer discussion of Platonism in *The Silver Chair*.

> beautiful than the Narnia outside the Stable door! I see . . . world within world, Narnia within Narnia. . . ."
>
> "Yes," said Mr. Tumnus, "Like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last." (16.180)

But Tumnus's onion model doesn't always fit. Joeckel is correct that Narnia is regularly portrayed as superior to England: in the Narnian world clothes are more comfortable than English clothes (*Last Battle* 133-4), air is healthier than English air (Joeckel 10), and even Calormene stories are superior to English essays (*Horse and His Boy* 32). When the Pevensies live for years in Narnia, they remember England only as a shadowy "dream" (Joeckel 8), and Andrew Ketterley is as confused by his arrival in Narnia as Plato's cave-dwellers are by their first encounter with the sun (Joeckel 9).

The onion-hierarchy of worlds that Lucy lays out, however—earthly "Narnia outside the Stable door," the initial afterlife of "Narnia down below," and the current afterlife Narnia where Lucy is speaking with Tumnus—doesn't include England at all. And that isn't an accidental omission. Later in the novel, Lucy sees England, like Narnia, as one among many worlds adjoining the chain of mountains that includes Aslan's country. As Tumnus explains, "you are now looking at the England within England, the real England just as this is the real Narnia. And in that inner England no good thing is destroyed" (16.181). England is its own onion, just like Narnia: the two are interconnected parallel worlds, not inferior and superior. It appears that sometimes in the *Chronicles*, England is a shadow of Narnia, and at other times they are equal shadows of a better place.

Some of the inconsistency in the books may simply be inconsistency—or rather, the same authorial mind returning to the same worlds over years to explore the same theme, but from different angles of approach. The *Chronicles* are generally consistent, however, in following the Platonic assumption that the physical world (Lewis's "natural" world) is the shadow or copy of another, superior world. Richard Clarke describes this position as characteristic of Lewis's Christian Neoplatonism, in which the natural world is a copy of a spiritual world, with the spiritual world corresponding to Plato's intelligible world (48-9). In this understanding, "[i]t is the spiritual world which is […] the true reality" (51). Lewis further connects this spiritual world with a heavenly afterlife, anticipating that the "life of the risen man [...] will differ from the sensory life we know here, not as emptiness differs from water or water from wine, but as a flower differs from a bulb or a cathedral from an architect's drawing" ("Transposition" 177).[5] The hierarchy suggested here—the architect's drawing is a lesser copy of the earthly cathedral, while the earthly cathedral

[5] Also quoted in Richard Clarke, p. 51.

would presumably be a lesser copy of the spiritual cathedral—parallels the onion-hierarchy of the Narnias in *The Last Battle*.

We see the same onion-layering in Plato's *Republic*, which outlines at least three levels of hierarchy through Socrates's example of three kinds of bed: the real, true, divinely-made bed (belonging to the intelligible world), the inferior carpenter's bed that copies it (the physical world), and the twice-inferior artist's image of a bed that copies the carpenter's (a mimetic artistic world) (285-88). Unsurprisingly, this particular hierarchy, subordinating the artistic as inferior to the physical and two steps of debasement from the intelligible world, has never been a hit with fans of the arts. So it's also not surprising to see the literary artist Lewis depart from Plato's thinking on this issue. Lewis's understanding of the arts is closer to that of the Neoplatonist Philip Sidney, whose *Defence of Poesie* Lewis describes as "the best critical essay in English before Dryden; and it is not obvious that Dryden wrote anything so good" ("Sidney and Spenser" 343). Sidney argued that art in a Platonic hierarchy is not inferior but superior to the physical world:

> the poet [...], lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature, as the heroes, demi-gods, cyclops, chimeras, furies, and such like; so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

Sidney's golden world of the poet, with its heroes, mythical creatures, and bucolic landscapes, could pass for Lewis's Narnia, so often presented as a better place than England. The imagination can improve on the natural world.

This Sidneyan understanding makes an appearance in the *Chronicles* as a hypothetical position. In *The Silver Chair*, as Johnson and Houtman have noted, the Narnians are trapped in a Platonic cave by a witch who attempts to convince them that there is no sunlit Narnian world above, and "only fails because the very practical Puddleglum dis-spells her evil effects by stamping out the fire creating the Underland illusions (exactly as the fire in Plato's allegory casts the shadows on the Cave wall)" (79-80). But the speech Puddleglum makes is as necessary as the smell of burnt Marsh-Wiggle foot for breaking the witch's spell, and every bit as idealistic as it is "practical":

> Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. (*The Silver Chair* 12.159)

Puddleglum's just-suppose explores the possibility that, like Sidney's poetic gold compared to this world's brass, the imagination can create a world that "licks your real world hollow," and deserves allegiance accordingly.

