

“‘Patches of Godlight’”: C. S. Lewis as Imaginative Writer

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Writers may not become what they are by nature, but they certainly do so by nurture. Childhood and adolescence seem in large measure to determine the destiny of those who become writers in terms of both what and how they write. The truism that trials and tribulations, as well as advantages and privileges (or lack thereof), shape the formative behind-the-scenes story of countless authors certainly includes C. S. Lewis. But his story needs no elaborate recounting here—it is told, eloquently and poignantly, by Lewis himself in his *Surprised by Joy* (1955). What simply needs to be observed is that what Lewis read, beginning as a precocious three-year-old and continuing through his boarding school and war-time experiences—long before he ever landed in Oxford for collegiate schooling—had a profound effect not only on the man he became but also on his concept of the vocation of authorship. As Lewis explains in *Surprised by Joy*,

My father’s house was filled with books. . . . I am a product of long corridors, empty sunlit rooms, upstairs indoor silences, attics explored in solitude, distant noises of gurgling cisterns and pipes, and the noise of wind under the tile. Also, of endless books. . . .

Nothing was forbidden me. In the seemingly endless rainy afternoons I took volume after volume from the shelves. (10)

Throughout his young life, whether immersed in children's fiction like E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) or Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* (1901) or in poetry like Longfellow's *The Saga of King Olaf* (1863), the voracious reader Lewis became alert to something more than just mundane plot details or poetic imagery—an intangible, numinous feeling pointing him beyond the natural and into the eternal.

Myth and fairy tale early on ruled his imagination and mediated this subtle but real transcendent touch. In addition, his deep friendship with his brother Warnie, whose penchant for creating miniature playsets, like the toy garden he invented for their mutual pleasure, gave Lewis his first encounter with a certain elusive feeling which he initially associated with autumn and later with the calling of heaven.

These were what his beloved Romantic poet, William Wordsworth, called “intimations of immortality” or, as Lewis put it liltily toward the end of his life, “patches of Godlight’ in the woods of our experience” (*Letters* 91). There were no artificial compartments in Lewis's adult world—just as there were none during his early years; what he learned, cherished, embraced, rejected, refined, and championed finds its way into everything he eventually wrote, whether prose or poetry, fiction or nonfiction.

Authorship included, demanded some kind of uplink to the grand or grander narratives that help explain what it means to be human—and divine, whether created by myths or discovered through revelation. In recalling his conversion, Lewis directs his audience to nineteenth-century Christian writer George MacDonald, whose fantastic adventure, *Phantastes* (1858), served as a corrective work that Lewis claims, in memorable phrasing, “baptized” his “imagination” (*Surprised* 181). It led Lewis to glimpse for the first time since his childhood a pathway into the realm of the supernatural, something he recognized as “Holiness” (179). His famous summary of his journey to faith captures well the impact of MacDonald's text and others like it:

In reading Chesterton, as in reading MacDonald, I did not know what I was letting myself in for. A young man who wishes to re-

main a sound Atheist cannot be too careful of his reading. There are traps everywhere—"Bibles laid open, millions of surprises," as Herbert says, "fine nets and stratagems." God is, if I may say it, very unscrupulous. (191)

It should also be noted that what held the Inklings—the writing community shepherded by friends C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien—together beyond their common erudition and overlapping religious worldviews was the fact that they were superb craftsmen in matters in which they were rank amateurs and infectious enthusiasts.

Not a single Inkling was a trained nor credentialed creative writer (if there could be such a thing as credentials for becoming a chronicler of Middle-Earth or Malacandra!) but, rather, had "day jobs" that meant they would need to pursue their interests in imaginative writing as a hobby. Lewis did earn degrees in philosophy and medieval and renaissance literature, but he confined neither his research nor his publication to these academic fields, prolific in them though he was. Rather, Lewis simultaneously maintained an active writing and publishing vocation in Christian apologetics, poetry, fantasy, science fiction, mythmaking, allegory, and the unique territory of "dream-vision" literature (inspired by writers as diverse as the Apostle John, Dante, St. Teresa of Avila, Coleridge, John Bunyan, and MacDonald).

