

Moral Notes from Fictional Landscapes

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ON THE SURFACE of it, we might seem to be bringing too great a weight to bear on the matter when we speak of *moral* things in the fictional landscapes of C.S. Lewis. After all, we all know what's in those landscapes: children and fauns and witches and talking beavers and marshwiggles and so forth—scarcely the stuff of serious discourse.

And yet, anyone who has actually read Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, and his Deep Heaven trilogy (1938-1945), and his re-telling of the Cupid and Psyche story in *Till We Have Faces*, will have discovered himself head over heels in all the great questions: questions of good and evil, of hell and heaven, of virtue and wickedness. And if the reader is someone who is at all familiar with Sacred Scripture and the Western tradition in letters, then of course he will find himself on entirely familiar turf when he goes through Lewis's wardrobe, so to speak, and finds himself in Narnia, or on Perelandra, or in Glome. And the farther he travels in these precincts, the more he will find himself murmuring, with increasing frequency, even in the face of great marvels which he has never come across in his own world, "My word—this is a true story! Just so!"

For in the strange affairs of marshwiggles and newborn planets and pagan kingdoms full of bloody mumbo-jumbo,

he will descry the very Tao itself—that titanic and fixed order of things which arches over all possible worlds and all possible stories, and which is assumed, as much as invoked, in all the ancient religions and codes of our own world.

Tao is a word which Lewis borrows from ancient Chinese philosophy, and which he pressed into service in his monograph, *The Abolition of Man*, in which he argues that there is at work in all religions and moral codes, and indeed in every conceivable scheme of things, a fixed order of good and evil that cannot be tinkered with. All of us—Greeks, Jews, Aztecs, Polynesians, Tibetans, Kikuyu, ancient men, modern men, post-modern men—all of us function inside of this fixed order; all of us assume it; all of us bank on it; all of us cling to it for very life.

As a sort of appendix to *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis brought together and listed Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Hindu, Norse, Greek, and "Redskin" (*sic*) maxims on such notions as the law of general benevolence, the law of special benevolence, duties to parents and elders and ancestors, duties to children and posterity, the law of justice, and the law of good faith and veracity. What he found was universal agreement on all of these points. It does seem, then, that we mortals, in whatever tribe, society, or century we find ourselves, have supposed that there

is indeed some fixed order of things arching over our life, and that we must, one way or another, conform our behavior to this order. The penalty for not doing so seems to run deeper than any mere punishment our tribe might visit upon us: it seems to bring destruction on our very identity as human, as over against bestial or demonic.

Lewis felt that modern fiction has run itself out into the moral salt flats, so to speak, and that the moral vision at work in the ancient tradition of fiction has been obscured somehow. In soap operas, modern theatre, many contemporary novels, and certainly in the fiction that finds its way into magazines, we seem to find ourselves in very confusing regions. There don't seem to be any gods peering over the characters' shoulders and calling them to account the way Oedipus or Aeneas or Macbeth was called to account.

So, in his tales, Lewis leads us right away from these religions and back into a landscape that might be remote from our own current one but that is immediately and gloriously recognizable to anyone who has ever travelled in the world of story. This is why, in Lewis's fiction, we find ourselves bidden through a wardrobe, or off to Perelandra, or back to the ancient kingdom of Glome. In the landscape of these realms, we find ourselves, suddenly, at home with the Tao. If we ask why we have to be transported so far, the answer is that in these very remote landscapes of myth and faerie, our complex defenses are down, so to speak, and we are disarmed by the very naivete of the tale. Myth and fairy tale have a power which works differently from the power at work in Tolstoy or James Joyce. The transparency and simplicity of the fiction are the strategy here.

We come into Narnia, for example, with a small girl named Lucy. We do not need to read far to discover that in the figure of this little girl we have an icon, as

it were, of a simplicity and transparency and humility that stand in dazzling contrast to the cynicism and venality and treachery of her brother Edmund. Her attitude, upon reflection, reminds us of a young girl in our own story whose attitude towards reality was such that, when it came upon her, she said, "Be it done unto me according to Thy word." But wait. Haven't we gone too far too fast? Lucy an allegory of the Virgin Mary? Come.

The objection would be well taken if we were to insist that in order to understand Narnia we must sniff out the allegory and quickly make all the connections. Lucy is not, of course, an allegory of the Virgin Mary. But *in* Lucy, in that story, we may perceive at work the readiness and simplicity and wholeheartedness, shall we say, that were at work in the woman in our story whose response to the approach of the divine was such that it "repaired" the disastrously disobedient and self-aggrandizing response that you and I, in our mother Eve, made in Eden, when we said, in effect, "Be it done unto me according to *my* word."