But Puddleglum's speech, though inspirational, is ultimately inaccurate. In the story there really is a sunlit Narnian world, which the Narnians really do remember. The reality of the world outside Puddleglum's cave makes sense in light of what is at stake in the *Chronicles's* riffing on Plato's cave. Since the Narnians' afterlife, a version of Lewis's Neoplatonic Christian world of "the risen man," parallels the Platonic intelligible world, for Lewis (as for Puddleglum) the possibility of imagining a better world on his own may not be so attractive as the existence of such a world as an actual destination. *The Silver Chair* thus verifies the more attractive option. Puddleglum's beloved Narnia is not—in the books—a fiction, and the *Chronicles* differ from the *Republic* in that art tends not to feature as a world of its own there. It has no place in the hierarchies of either Tumnus's English-Narnian onions or the map of progressive cognition that Joeckel traces. Art, in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, plays a different role.

Statues and Portals: Art in Narnia and the House

Lewis's and Clarke's novels both feature works of art in powerful roles, but in neither case is art the simply inferior imitation of Plato, nor the superior improvement of Sidney. There are some similarities. We see a Platonic representation of debased art in the statues of the White Witch in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which are living people petrified by the Witch's sorcery. The prospect of being turned into a statue frightens Mr. Tumnus so much that he comes perilously close to betraying Lucy (17), and to witness such a transformation is so upsetting that it breaks through even Edmund's early self-absorption. After the White Witch freezes the "merry party" of "a squirrel and his wife with their children and two satyrs and a dwarf and an old dog-fox" (11.111), Edmund "for the first time [...] felt sorry for someone besides himself.

It seemed so pitiful to think of those little stone figures sitting there all the silent days and all the dark nights, year after year, till the moss grew on them and at last even their faces crumbled away" (11.113). Statues in the *Chronicles*—the dormant Jadis of Charn, the White Witch's victims, the Lord in the pool on Deathwater Island who perishes by becoming a statue of gold—are not what they should be. They are victims of dark enchantment, either dead or fixed in a deathlike state.

As enchanted people, however, they're not truly works of art. Real art, as opposed to enchanted people who are not art, might be expected to serve a different role in the *Chronicles*, given Lewis's approval of Sidney, and given the use of art in his critical and spiritual writing as an analogy to describe the relationship between the natural and spiritual. Lewis's essay "Transposition," for example, compares the relationship of the natural and spiritual worlds to that of a flat drawing and its three-dimensional real-life model (171-2). It also depicts the discovery of the spiritual in this life to the progress of a child born and raised in a dungeon and taught about the world outside it through drawings (177-8). In both cases, the drawing is an inferior reduction of the world that it attempts to represent: thus far, "Transposition" provides a strikingly cave-allegorical repetition of Plato's take on art as an inferior imitation of the physical world. As Richard Clarke has pointed out, however, in a manner fitting with Lewis's Christian Neoplatonism, art for Lewis is not merely a shadow of but also a vehicle for the superior reality it imitates: "the supernatural is 'reproduced' in/by the natural" (R. Clarke 48). As Lewis writes,

> Pictures are part of the visible world themselves and represent it only by being part of it. Their visibility has the same source as its. The suns and lamps in pictures seem to shine only because real suns or lamps shine on them; that is, they seem to shine a great deal because they really shine a little in reflecting their archetypes. […] [T]he thing signified is really in a certain mode present. ("Transposition" 173)

The natural world is present in its picture, as the spiritual world is present in the natural world—so much so that Lewis further uses his analogy to explore the Christian concepts of the Incarnation of Christ (175) and the resurrection of the body (177), both of which require the interpenetration of the spiritual and physical worlds.

Such Neoplatonic departures from their source remind us that Platonism is, after all, in some ways an odd fit for a religion centered around a God who had a redeeming physical and historical presence in the natural world. It's a bit of a jaw-dropper to recall that Plato's work, so often seen as establishing the place of reason in the Western intellectual tradition, does not accept the reality of anything a person might see or touch. The spiritual and natural worlds

can't remain so separate for Lewis. Even the drawing that imitates the physical world has a physical reality. It is line, color, and paper, and their physical properties are gloriously part of the world they duplicate: "I said before that in your drawing you had only plain white paper for sun and cloud, snow, water, and human flesh. In one sense, how miserably inadequate! Yet in another, how perfect" ("Transposition" 181). If the spiritual world is incomprehensible to earthly understanding, it is also constantly present in it. And so if, on the one hand, Lewis borrows from Plato in representing the spiritual, natural, and aesthetic worlds in hierarchy, on the other hand, for Lewis the higher worlds in that hierarchy interpenetrate the lower.