The adult Lewis also shared an affection—some of his Oxford and Cambridge colleagues might have jadedly called it a weakness—with his colleague Tolkien for popular literature and genres. Rather than dismissing common readers and their seemingly misplaced love for lower-echelon fantastical novels about interplanetary travel or swords and sorcery, Lewis and Tolkien embraced them, emulating and elevating these genres but also imbuing them with a complexity and a sophistication that ennobled their original practitioners—for example, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells—and those who read them.

A case in point is Lewis's well-known interest in Scottish writer John Buchan, the early twentieth-century creator of both the imaginative "shocker," featuring wickedness in high places, elemental spirits, mysterious curses, ghosts and demons, all exemplifying the interpen-

tration of the modern world by the ancient and pagan, and the conspiracy or espionage thriller that reveals the thin layer of honesty, courage, and honor that upholds civilization and the rule of law, and how one brave man or woman can tip the scales toward decency, civility, and justice. Indeed, the typical Buchan hero, someone like Richard Hannay in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), the ordinary fellow caught up in extraordinary circumstances, inspires Lewis's own protagonist, Edwin Ransom, hero of *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) and the rest of Lewis's space trilogy.

As his literary career evolved, Lewis wrote well-received works of science fiction, wise and sprightly volumes of Christian apologetics, and learned tomes on medieval and renaissance literature, but his heart was always centered in myth and fairy tale. His greatest triumph and most enduring works were destined to be his Narnian tales. Indeed, the question most people want to ask Lewis after they read the *Chronicles of Narnia* is well expressed by a young reader named Meredith, who wrote to him three years before his death in 1963, asking, "What inspired your books?" Lewis replied: "Really I don't know. Does anyone know where exactly an idea comes from? With me all fiction begins with pictures in my head. But where the pictures come from I couldn't say" (C. S. Lewis 68-69). Ah, those pictures! When he explained the origins of Narnia, Lewis always pointed to these recurring images:

All my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. They all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. Then one day, when I was about forty, I said to myself: "Let's try to make a story about it." At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. I think I had been having a good many dreams of lions about that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the other six Narnian stories in after Him. ("It" 53)

One doubts his ideas could be put more simply or eloquently than that. Aslan first pulled the stories together and then Lewis himself into Narnia, and that is probably as good a description as any of what happens to readers when they enter the wardrobe: Aslan pulls them in, and they keep seeing pictures in their heads. How intriguing to witness the intrepid Lucy and the irreverent Edmund stumbling into the chill and wonder of wintry Narnia. How interesting that it is Mr. Tumnus, a faun with an umbrella and parcels, whom Lucy first sees, and that it is the wicked White Witch who is waiting to greet Edmund. How different their respective reactions are to hearing that “Aslan is on the move” (*Lion* 64).

But none of this should surprise readers too much. The emphasis in Lewis’s fiction (and nonfiction) is always seeing with the heart, apprehending images and tracing metaphors that instill faith and inspire journeys into the “never-never land” of the spirit (Lewis “Tolkien’s” 89). For the heart reveals one’s true character, and, ultimately, where one’s treasure is, and the perfect genre for hosting such stories and themes is the fairy tale. Tolkien made explicit the connection between how fairy tales touch the soul and how the account in the Gospels of the Incarnation embodies “true history” in his fascinating lecture “On Fairy-Stories”:

The Gospels contain a fairy-story, or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. They contain many marvels—peculiarly artistic, beautiful, and moving: “mythical” in their perfect, self-contained significance; and at the same time powerfully symbolic and allegorical; and among the marvels, the greatest and most complete conceivable eucatastrophe. The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the “inner consistency of reality.” There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing

tone of Primary Art, that is, of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy, that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be “primarily” true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed. . . . Because this story is supreme; and it is true, Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused.