We do better, it seems to me, to speak of "cases in point" rather than allegories in Lewis's fiction. That is, Lucy is not an allegory for anybody or anything: she is a case in point in that world of an attitude which has been visible in our world in Mary of Nazareth. Or take Aslan, the Lion: he is not an allegory for Christ: rather, he is to that story something of what Christ is to ours. Of course it can very convincingly be argued that if Aslan is not an allegory, then there is no such thing as allegory. Tolkien complained that Lewis's tales are far too allegorical, with the result that the texture of the tales is flimsy.

But whatever we decide about that, my real point here is that in the figure of Aslan, children in our world will come upon something which scarcely exists in their own world, but which lies at the

bottom of all political and social efforts, namely, absolute authority which is absolutely good. In the muddled affairs of our world, we have to have checks and balances in order to spread out governmental authority because we know that there is no such thing as a man who will embody in himself the wisdom, magnanimity, justice, and integrity that ought to be at work in the affairs of state. Because we know that all of us mortals are shot through with venality and cruelty and capriciousness and cupidity, we have to arrange things by spreading power out amongst a vast tangle of cabinets, congresses, committees, caucuses, bureaus, and finally the voting public. We don't speak of it much, but we all know that at the root of human politics is the riddle of human sin. It makes things fathomlessly inefficient, but there it is, and we have to live with it.

In Narnia, on the other hand, all power and authority are rooted in the person of Aslan, the great Lion. When we, in our world, hear of a scheme like this, we immediately cry, "Tyranny! Totalitarianism!" But then we meet Aslan, and our protestations die on our lips. Here is a state of affairs in which absolute authority not only is not unjust or repressive: it is the very fountainhead of freedom and peace and happiness for all the denizens of that country. Justice is not something which has been sundered from power: it is indistinguishable from that power and is guarded and dispensed by that power.

And again, justice and mercy are not sundered here: to have encountered Aslan, as so many characters in Narnia do—Edmund, Eustace, Jill, Shasta, Bree, Frank the Cabby, Rabadash—is to have had a glimpse into precincts, virtually unimaginable in our own story, but hinted at in the Psalm, where we hear about mercy and truth meeting together, and righteousness and peace kissing each other. It is a state of affairs which eludes all of our best efforts, and which no child

will ever encounter in any politics or social studies class nor on any talk show.

It might, then, be objected that the picture is irrelevant to our world at best, and perhaps deeply misleading. Does it not siphon a child's imagination off into a land even more Never-Never than the fantasies of that perpetual escapist, Peter Pan? Don't we want to furnish stories for children that will reflect their real world, even if, or perhaps most especially if, their real world is full of dissonances and breakdowns like divorce and adultery and alcoholism and violence?

This, as we know, is very much the agenda in a lot of the literature being written for children now, and it raises one of the fundamental questions about art itself. Do you, in your art, simply depict what *is*, or do you hail the human imagination with images of some ideal?

Our own century, I think, has preferred the former option. We pride ourselves on our lack of illusions and our courage in refusing sweetness and light. But of course this is a view that has uprooted us from the ancient notion of the function of art, which was thought to be a matter of "feigning notable images" that would both delight and teach us. Teach us what? Why, virtue of course.

And at this point, all of us twentieth-century types lick our dry and embarrassed lips and look about for the exit. If there is one thing our school teachers taught us, it is that art must not be didactic. Don't preach. And indeed this is good advice, if by preaching we mean plucking our reader's sleeve with little maxims about good behavior smuggled in under a thin story line. But one way or another art *does* "preach," in the sense that it moves us if it is worth its salt. It moves us towards some things and away from others.

Lewis is unabashedly on the side of Aristotle and Homer and Virgil and Dante and Shakespeare and Milton and the rest of them who thought that story—fiction—

has the responsibility not only of showing us to ourselves in all of our folly and naughtiness, but also of bidding us towards virtue. Valor, courtesy, nobility, magnanimity, purity, trustworthiness, humility: none of these authors would have apologized for extolling such virtues in their work, nor for deploring cruelty and greed and treachery and malice and cynicism.

We come upon a bigger landscape than Narnia in Lewis's trilogy, but we have the sense that good and evil look exactly the way they do in Narnia. And of course they do. They look that way because in all possible stories, real good and real evil are intractable: that is, you can't change them. You can't make cruelty praiseworthy or purity loathsome in any world.

There is no question that the particular form evil takes in Lewis's "space" trilogy is pride and the lust for dominion. Weston, the scholar-villain, is determined to export to other planets from our world what he feels to be the liberating truth. He is evil, not because he is a scientist, but because he has been lifted up in pride, and, like Lucifer, wishes to break all confines and dominate all. He is a gnostic and a Nietzschean, in that he feels that brilliant men like himself constitute a superior breed who, by virtue of having been initiated into knowledge hidden from the lumpenproletariat and the rest of us, are exempt from routine moral constraints that must be left in place to keep the masses in *their* place. Men like Weston—and Alexander of Macedon, and Faust, and Stalin and Mao—may have to break a lot of eggs (or skulls) in cobbling up the utopian omelette: but that's the way it is.