It's important to acknowledge that Lewis does distinguish the incarnation of visual artistic representation from the abstractions of written art forms. Between writing and the speech it represents, "there is complete discontinuity," unlike between the natural world and the drawing that follows its physical contours ("Transposition" 173). But literary art, for Lewis, also transcends the world of its reader. As he argues in *Experiment in Criticism*, people turn to books because "[w]e seek an enlargement of our being" (137), which literature provides by connecting us to the experiences of others: "I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here [in reading great literature], as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do" (141). To enter one understanding is not to leave another behind: literary art is the entryway that allows us to inhabit multiple realities.

In the *Chronicles*, we see actual art—as distinguished from enchanted statues—playing just this role: the portal between worlds. The most obvious example is the painting of the *Dawn Treader,* through which Edmund, Lucy, and Eustace fall out of England and into the Narnian sea.[6] It's a gorgeous metaphor for the experience of transportation offered by the *Chronicles* themselves, since wherever Narnia may belong in relation to England through an in-story Platonic layering scheme, at a meta-level outside the story the books are the work of Lewis's imagination. As such, they are the vehicle by which readers are moved from their own physical world into Narnia, Lewis's Sidney-world of imagined gold.

Further, not only is the book-world Narnia often closer to the Platonic ideal world than the physical world its readers live in is, but in that closeness Narnia becomes a door between worlds in the reader's spiritual journey. In *The Voyage of the* "Dawn Treader," the book of art-as-portal, Lucy mourns leaving

[6] Art is a portal again later in *The Voyage of the* Dawn Treader, to less positive effect, when Lucy uses the Magician's book to eavesdrop on her home world.

Narnia forever to return to England because it means losing Aslan. Aslan, however, tells her she's mistaken:

> "But you shall meet me, dear one," said Aslan.
> "Are—are you there [in England] too, Sir?" said Edmund.
> "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there." (16.216)

Aslan's counterpart in England is of course Jesus, so by coming to know Aslan in Narnia, the Pevensie children—and the readers of the *Chronicles* along with them—can better move toward the divine world of the Christian God. Art in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* thus functions as a portal three times over. It enables the fictional passage of the children between book-England and book-Narnia, the imaginative passage of the reader between our real, earthly world and book-Narnia, and the spiritual passage of the Christian between the earthly and heavenly worlds. And since the *Chronicles* assume an existing heaven and facilitate access to it, the better world is a real place both in-story and meta-textually—not Puddleglum's "made-up thing." In Narnia, it's never necessary to go on believing in fiction—in art—for its own "*a priori* superiority" (Joeckel 8). The golden world exists beyond its presence in art.

Clarke's *Piranesi*, by contrast, does portray an independent art-world. The House is a realm of statues. While some of these recall the debased, enchanted statues of Narnia, in her depiction of these works as in her adaptation of Charn, Clarke seems to like Lewis's creations more than Lewis did. The statues of the House are neither enchanted people nor horrifying. The House, like Narnia, includes a statue of a "Dog-Fox teaching two Squirrels and two Satyrs," but far from being upset by this grouping as Edmund was, Piranesi counts it as "one of my favorites [...]!" (81). His favorite statue of all is even more noteworthy:

> Another—perhaps *the* Statue that I love above all others—stands at a Door between the Fifth and Fourth North-Western Halls. It is a Statue of a Faun, a creature half-man and half-goat, with a head of exuberant curls. He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips. I have always felt that he meant to tell me something or perhaps to warn me of something: *Quiet!* he seems to say. *Be careful!* But what danger there could possibly be I have never known. I dreamt of him once; he was standing in a snowy forest and speaking to a female child. (15-6)

It is fitting that the faun "stands at a Door." The statue is clearly a love-note to Narnia at the moment the reader first enters it: Lucy's meeting with Tumnus in a winter wood in the first-published Narnia book, which ends with their fleeing "as quietly as we can" from the White Witch (*LWW* 2.18). But Piranesi's faun isn't running from a witch who might turn him into a statue, since he already is a statue. Nor is he a dead thing that ought to be living: the faun has a life in the same way that a work of art has a life. He interacts with Piranesi—smiling as if "he meant to tell me something"—much as the *Chronicles* interact with their readers, telling them of Narnia.

Still, the House with its statues—resembling the artistic world that was layered in below the physical world in Plato's *Republic*, but that lacks a presence in the *Chronicles* as a world-layer of its own—is nonetheless a highly ambiguous place. The statue of the faun smiles at an adoring Piranesi, but the statue also hints of danger, and Piranesi is an unreliable narrator who puts a friendly face on everything. We can't trust him or his House. *Piranesi* revisits the Platonic question of art, articulated through the same medium of fantasy worlds that Lewis adopted. But whether we are to see the world of art as good or evil is, at the beginning of the novel, an unsettled question.

