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# Death, Myth and Reality in C.S. Lewis

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**ABSTRACT** *C.S. Lewis's life and writings were profoundly shaped by his childhood experience of his mother's death. It is significant that the young hero's dying mother is mentioned at the very beginning of the first book of the Narnia sequence (see The Magician's Nephew), which in more general terms offers a mythopoeic version of the Christian interpretation of death. Lewis had a keen awareness of the power of myth (he would not have denied that the Christian gospel is myth). However, it was in the experience of the death of his wife (recounted in A Grief Observed) that he felt confronted by reality in a way that shook his faith to its foundations. This article will explore the tension between myth and reality in Lewis's attempts to write, as a Christian, of the experience of death.*

C.S. Lewis's imaginative writing is all about death. It is about the impact on a nine-year-old-boy of the death of his mother. Lewis's writing itself could be seen as an attempt to come to terms with that death by the very act of writing. The author's life and work cannot be neatly separated, despite the fact that in an early critical work, *The Personal Heresy*, Lewis tried to direct critical attention away from the author and towards the text. However, I suspect we would have been able to guess the secret theme of Lewis's writing (the figure in his carpet) even if he had not given the game away in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy: the shape of my early life*. There Lewis rather laconically tells us of his mother's death when he was nine. Only a few phrases give away the impact this event had on his life. The section ends in lapidary fashion:

With my mother's death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis. (Lewis, 1959, p. 23)

More revealing perhaps of the personal anguish of the nine year old boy is:

There came a night when I was ill and crying both with headache and toothache and distressed because my mother did not come to me. (Lewis, 1959, p. 20)

In these circumstances the natural resort would be to the father, but at this point Lewis effectively lost his father too, though this loss to Lewis is defensively disguised as a loss to the father:

His nerves had never been of the steadiest and his emotions had always been uncontrolled. Under the pressure of anxiety his temper became incalculable; he spoke wildly and acted unjustly. Thus by a peculiar cruelty of fate, during those months the unfortunate man, had he but known it, was really losing his sons as well as his wife. (Lewis, 1959, p. 21)

The result of these losses was a very close bond between Lewis and his brother which lasted all his life (Lewis died in his brother's arms). There was also the development of an intense imaginative life, and the creation of an imaginary other world—'Animal-Land'. Lewis denied that Animal-Land had much in common with Narnia because it lacked a sense of imaginative wonder (Lewis, 1959, p. 18), but Lewis's experiences of imaginative wonder—or Joy—were also beginning at this time. Narnia, it could be argued, pulls together different kinds of imaginative experience which were split apart in the young Lewis.

What *The Chronicles of Narnia* offered was an imaginary realm where Lewis tried retrospectively to work through his sense of cataclysmic loss, and to quest for what his heart ached for, the sense of the 'enormous bliss' of Eden—Milton's phrase, characteristically borrowed by Lewis (Lewis, 1959, p. 19). The word Lewis uses most often for this lost bliss is 'Joy' (the title *Surprised by Joy* is again borrowed, this time from Wordsworth). Where Lewis found Joy evoked above all was in 'myth'. But myth for Lewis, up until his conversion in 1931, was by definition 'not true'. Myths were 'breathing a lie through Silver', to use Lewis's phrase quoted by Tolkien in his introduction to his poem 'Mythopoeia'—a poem occasioned by a great debate between Lewis and Tolkien just before Lewis's conversion (Tolkien, 1964, p. 49). One result of his conversion was that Lewis no longer thought that myths were 'lies', but 'true' insofar as they pointed to the central myth of Christ which was 'in fact' true. Here was a myth of a dying and rising God which had really happened (Lewis, 1959, pp. 187–189). Other myths could have some measure of 'truth' insofar as they referred unconsciously to the 'true' myth of Christ. This is the old Christian idea of the Greek poets being—like the Hebrew prophets—a *preparatio evangelica*. Lewis was close to Bede Griffiths (to whom *Surprised by Joy* was dedicated) and was open to the 'truth' of Hindu myths—indeed he says (Lewis, 1959, p. 188) that for him it was a choice of whether to convert to Christianity or to Hinduism (just as T.S. Eliot had earlier hesitated between Christianity and Buddhism). Lewis was certainly not a religious pluralist, but on the other hand he was not, like the conservative evangelicals who have appropriated him, an exclusivist. In his religious inclusivism he seems very close (for better or for worse) to the spirit of Vatican II.