We watch with horror as Weston shoots one of the exquisite creatures on the planet Malacandra—a creature whom the hero, Ransom, has come to know as a great and wise and noble being. But by Weston's standards the murder is not-

ing: simply another statistic. Likewise, when we get to Perelandra, we come upon what seems to be the final horror when we encounter the intellectual, the cerebral, the philosophical Weston, squatting like a toad on the ground, tearing the skin gratuitously from the back of the beautiful, froglike creatures who inhabit the planet. Lewis has here caught one of the qualities of evil perceived by Saint Paul and Dante and Milton, namely, its inane, or imbecilic, quality. Saint Paul points out the orgiastic sexual havoc that comes upon the heels of intellectual pride. Dante says that the souls in hell had lost the good of intellect. Milton has the glorious Lucifer finally whispering in Eve's ear, "Squat like a toad." Down, down, down, comes the evil man, into brutishness, squalor, inanity, and, finally, diabolism.

Before the tale is half over in Perelandra, it is not at all clear just what Weston *is*. This confusion of identity is another quality of evil, perceived since antiquity and caught by Lewis in his story here. Whatever that good and glorious thing was that had been Weston, created by God and known by Him, has somehow been effaced; and we are obliged, along with Ransom, to call this residual horror, this detritus, the "Unman." The power which all evil has of leeching away the good solidity and specificity of the Creation and of leaving only blur and wraiths and murk is one of its most frightening qualities. "Hell is murky," says Lady Macbeth, and she is right.

Lewis would, I think, have heard the unmaking of language in our own time as a case in point of this. Words are glorious things when they appear in the service of their master, Truth. But when they are dragooned into the service of untruth, we are in trouble. To call, for example, the ovens of Auschwitz a "final solution," or an unborn child "the tissue," or sexual promiscuity a "life style," are, in Lewis's world, cases in point of the leeching away

of the good solidity which belongs to words, so that we have left only euphemism, circumlocution, tergiversation. Hell, in other words.

This theme is very close to the center of things in *That Hideous Strength*. Here the unmaking of language is a crucial part of a bigger scheme, not only to take over England, but to re-draw the moral map of the universe, so to speak. The bad guys, in their headquarters at Belbury, have embarked on a program to remake everything. They find polysyllabic and circumlocutory ways of cloaking items in their program that would horrify your average man in the street or peasant. And right here we have one of the key points in Lewis's moral vision.

In his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942), he argues for the validity of what he calls "stock responses" which spring spontaneously from any man or woman who has not been debauched by sophistication. The ability to be horrified in the presence of that which is horrifying is an example: a peasant from the boondocks coming upon a thousand crucified gladiators lining the highway to Nero's playground would be horrified; whereas your jaded Roman, accustomed to such spectacles, might complain that some of them had died altogether too quickly, thus robbing him of half the fun, since a corpse on a cross isn't nearly so diverting as a writhing, screaming man. We do not have to go as far as ancient Rome, however, to see the same thing at work. Our own society uses the term "sexually active" to refer to a thing which earlier ages called lechery. I am not quite equating Nero's mass crucifixions with lechery: but you can see how language can help paper over the truth.

The denizens of Belbury are masters at circumlocution and euphemism. In the early chapters of the book they carry through their program in faculty meetings at Bracton College (Lewis had clearly sat in on many a faculty meeting) by

means of artfully chosen wording. As things progress, we meet the Deputy Director, a man called Wither, whose mastery of foggy prose is stultifying. Words, for him, have no meaning: they are merely counters, or chips, to be used to obscure things. Wither's words are, in effect, ghost words, mere wraiths, with the solid body of meaning having been leached away from them. And, indeed, Wither himself has become a wraith. You are never sure where he is: he comes drifting along corridors, humming softly, and fading into the indeterminate middle distance. When he looks at you, you are not sure your presence has registered at all in those vacuous blue and dreamy eyes. Wither is, really, a damned soul—that is, almost nothing.

But the unmaking of language is only a part of a bigger scheme on the part of Belbury. Its scheme is a gnostic one. The gnostics, in any age, are forever beckoning us away from this hefty world of flesh, blood, earth, rock, water, and wine. Spirituality is all, they tell us. (Lewis would have distrusted the widespread vocabulary of mere "spirituality" in our own decade, detached as it seems often to be from any particular orthodox content.) Gnosticism equates the good with spirit and evil with matter, and hates the latter.