"Neither He Nor I Have Ever Been Mad": Clarke's Parallel Worlds

To unpack the question of the relationship between Plato's artistic, physical, and intelligible worlds and their potential analogues in *Piranesi*, we might start with the figure who stands with Plato's authority in the novel. In the *Chronicles*, Plato has all the answers, as an exasperated Professor Kirke points out to the under-educated: "bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools!" (*LB* 15.170). In *Piranesi*, the all-explanatory work that goes unread is that of Laurence Arne-Sayles—or as Piranesi calls him, the Prophet:

> "It's all in the book I wrote. I don't suppose you happen to have read it?"
> "No, sir."
> "Pity. It's terribly good. You'd like it." (89)

As a stand-in for Plato, the Prophet—who is lustful rather than Platonic in his loves, amoral if not immoral ("I've never been very interested in what you might call morality" [88]), and a self-confessed agent of chaos ("I want to put the cat among the pigeons" [92])—is hardly an exact match. Having come to the House to persuade Piranesi he should murder Ketterley, Arne-Sayles is less a law-abiding Socrates than Socrates's evil twin.

It may be more productive to see Arne-Sayles instead as a stand-in for everything they don't teach them in those schools. Specifically, he is a transgressive outsider, which is how Arne-Sayles draws the attention of

Matthew Rose Sorensen, the scholar of transgressive thinking who is abducted into the House, loses his memory, and survives as Piranesi (164). Sorensen's journal situates Arne-Sayles in a broader context of outsider thought, indexing under "Outsider" a series of extra-textual, nonfictional figures (104). These include a possible model for Arne-Sayles: author Colin Wilson, who "shot to international acclaim with his first book, 'The Outsider' [...] but who incurred critical disdain for a string of later books about murder, sexual deviance and the occult." Wilson argued "that mankind is on the verge of an evolutionary leap to a higher stage," and described himself as a genius and a prophet (Fox). The index also features a possible nod to the novel *Piranesi's* origins in *The Magician's Nephew*, playfully cross-referencing "Outsider literature" as "see Fan fiction." And it includes, under "Outsider philosophy," a listing for C.S. Lewis's friend and fellow scholar, Owen Barfield (104).

The entry on Barfield is particularly noteworthy not only because he was Lewis's intellectual sparring partner and fellow Platonist thinker (Adey 23), but also because Clarke, in an interview for the *The Church Times Podcast*, cites Barfield as an influence on *Piranesi*:

> One of Barfield's ideas was that originally ancient peoples […] had a much deeper connection to the world; we modern man sort of think of ourselves as consciousnesses inside our heads, and the world is out there, and we're sort of looking out at the world, but there's this sort of gap between us and the world. Barfield's idea was that ancient peoples, earlier peoples did not experience the world in this way; they felt [...] their life and the life of the world was sort of the same continuum [...]. And I found this a very striking idea. Owen Barfield called it 'original participation', and in *Piranesi* one of the things I was trying to do was to describe as best I could what that might have been like to feel that your life was just part of a greater life that was going on all around you [...]. So that was a very deliberate effort on my part, that Piranesi should feel like he perfectly belonged in the world in which he found himself, and that the world was benevolent, and that it really cared for him, and he for it. (qtd. in Lothian)

Barfield's beliefs about the evolving relationship between people and the world are anthroposophic positions drawn from Rudolf Steiner, which Lewis did not share (Barfield 12-13). But they abound in *Piranesi*. Anthroposophic theory is the initial foundation of Arne-Sayles's thought: "Laurence Arne-Sayles began with the idea that the Ancients had a different way of relating to the world, that they experienced it as something that interacted with them" (147). It's also the present mindset of Piranesi, who is surprised to read that Arne-Sayles considered original participation an ancient phenomenon, since "The World still

speaks to me every day" (154). We find examples of Piranesi's interaction with the House throughout the book. In the opening scene, he prays to the House to protect him from a rising tide and attributes his survival to the House's beauty and kindness (5). He reads the movements of flocks of birds as intentional communications to him (40-43). He regularly personifies objects, including—in the climactic fight of the book—Ketterley's boat, which initially "seemed to make up its mind to save" Ketterley from the flood, then turns away (206).

To some extent, the novel *Piranesi*, with its sympathetic anthroposophical narrator, would seem to be endorsing the outsiders recorded in Sorensen's index. After all, in the book, Arne-Sayles is successful in his efforts to communicate with an ancient seer and travel to another world. But the anthroposophic underpinnings of the House are only partly validated. It's debatable whether the House's care for Piranesi has any reality outside his own perception. The House is as harsh as it is kind: Piranesi is often cold or hungry, and credit for his survival can be as easily ascribed to his own considerable ingenuity as to a beneficent world. While the messages he takes from the birds might be read as prophetic, they are also—like many prophecies—vague enough to be true only as coincidence, or as a resurfacing of Piranesi's own forgotten knowledge. Ketterley's boat might change its mind and leave its owner to drown, thereby protecting Piranesi from a man prepared to murder him—or it might simply be adrift in the wild currents of converging tides.