But in God’s kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. Redeemed Man is still man. Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the “happy ending.” The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know. (83-84)

Tolkien’s words—especially his neologism for the death and resurrection of Christ, the “eucatastrophe,” meaning, oxymoronically, a “tragedy with a happy ending”—capture the delight he and Lewis shared in this literary form, but they also prepare readers to recognize and engage the spiritual insight they may encounter in Lewis’s post-conversion fiction. Lewis himself summarized his own convictions on the topic of how “myth” works in understanding the historical fact of the Incarnation, not as the relatively recent convert he was in 1931, but later as a completely persuaded and notable apologist for Christianity:

As myth transcends thought, Incarnation transcends myth. The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also a fact. The old myth

of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history. *It happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle. . . . Those who do not know that this great myth became Fact when the Virgin conceived are indeed to be pitied. But Christians also need to be reminded . . . that what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less. We must not be ashamed of the mythical radiance resting on our theology. (“Myth” 66–67)

The fairy tale was perfectly suited as a vehicle for expressing transcendent truth and provided for Lewis the perfect “canvas” on which to paint the “pictures in his head” that in words became the Narnian tales. What Lewis observed of Tolkien’s achievement in his original review of *The Hobbit* (1937), published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on October 2, 1937, could equally have been said of his space trilogy, “The Chronicles of Narnia,” and certainly *Till We Have Faces* (1956):

The publishers claim that *The Hobbit*, though very unlike *Alice [in Wonderland]*, resembles it in being the work of a professor at play. A more important truth is that both belong to a very small class of books which have nothing in common save that each admits to a world of its own—a world that seems to have been going on long before we stumbled into it but which, once found by the right reader, becomes indispensable to him. To define the world of *The Hobbit* is, of course, impossible because it is new. You cannot anticipate it before you go there, as you cannot forget it once you have gone. (“World” 714)

The worlds Lewis created, even before he became a Christian, are inherently spiritual and betray his inclination toward the transcendent. Post-conversion, Lewis deftly used the conventions of the fairy tale to depict

a winsome and whimsical landscape that stirs readers' hearts and directs their souls, minds, and strength toward the world beyond this one. To inhabit that elusive but accessible world, Lewis believed, readers must be poised to receive a story grander than what they have ever been told before, but a narrative and an experience after all, and thus resonating with all the stories they have read or heard nonetheless. In so doing, they come to see that, first and foremost, Glome, Perelandra, heaven in *The Great Divorce* (1945), and Narnia, like Middle-Earth, constitute a world "you cannot anticipate . . . before you go there, . . . and cannot forget . . . once you have gone."

Still, Lewis cautioned that in his fiction he was not creating allegories requiring a one-to-one parallel with personages and events in the Gospels, but a series of "supposals" (Hooper 475–76), as Lewis reckoned it. What if the Son of God were incarnate in a world like Narnia—what would happen? What if readers discovered an unfallen planet and fellow humans were conspiring to bring it to the ruin this world has suffered? What if they could glimpse for a night the realities of the next world on a bus ride between heaven and hell and see themselves from the perspective of eternity? How would these tales unfold and how would they receive the news they bring?

Lewis's poetry and fiction inevitably raise these and other key questions for the modern consciousness he faced as well as the contemporary one today's readers possess. For example, why should it matter what and how readers imagine, dream, invent? Why can readers not just be logical, fact-based folk, who operate out of reason, and from reason, responsibility, and from responsibility, performance of duty? Do they really need to use anything but pure logic? Why can they not, as rules become apparent, just obey them, build community around them, and be happy? Is not the imagination something that just gets them into trouble?

The world of the imagination is not just the terrain inhabited by artists, musicians, scriptwriters, novelists, and quilters; it is the domain of every human being, and in Lewis's understanding it is how God made people, how they are to negotiate the world to reckon with what is euphemistically called "thought lives." What could a phrase

like that mean, except that the world people envision in their hearts and minds is different from the one they “actually” inhabit? And, if so, what does that imply for how they can shape their “real world” by the potential or unrealized ones in their heads? Lewis had an answer.

The fact is, he suggests, people never fully live their lives out on the surface—they are never completely logical creatures; they are, in fact, made in the image of God and are, therefore, spiritual. Because God imagines, invents, creates the world, so, too, are his human creatures involved in an imaginative enterprise that determines whether they live “lives of quiet desperation” or those of meaningful engagement with the world He is redeeming, including imagination.