Lewis, standing as he did in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which affirms the goodness of matter because of the doctrine of creation and recognizes both the good and evil potentialities of spirit (Jews and Christians believe in Satan and evil spirits)—would have felt, I think, that the gnosticism at work in Belbury is perhaps as close to hardcore evil as you can get. Its agenda is to destroy everything. "There is too much life about," complains Filostrato, one of the leaders in Belbury. "The forest tree is a weed," he says. "At present, I allow, we must have forests, for the atmosphere. Presently we find a chemical substitute. And then, why *any* natural trees?...No leaves to fall, no twigs,

no birds building nests, no muck and mess....One day we shave the planet....No nests, no eggs, no dirt....We do not want the world any longer furred over with organic life.”

Lewis is using the technique of hyperbole here, of course. But, like any writer of fiction, he wants his story to be true and resorts to shock techniques to startle us awake. In the evils at work in *Belbury*, I think Lewis felt that he was depicting horrors that derive directly from forces already at work in the modern world. The whole uprooting of human imagination, for example, from the very physical centrality of motherhood, with all that has meant to any of us mortals who have had a wonderful and wise and loving mother, and the driving of a wedge between woman as professional and woman as mother—I am pretty sure Lewis would have suspected that there is an epochal dislocating of the creation going on in the pell-mell agenda of modernity. Likewise the unlinking of sex from procreation, on the one hand, and from morality on the other—this campaign would have struck Lewis as anti-creation, and hence gnostic.

But what about the good, as over against all of this evil? Anyone who has ever read Lewis's fiction knows that it is punctuated with scene after scene where we find ourselves sitting down to a little tea on a gingham cloth in front of a crackling fire, with a kettle singing, and thin strips of bread and butter, and pots of jam, scones, and heavy cream. Or again, sitting around with foamy tankards of beer, and lots of bonhomie. Here is the locale of goodness, for Lewis. All politics, all economics, all wars, all commerce, all striving have for their end, really, the sacred privilege which you and I have to sit down at table with family and friends and eat and drink and laugh. What else is it all about if it is not about this? The “good place” in *That Hideous Strength*, a household called Saint Anne's, is a won-

derfully homespun, merry, and even dumpy collection of people (and pets—they have a cat, a jackdaw, and a bear) who exhibit in their day-to-day attitudes and activities all that Lewis cherished of simplicity, fidelity, generosity, humor, courage, and purity. This household becomes the means of salvation for the two protagonists, Mark and Jane Studdock.

In *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis follows the progress from fury and egocentrism towards joy and charity, of Orual, a princess in the ancient pagan kingdom of Glome. Here there is no virulent evil abroad in the land such as we have in the trilogy. Oh, there are ignorance and churlishness and cruelty, but, far, far more important for Orual is her own sullen resentment against the gods. She hates them for (she thinks) hating her. They have given her an ugly face, for one thing, and her sister Psyche is beautiful. They love Psyche, for another, and choose Psyche to come to them, leaving Orual out in the cold.

The further we read, the more we have the feeling that we are reading a modern psychological novel, with the difference, of course, of its taking the gods seriously. We might put it this way—and it ends up being a bit disquieting for us late twentieth-century types who have an entire industry whose business it is to explain human behavior to us, and which never, ever, speaks of that behavior in terms of virtue and vice, or of salvation and damnation. We might put the matter this way: Orual discovers that her attitudes not only have a moral dimension: they are judged, all of them, by the gods as being either salvific or destructive. She is, in a word, responsible, not only to herself, but to some final moral tribunal for her attitudes and, hence, for her actions.

But, just as we might be about to conclude that these gods must be horrid, strait-laced beadles, we find that their whole agenda for Orual is joy. Oh Orual, wake up! Look up—from your busy and

sullen agenda of proving your own case. Look up and see what is in front of you. Forget yourself for just a minute!

And that “forget yourself” is the key. Orual, angry and busy in her resentment against her lot in life, is “saved” by being obliged to become queen of Glome when her father the king dies, and as such, she must pour out her life for Glome, day after day, year after year, decade after bone-wearying decade, meting out justice, dispensing laws, listening to her people’s troubles, leading them in war. She hasn’t one moment to think of herself. And that is her salvation. The

pinched, angry, imprisoned Orual emerges at the end as (in the words of the priest after she dies) “the most wise, just, valiant, fortunate, and merciful of all the princes known in our parts of the world.”

In other words, the full dignity and majesty and freedom and beauty of the woman Orual could not grow and flower until she had forgotten herself. If any such scenario is, in fact, the case, then how shall we, whose century shrills at us unremittingly to discover ourselves, reward ourselves, actualize ourselves, assert ourselves, and get comfortable with ourselves—how shall we ever be saved?