Further, although the alternate world of the House does exist in the book, the Great and Secret Knowledge that Ketterley hopes to find there—a parallel to the evolutionary next step anticipated by thinkers like Wilson and Barfield—does not:

> 'Tell me,' [Arne-Sayles] said, 'does Ketterley still think that the wisdom of the ancients is here?'
>
> 'Do you mean the Great and Secret Knowledge, sir?'
>
> 'Exactly that.'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'And is he still searching for it?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'How amusing,' he said. 'He'll never find it. It's not here. It doesn't exist.' (89-90)

With one blow, the originating proponent of anthroposophy in the novel dooms its prospects. And Arne-Sayles does so with Platonic imagery, offering Piranesi his own cave allegory:

> Before I had seen this world, I thought that the knowledge that created it would somehow still be here, lying about ready to be picked up and

> claimed. Of course, as soon as I got here, I realised how ridiculous that was. Imagine water flowing underground. It flows through the same cracks year after year and it wears away at the stone. Millennia later you have a cave system. But what you don't have is the water that originally created it. That's long gone. Seeped away into the earth. Same thing here. (90)

Arne-Sayles's initial outsider positions are thus gradually modified. Just as Lewis's thinking blends Platonism with Neoplatonic Christian influences, so too Arne-Sayles—like Barfield—appears to be blending Platonic and anthroposophic concepts, adding to anthroposophist "original participation" the Platonic model of a "cave system" in which one world is a shadow of another. The House, as described by Arne-Sayles, is derived from his own world, which is also the reader's world—or, as Piranesi comes to call it from his perspective as a denizen of the House, the "Other World." And the statues of the House "exist because they embody the Ideas and Knowledge that flowed out of the [O]ther World into this one" (90). So the House—as the repository of earthly understanding—is a product of the Other World just as the artistic world in Plato is a product of the physical world.

Given this derivative relationship, it's tempting to read *Piranesi's* House, the Other World, and the Great and Secret Knowledge as corresponding to Plato's artistic, physical, and intelligible worlds. But there are problems with this interpretation. The House may indeed be a cast-off shadow of the Other World: Arne-Sayles enthusiastically hypothesizes that "in some remote area of the labyrinth, statues of obsolete computers are coming into being as we speak!" (90). But since the Knowledge has flowed out of the Other World into the House, the House would if anything appear to be closer to the Knowledge than the Other World is, and not at second-remove from it, as Plato's artistic world is at a second-remove from the intelligible world. This, after all, is why Ketterley searches for the Knowledge in the House.

Further, while Arne-Sayles confirms that the Knowledge that made the House is "long gone," Piranesi questions whether it exists at all:

> As I walked, I was thinking about the Great and Secret Knowledge, which the Other says will grant us strange new powers. And I realised something. I realised that I no longer believed in it. Or perhaps that is not quite accurate. I thought it was possible that the Knowledge existed. Equally I thought that it was possible it did not. Either way it no longer mattered to me. I did not intend to waste my time looking for it anymore. [...] The House is valuable because it is the House. It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end. (60-1)

On the question of the Great and Secret Knowledge, Piranesi is agnostic. His revelation casts doubt on the existence of any abstract Knowledge separate from either the House or the Other World.

Whether this revelation about the Knowledge may be taken as a commentary on Plato's intelligible world, or on Lewis's corresponding Neoplatonic heaven, is another question. Clarke herself, the daughter of a Methodist minister, is a practicing Anglican. As she recalls, however, she was drawn to her church upon finding that it was "very free I would say from dogma [...] you could put any question and nobody would be shocked. You could tell people that you were struggling with this or that part of doctrine and nobody would [...] immediately sort of rush in to correct you." When asked about Piranesi's belief in the care of a benevolent world, she comments, "As to whether I have a faith like that, I would say: I wish I did. […] I feel I'm struggling towards faith" (qtd. in Lothian). While Clarke's expressed uncertainty is different from Piranesi's, both she and her narrator are questioners.

That said, however—and quite apart from the issue of whether an author's beliefs are necessarily expressed by her works—from a perspective like Piranesi's, the existence or non-existence of an intelligible world, a Christian heaven, or an anthroposophic Great and Secret Knowledge is not the point. If the allegory of *Piranesi* uncouples the Other World and the House from the Knowledge that shapes them, it does so not to assert or deny that such Knowledge exists (which Piranesi explicitly does not do). Rather it replaces the Knowledge as a primary object of interest: the House is more than its subordinate shadow, being "enough in and of Itself." It's less that Piranesi doesn't believe in a spiritual reality than that this reality is closer to Barfield's original participation or Lewis's Christian Incarnation than to Plato's intelligible world: it is part of this world, rather than existing off in some other place still beyond us. Clarke's refusal to present the House as a paler imitation of something superior—a refusal endorsed by both the morally-admirable Piranesi and the intellectually-admirable Arne-Sayles—is a major break not only from Platonism, but from the imagery of Lewis's *Chronicles* (if not necessarily from his Christian thought). The *Chronicles* repeatedly frame their earthly worlds in reference to a higher one. In *Piranesi*, by contrast, the Other World and the House may be all we've got—and Piranesi is content with this. There's no need to confirm that Plato's and Puddleglum's sunlit lands above the cave exist.