Why should people care about their imagination? Does it not just get them into trouble? Well, Lewis, opines, yes, the unused and undisciplined imagination does offer trouble—when it is inactive or used sparingly for cheap thrills, petty lusts, minor envies; when the imagination is neglected in favor of satisfying mere bodily appetites, yes, it becomes less a vital, spiritual force and more a temporary escape from the mundane, a wasteful trek into fantasyland where readers are the heroes or the villains, exacting revenge or extracting glory.

Lewis calls this “morbid” (*Experiment 51*) or “egoistic castle-building” (2)—morbid because it is unproductive, noncontributory to growth, focused on what is dead or dying; egoistic because it is merely self-gratifying, self-congratulatory, “incessant autobiography” (*Preface 100*); castle-building because it is merely elevated daydreaming, the construction of the unattainable in pursuit of the unworthy. The ultimate problem with such mis- and dis-use of the imagination for Lewis is that he believed it could provide much more. The redeemed and disciplined imagination, like the redeemed and disciplined intellect—intellect as reason and logic in service of extended heaven’s rule on earth—is meant to enlarge people’s vision, encourage their hearts, and engage them in the battle for and nurture of souls. So, why, Lewis asks Socratically, did God give people this nature, this tool, this ability, one which can both enslave and liberate, enhance and debilitate? The simplest answer is because they are to be like God in every way, partaking of Him by exercising imagination. If they do not feed their imagination and

put it to godly use, the vacuum will be filled with something else, something that at best will merely distract or divert them or at worst may derail and divorce them from their heavenly pathway.

In his fiction, Lewis determined to turn hearts toward his readers' "true country" (*Mere* 120), to rewrite its unknown or faded history in their hearts, by drawing attention to the "echoes" that already exist in their imagination. From Middle-Earth to Narnia, from Perelandra to Cair Paravel, from Mordor to Malacandra, Lewis and Tolkien call upon readers to re-enchant the cosmos, keeping alive the promise and animating the search for the world beyond the world. They point to the surprising reality of the fellowship of heaven to be glimpsed in Lewis's space trilogy and *Chronicles of Narnia* or in Tolkien's *Middle-Earth*.

In engaging his fiction, Lewis would have readers come to see imagination as the divinely given human faculty of comprehending reality through the use of images, pictures, shapes, patterns, seeing what is, seeing what was, and seeing what could be, through artistic re-presentation. Imagination is the counterpart and complement to reason. Readers come to know what is true not only through words and propositions, but also through what is mediated beyond words, in the heart, "groanings" too deep to "be uttered" (Rom. 8:26). By the imagination readers are called upon to grasp, negotiate, understand the world directly before them and as well the world just beyond them in pictures and images that create their own reality. Lewis's conviction was that it is through imagination that readers are thereby enabled to fashion re-presentations of and alternatives to reality, for imagination engages both creation and interaction with the cosmos, not just static gazing.

Through the tools of the imagination, art imitates life and life imitates art, reality leaking through both, the products of creative imagination becoming part of the reality that is in turn engaged by that same imagination. In fact, encounters with art actualized by imagination help "defamiliarize" what has become habitual and mundane in the world and allow revising (or re-seeing) it as it is, permitting personal change and godly renewal. Great hymns, great novels, great

movies, great sermons can do this.

Lewis held that the Christian imagination at work in Narnia and Tolkien's Middle-Earth is imagination illuminated by revelation, by the life and light of Jesus Christ. It is an echo of the metaphor the Apostle Paul chooses to inform his prayer for illumination for the Ephesians: "The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (Eph. 1:18-19). This is one of Paul's most arresting metaphors—one that offers an initially strange image of two essential organs sharing a vital function: how do people see with the heart? It is clearly the case that sometimes "the eyes" of the heart must be further enlightened to understand what logic alone cannot reveal, that people can be oblivious to something God wishes them to know, but which they cannot apprehend through the head alone. For instance, it is possible to read the New Testament as a piece of literature or history and thereby intellectually come to know facts about Jesus of Nazareth as a man with a message. But if seen with the heart, Lewis would aver, He emerges as more than that; He is the Son of God, and, not only that, He is a Shepherd, the King of Kings, the Morning Star, the Way, the Truth, the Life, but, still further, He is also a Lamb, and, most certainly, a Lion—all true, but all images captured first in the heart and only then with the intellect.