But the confidence with which Lewis asserted the truth 'in fact' of Christianity, a confidence which informs his popular apologetics of the 1940s, seems to have evaporated after an apparently (for Lewis) disturbing encounter with the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe in 1948. In a debate in the Socratic Club in Oxford focusing on chapter 3 of Lewis's recently published book *Miracles* it seems that

Lewis's *intellectual* argument against philosophical scepticism was soundly refuted by Anscombe, a pupil of Wittgenstein, and also, incidentally, a Roman Catholic [1]. It was not Lewis's *faith*, then, which was under attack, but his *reasoning*. Whether as a result of this encounter or not, the flow of confident rational defences by Lewis of the truth 'in fact' of Christianity ceased, and he turned instead to *The Chronicles of Narnia*. It is as if he recognized that rational argument was not the best way to communicate the truth of Christianity (or at least that he was not the best person to do this); *myth* began to seem a better way to communicate the truth of Christianity. Lewis, who in a professional sense knew what he was talking about, denied that *The Chronicles of Narnia* were *allegory*. By this he meant that the stories were not personifications of Christian doctrine. Rather, certain pictures seem to have come to him as 'dream-images'. As he put it in 'It All Began with a Picture':

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. The *Lion* 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. 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 about lions about this time. (Lewis, 1982, p. 79)

What Lewis is returning to in *The Chronicles of Narnia* is the power of 'pictures'. In *The Pilgrim's Regress* he explicitly calls the 'pagan' myths 'pictures', and affirms them as a *preparatio evangelica* (Lewis, 1977, pp. 192–202). They are God's way of communicating himself apart from Christ, who is the reality the pictures point to. It is as if in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (as in his science fiction works) Lewis is creating a new world where he can imagine 'pictures', or 'myths' which would express in *that* world what the 'true' myth of Christ means in 'our' world. To play with Lewis's own phrase, Lewis is now 'breathing the *truth* through Silver', and Aslan is 'the hidden Christ of Narnia'.

However we may suspect that Lewis's longing for another country which he identifies via the epigraph to the last chapter of *Surprised by Joy* as Augustine's 'land of peace', is actually a longing for the lost Atlantis, that is, for the settled, *reliable* happiness which went with his mother, and originally with his mother's body. Then the creation of another world where Joy is offered in the body (and especially in *the mane*) of Aslan takes on another resonance. Lewis would thus be returning to the realm of the 'the Imaginary' or 'the semiotic' (to use the French Freud jargon of Lacan and Kristeva) to find the lost wholeness which went with the feel and the touch of the mother's body, and the look of her face. One of the most powerful evocations of what Lewis was looking for in Narnia comes in the last chapter of *The Magician's Nephew*, where he writes:

Both the children were looking up into the Lion's face as he spoke these words. And all at once (they never knew exactly how it happened) the face seemed to be a sea of tossing gold in which they were floating, and such a

sweetness and power rolled about them and over them and entered them that they felt they had never really been happy or wise or good, or even alive and awake, before. And the memory of that moment stayed with them always, so that as long as they both lived, if ever they were sad or afraid or angry, the thought of all that golden goodness, and the feeling that it was still there, quite close, just round some corner or just behind some door, would come back and make them sure, deep down inside, that all was well. (Lewis, 1990a, p. 165)

The fact that Aslan is male does not necessarily tell against the reading of such passages as representations of 'the primary maternal matrix'. Certainly David Holbrook in his psychoanalytical reading of *The Chronicles of Narnia* in his book *The Skeleton in the Wardrobe* sees Aslan as 'the Good Mother (or Breast)' (Holbrook, 1991, p. 162)—with the Witch figuring as the split-off 'Bad Mother (or Breast)' (Holbrook, 1991, p. 41). In any case we are in the realm of 'the Imaginary' or 'the semiotic'—the pre-oedipal realm where in psychoanalytical terms 'objects' (or, if you prefer, 'subjects') have not yet been constituted, let alone gendered. And indeed, somewhat controversially, Kristeva does actually posit a role for the father in this pre-oedipal scenario (Kristeva, 1987, p. 46).

At any rate, in this same final chapter of *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory, the central character who is also closest of all the Narnian characters to Lewis himself, and who will grow up to be the Professor in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, takes what *he* has gone to Narnia to find, the Apple of Youth, to his dying mother. *The Magician's Nephew* is haunted by the figure of Digory's dying mother, to whom we are introduced in the first chapter. The way into Narnia is provided by magic rings in an ancient box from—significantly—Atlantis. Digory's mother eats the Apple of Youth and recovers. Lewis brings about in the magic of fiction what his prayers as a nine-year-old boy could not achieve—the restoration to life of his dying mother. The core of the magic apple is planted and grows into a Narnian tree flourishing in the London suburbs, and will eventually provide the timber for the eponymous wardrobe.

However, the fictional or imaginary restoration to life of the dying mother is not without its complications. If it were a straightforward reversal of what happened in real life, it would be merely escapist fantasy, sheer wish-fulfilment. As Lewis tells us in *Surprised by Joy*, his prayers for a miracle were not answered (Lewis, 1959, p. 22). Somehow his fiction must achieve an imaginary transformation of reality without becoming a gross distortion of reality. The 'picture' Lewis is offering in *The Magician's Nephew* must be a myth but not a lie. Lewis seeks to achieve this compromise by giving a version of the Genesis Temptation story in which the Fall does not occur. *The Magician's Nephew* can be seen as the Narnian Genesis, and Digory's temptation in relation to the Apple of Youth, also called the Apple of Life, clearly echoes the Biblical narrative. There is, incidentally, a precedent in Lewis's science-fiction novel *Perelandra* for a version of the Genesis temptation story in which the Fall is avoided. In *The Magician's Nephew* Digory is set the task of bringing to Aslan an apple from the garden beyond the western borders of Narnia.