Then again, Puddleglum didn't require a confirmation either. Real or not, his sunlit world was a better place than the cave-world. By analogy, then, we might suppose that the House built from the Other World's creative energy is better than its origin: Sydney's gold again, next to the physical world's brass. That possibility is complicated, however, by the fact that the House Piranesi loves so deeply is initially the only world he knows: he's not well-enough

informed to make comparisons. Piranesi's ignorance flips Plato's cave allegory on its head. If *Piranesi* suggests an evil Socrates in the Prophet, that may be because Arne-Sayles has nothing to offer Piranesi but the corrupted Other World, rather than an ideal world of intelligible forms. Although Piranesi's House is not an easy place to live—in addition to physical deprivation and the constant danger of drowning, he suffers badly from loneliness—there's a reason he has forgotten Arne-Sayles's world, in which vicious people kidnap and murder for power. The horror of his own abduction is too painful to remember. The people of Plato's cave were in ignorance of a better world, but Piranesi is in ignorance of ugliness. As he reads his journal and begins to recover his lost and traumatic past, Piranesi experiences the confusion of the cave-escapee, mistaking reality for madness. "It was nonsense, gibberish!" he writes of his journal composed in the Other World. "[C]ertainly I have been mad in the past. I was mad when I wrote those entries!" (108). But for Piranesi, coming out of confusion doesn't seem to offer him much. When he does at last recall the truth, he vomits (187).

The novel *Piranesi* thus offers a flipped-cave scenario in which the world outside the cave isn't necessarily an improvement.[7] The Other World might even be inferior to the House, as Piranesi argues when Raphael tries to persuade him to return to that world. "Here [in the House]," Raphael tells Piranesi, "you can only see a representation of a river or a mountain, but in our world—the other world—you can see an actual river and the actual mountain'" (222). Raphael's appeal is strikingly Platonic: the House, as the world of artistic imitation, is inferior to the Other World that is its source, just as Plato's artistic world is inferior to the physical world it imitates. But Piranesi refuses this assumption:

> This annoyed me. 'I do not see why you say I can *only* see a representation in this World,' I said with some sharpness. 'The word "only" suggests a relationship of inferiority. You make it sound as if the Statue was

[7] Nor is it clear that the world outside the cave can be grasped, Platonically, by the use of reason. The most visionary and intellectually-capable character in the book, the Prophet who shows everyone else the way to move between worlds, may be "passionately fond of science" (89), but he's also anti-Enlightenment, disparaging his contemporaries who "were all enamoured with the idea of progress and believed that whatever was new must be superior to what was old" (88). Piranesi may see himself as reasonable, but Ketterley points out this is only true part of the time. "[Y]ou're also a romantic" (143), he observes—fittingly, since we readers know that Piranesi is evading some basic unhappy facts about his own life in the House. The House itself is not a particularly reasonable place. The people most drawn to it have a history of poetry (D'Agostino), madness (Ritter), or an affinity with the mad (Raphael). We're a long way from the Platonist Professor Kirke, who talks up logic as he posits the existence of Narnia (*Lion* 45).

> somehow inferior to the thing itself. I do not see that that is the case at all. I would argue that the Statue is superior to the thing itself, the Statue being perfect, eternal and not subject to decay.' (222)

Unlike Edmund Pevensie, who imagines the petrified animals sitting until "at last even their faces crumbled away," Piranesi, who tends the bones of the House's dead, knows a body perishes before a statue will.

It's difficult to dispute Piranesi's faith that the House is at least as good as the Other World. He may experience a cave-escapee confusion when he regains awareness of the Other World, but Piranesi's earlier, reverse journey into the House is also portrayed as a coming out of a cave. As his journal reveals, when he first entered the House as Matthew Rose Sorensen, he was also confused: "*I forget. I forget. Yesterday I could not think of the word for lamp-post.* […] *I am LOSING MY MIND*" (127). We might dismiss Sorensen's disorientation—with its allusion to the Pevensies' inability to remember the word for a lamp-post in Narnia (*Lion* 182-5)—as an actual loss of sanity, and not the temporary confusion of the cave-escapee encountering truth. But if sanity must be defined at least in part by the ability to function in a worldly context—including to function within a moral framework—then Sorensen, trapped in a murderous rage toward Ketterley, is less sane than Piranesi. Sorensen's dysfunction becomes evident when Piranesi relapses into his former identity: "I lost Myself in long, sick fantasies of revenge. I did not think to rest. I did not think to eat. I did not think to drink water. Hours passed—I do not know how many. […] These imaginings left me ravaged" (189-90). Clearly, Piranesi became who he is to survive in a world where Sorensen could not live—and if he is to continue surviving, Sorensen must be put away again. "*Go back to sleep,*" Piranesi tells him, like an adult speaking to a child. *"I will take care of us both*" (191).