This set of principles is what Lewis, Tolkien, and the other Inklings took to be foundational to mythopoeia—the act of new myth-making. Myth for them was not defined as a legendary tale told with dubious authority; instead, it was the grand overarching narrative that created the reason to be, and to become, for members of the village, *polis*, nation touched by its encompassing themes, images, characters, and plot lines. Neither antihistorical nor ahistorical, myth evokes awe, wonder, passion, and, what is more, pursuit: a culture's myth is the story that has the power to explain the origin and destiny of a people, the text that orients them in history, guides them in the present, and points them to a future in which they and their offspring will live and move and have their being. It places them in the presence of their Creator

and Benefactor, Judge or Advocate, and answers the questions when, how, who, and why. A true myth has the power to explain where they came from, shape their identity and purpose, instill hope, promote justice, and sustain order.

The only reliable, encompassing world story or grand narrative, the one integral to Lewis's craft and motive, as well as that of the other Inklings, is found in the Scriptures, and it has provided cultures from Asia to Africa, Europe, South America, and North America just such a frame for working out their place (and salvation) in the cosmos with fear and trembling. For the Inklings this forms the true history of the planet, of all peoples, and the only trustworthy forecast of destiny. But since this narrative has been crowded out or discarded in civilizations that have ignored its relevant witness and forgotten its historical impact, how does one go about getting recovering postmoderns to take a second or third look at its testimony? The Inklings' answer was to create fantasies and new myths, a "Neverland," that could yet serve as an "alternate history," a winsome, redemptive, inclusive worldview that would restore personal dignity and a promised destiny to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. But a history alternate to what? Simply put, to the false history written in the rise of a dehumanizing and disenchanting naturalism that reduces men, women, children, even whole civilizations to instincts, impulses, genetics, environment: cosmic accidents whose dreams and visions nevertheless point them to longings they cannot account for in purely scientific terms.

In a review of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Lewis defended his friend's choice of genre by explaining why the fairy tale may be the best medium for accomplishing the heady goal of redirecting wayfarers to their real identity and homeland:

"But why," (some ask), "why if you have a serious comment to make on the real life of men, must you do it by talking about a phantasmagoric never-never land of your own?" Because, I take it, one of the main things the author wants to say is that the real life of men is that of mythical and heroic quality. One can see the principle at work in his characterization. Much that in a realistic

work would be done by “character delineation” is here done simply by making the character an elf, a dwarf, or a hobbit. The imagined beings have their insides on the outside; they are visible souls. And Man as a whole, Man pitted against the universe, have we seen him at all till we see that he is like a hero in a fairy tale? In the book, Eomer rashly contrasts “the green earth” with “legends.” Aragorn replies that the green earth itself is “a mighty matter of legend.”

The value of myth is that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by “the veil of familiarity.” . . . If you are tired of the real landscape, look at it in a mirror. By putting bread, gold, horse, apple, or the very roads into a myth, we do not retreat from reality: we rediscover it. (“Tolkien’s” 89-90)

“The veil of familiarity” is a telling phrase; in the realm of the fantastic within mythic landscapes, vistas, perspectives, anything might happen, anything might be discovered. One is not restricted by what one knows of the “real world,” its colors, shapes, creatures, languages, predicaments. The author of fantasy can use these but also invent still more, thus intermixing them with the familiar and the real to create a “secondary” world that envelops and surpasses both. These alternate histories rescue readers from the “veil of familiarity,” ushering them into a transcendent realm unreachable by mere reason or coldhearted induction. People do not “retreat from reality,” Lewis reminded readers; they “rediscover it.”

This is certainly the case with Lewis’s greatest creations: the landscapes of the space trilogy, the foreboding domain of Glome in *Till We Have Faces*, and, of course, the glorious kingdom of Narnia. In mythical sojourns with his characters, Lewis indeed renews in readers a longing for “the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited” (“Weight” 5). Long before Willy Wonka or Harry Potter appeared on the scene, Lewis was “re-enchanting a cosmos,” and with a little help from his friends he managed to establish an outpost on the edge of darkness, opening the wardrobe door to help readers find the object

of their longing and the true end of their journey.

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Sunday Worship
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