So what we have in the House and the Other World is less a *Republic*-like hierarchy than two parallel realms, much as England and Narnia are parallel worlds in *The Last Battle*, but without the higher onion-layer of Aslan's country above them.[8] As Piranesi finally concludes, neither he nor Sorensen is

[8] Appropriately, given their parallel value in the novel, if Clarke draws on the imagined world of Lewis's Charn for the House, she may be drawing on the imagined worlds of Lewis's contemporary and fellow Anglican, T.S. Eliot, for the Other World. In a flashback to the Other World, Piranesi sees "More people than I had ever conceived of before. Too many people. The mind could not contain the thought of so many" (162)—an echo of the Unreal City of Eliot's *Waste Land*: "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many" (ll. 62-3). We find Eliot evoked again in Arne-Sayles's first journey out of the Other World and into the House, through a door in his mother's rose garden (152-3), its rosiness repeatedly stressed and recalling from "Burnt Norton" the "passage which we did not take / Toward the door we never opened / Into

delusional. Sorensen wrote his journal entries "in a different World where, no doubt, different Rules, Circumstances and Conditions applied. As far as I can tell, Matthew Rose Sorensen was in his right mind when he wrote them. Neither he nor I had ever been mad" (191). For Piranesi, the world that at first sounds merely imagined to him is a real, remembered place—as real as the House's world of art that Sorensen (in his previous identity as a disbelieving and, to quote Arne-Sayles, "arrogant little shit" [93]), refused to recognize. Each man's world is the cave to the other's sunlit land.

"To Live as Like a Narnian as I Can": Interpenetrating Realities

Both worlds are real, but both are also damaged. Piranesi can't function until he puts his Sorensen-self back to sleep, but neither can he remain his own self, lost in naiveté. The House, as Raphael points out, carries the corruptions as well as the knowledge of the Other World that produced it. Piranesi's sacred dead, she explains, are probably the bones of Arne-Sayles's murder victims. The House is not a place to escape the troubles of the Other World: "I said that this was a perfect world. But it's not. There are crimes here, just like everywhere else" (226). Here too the House resembles the worlds of art, perhaps especially the fantasy worlds. Lewis's Narnia may in many ways be Sidneyan gold—but as critics and readers have noted, it also carries the orientalist, racist, and sexist biases of Lewis's own world, and of his privileged position and personal choices within it.[9] If the *Chronicles* are a portal to a better place, they are still constructed from the flawed materials of this one.

If this is an inevitable failing, it's nonetheless a failing we'd be wise not to turn our backs on. While Piranesi's stated rationale for leaving the House at the end of the novel is its loneliness, a second reason is that now he knows how dangerous his ignorance has been. Valentine Andrew Ketterley may be descended from Andrew Ketterley from *The Magician's Nephew*, but the relationship between the Other and Piranesi doesn't really resemble that between the magician and his nephew Digory. Always the professor in the making, Digory doesn't hesitate to judge the uncle with whom he shares both virtues and sins: both intellectual curiosity and a sense of entitlement in the quest to satisfy it. Both Uncle Andrew and Digory push Polly Plummer into explorations without her consent—it is Digory's painfully violent restraint of

the rose garden" (ll. 12-14). For the evolving critical and personal relationship between Lewis and Eliot, see Brown.

[9] For discussion of bias in the *Chronicles*, see Cecire, Howe, and Ismail; see also Gordon, who provides some overall summary that includes popular press criticism (55-56, 58-59). Dickieson also mentions Narnian examples in his list of "the *loci classici* of difficult gender moments in Lewis" (111), though he further claims that these moments as not fully representative of the broader context of Lewis's positions on gender.

Polly that releases the Witch Jadis, who introduces evil to Narnia (51). There's an element of mutual understanding in the conversations between uncle and nephew: a good-ol'-boy shared recognition.

Piranesi's conversations with his own Ketterley, by contrast, are more like the donkey-ape dialogues of *The Last Battle*. Here's Shift the Ape speaking to Puzzle the Donkey: "What does an ass like you know about things of that sort? You know you're no good at thinking, Puzzle, so why don't you let me do your thinking for you?" (1.7). And here's the Other to Piranesi: "anything important you forget, I can remind you. But the fact that you forget while I remember—that's why it's so vital that I set our objectives. Me. Not you" (69). Puzzle's innocence, of course, is devastating: Shift's use of him to impersonate Aslan brings about the fall of Narnia. Similarly, Piranesi's innocence makes him the willing enabler of Ketterley, whose list of objectives includes "snuffing out and re-igniting the Sun and Stars" and "dominating lesser intellects and bending them to our will" (9). Piranesi is rightly horrified at the prospect of falling back under the amnesiac influence of the House, and relapsing into ignorance (188).

With neither Piranesi's ignorance nor Sorensen's arrogance an acceptable option, what's needed is a subordination of both blind identities, and an integration of the two worlds they belong to. At the end of the book, this integration is what the nameless narrator—who now calls himself neither Sorensen nor Piranesi—achieves. Sorensen, a wreck of fear and pride, remains asleep: he can never recover from the loss of his freedom and his violated sense of supremacy. And Piranesi's idealism can't survive his own journey out of the cave—although he, unlike the homicidally enraged Sorensen, remains an active voice in the narrator's head. The narrator can access the knowledge of both personalities as he moves between their worlds.

And move he does. In the end, the equal realities of the Other World and the House, like the hierarchical realities of Lewis's spiritual and natural worlds, are interpenetrating domains. The narrator not only makes frequent visits back to the House, but also carries its influence with him when he leaves it. The House becomes the narrator's interface with the Other World. "I thought," he writes, "that in this new (old) world the statues [of the House] would be irrelevant. I did not imagine that they would continue to help me. But I was wrong. When faced with a person or situation I do not understand, my first impulse is still to look for a statue that will enlighten me" (241). In order to understand his memories of Ketterley, the narrator imagines a statue of a man who "has used his sword to shatter [a] sphere because he wanted to understand it, but now he finds that he has destroyed both sphere and sword" (241). In order to understand Raphael, the rescuer who offered him truth, he recalls a statue-figure illuminating the darkness with a light (242). The narrator understands the

world, as many of us do, through art. Like Plato conjuring a fantastical cave to explain the nature of reality, the narrator explains the real through imagined images.

Memories of the House are a comfort to the narrator emotionally as well as intellectually. In the harsh cold of winter, he hears the sounds of cars through snow as "a steady, slushing noise, like the sound of tides beating endlessly on marble walls. […] I closed my eyes. I felt calm" (244). When he sees an old man, "sad and tired," with "broken veins on his cheeks," he recalls the statue of a king, and "I wanted to seize hold of him and say to him: *In another world you are a king, noble and good! I have seen it!*" (244). The illuminating art of the House—its truths and its reality—makes bearable the harshness of the Other World. Seeing the world through art allows a person to look on it with love and hope—as Puddleglum said, "to live as like a Narnian as I can."

That is why, even as he represses the despairing Sorensen inside him, the narrator stays in touch with joyful Piranesi. It's also why, in the daunting winter of the Other World at the end of the book, as in the daunting winter of the House at the beginning of the book (27), he keeps his faith. The narrator ends the final section of the book with the same sentence as the first: "The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite" (5, 245).

In Conclusion: The Light of Imperfect Worlds

The House, as Piranesi and Raphael both discover, is not a perfect world because there is no perfect world. The intelligible ideal, whether or not it exists, isn't with us; and the world of art is corrupted by the crimes of the society that produced it. The novel *Piranesi* itself is no exception. If the House is affected by Arne-Sayles's murders, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by Lewis's biases, so too Clarke's artistic vision is shaped by the choices she makes in the context of her world and times. And in Clarke's times (our times), we may find ourselves like Piranesi: looking askance at our art-worlds, the worlds from out of the past that we have loved.

Piranesi, however, seems to support its problematic Prophet in his skepticism about progress: that the "new must be superior to what was old" (88). Whatever else Arne-Sayles has (very) wrong, in the context of the novel he's correct that the past had a wisdom of its own. Past and present, like the House and the Other World, thus exist in parallel rather than hierarchy. *Piranesi* is not a morally-relative book: there are heroes (Raphael and Piranesi) and villains (Ketterley and Arne-Sayles); there are things worth fighting for. But in the absence of an ethos of perfection, meaning is fixed neither in a nostalgic past nor in a progressive present. Past and present are reciprocal. In revisiting the times that made us, we re-make them.

It follows that one of the many pleasures of reading *Piranesi* is Clarke's delighted acknowledgment and re-evaluation of Lewis's books. They are books that offered—to paraphrase Piranesi—the images to enlighten her, including the image of Charn, the place she liked more than its creator did. Clarke's fears are not Lewis's fears, and her understanding of the world he made isn't his. Her homage to the books that have shaped her is less imitative than conversational, and rightly so. Even in the *Chronicles*, Narnia was never a final destination. People from our world don't stay there any more than we should stay in the past, or readers should stay in fantasy worlds, or Piranesi should stay in the House. Imagined worlds, if cut off from our own, can be isolating as well as troubled places. But in our connections to them, they matter: we visit, we dream, we see as they teach us to see. They become a comfort and light in our own rough times.

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