When he reaches the garden and picks the apple, he finds the witch Jadis waiting for him. This witch, whom Digory had unwittingly aroused from an enchanted sleep in the dead world of Charn, and unwillingly brought to Narnia, will many years later appear as the White Witch of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. She is also related to the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair* who takes the form of a serpent. The witch tempts Digory to eat the apple himself, or, a much more terrible temptation, to take it back to his dying mother, rather than bring it to Aslan. This is like a re-enactment of Lewis's own childhood trauma: obedience to God's will seems to mean acceptance of his mother's death. Digory manages to resist this overwhelming temptation to disobedience, and returns to Aslan with the apple. Had Digory been disobedient, Aslan tells him, the apple would have healed his mother:

... but not to your joy or hers. The day would have come when both you and she would have looked back and said it would have been better to die in that illness. (Lewis, 1990a, p. 163)

Digory seems resigned to the bitter truth of this:

Digory could say nothing, for tears choked him and he gave up hopes of saving his Mother's life, but at the same time he knew that the Lion knew what would have happened, and that there might be things more terrible even than losing someone you love by death. (Lewis, 1990a, p. 163)

And then 'it was as if the whole world had turned inside out and upside down', for Aslan tells Digory to pluck another apple for his mother, who is miraculously cured.

Whether this is a myth 'breathing the truth through Silver', or a lie which denies the horror of reality; whether it represents a pathetic attempt by the middle-aged Lewis to console himself with fantasy for the blighting of his emotional life by the death of his mother, or a creative attempt to transpose the truth of the Christian myth into a personal mythology, must presumably be left to the judgment of the individual reader. That decision will, however, be related to the way we read other significant actions in *The Chronicles of Narnia*: these would have to include the Passion and Resurrection narratives (of Aslan) in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and the Narnian Apocalypse in *The Last Battle*. There is hardly room here to consider either of these in any detail. In each case, however, the crucial question would be: how real does death feel in these narratives? There are some problems with the Narnian Passion narratives, but overall the death of Aslan does carry weight, though mostly this is derived from the power of the very transparently underlying Christian myth.

The ending of *The Last Battle* falls into two parts: first there is the Narnian Apocalypse, which works rather effectively as a pastiche of the Biblical book of Revelation; secondly there is the more problematic life-after-death sequence which is explicitly based on Platonism. As the Professor says: 'It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools!' (Lewis, 1990b, p. 160). All the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve (apart from the lapsed Susan) who have been to Narnia are reunited in the Platonic 'real Narnia'. It transpires that they have all

been killed in a railway accident, though the tone in which this is narrated is disconcertingly light. Edmund says:

There was a frightful roar and something hit me with a bang, but it didn't hurt. And I felt not so much scared as—well, excited. Oh—and this one queer thing. I'd a rather sore knee, from a hack at rugby. I noticed it had suddenly gone. And I felt very light. And then—here we were. (Lewis, 1990b, p. 130f)

This could hardly be said to treat death with existential seriousness, which of course undermines the story's ability to offer any real resolution to the problem—or mystery—of death.

Where death is treated with a profoundly existential seriousness is in Lewis's account of his own bereavement. At first not intended for publication, and subsequently published under a pseudonym, *A Grief Observed* was only published under Lewis's own name after his death. In the last decade of his life Lewis had experienced, he said, the happiness that had passed him by in his twenties. He fell in love with and married (or perhaps vice versa) Joy Davidman Gresham. Joy was already dying when Lewis fell in love with her; indeed she was a dying mother of two boys. Lewis himself commented on the uncanny similarities between the circumstances of his own mother's death and those of Joy's. It is almost as if, having failed to come to terms with his mother's death in the early part of his life, or subsequently through the medium of imaginative fiction, Lewis had to work through that death again by repeating the experience of it in later life. The story of this loss, that is, the loss of Joy which repeated the loss of his mother, is narrated in the most harrowingly realistic terms. *A Grief Observed* is about the smashing of all images, of all 'pictures', by the reality of death. If there had been the suggestion of consoling fantasy in the Narnia books, it is rudely dismissed now:

... don't come to me talking about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand. Unless, of course, you can literally believe all that stuff about family reunions 'on the further shore', pictured in entirely earthly terms. But that is all unscriptural, all out of bad hymns and lithographs. There's not a word of it in the Bible. And it rings false. We *know* it couldn't be like that. (Lewis, 1966, p. 23)

A couple of pages later he adds:

Come, what do we gain by evasions? We are under the harrow and can't escape. Reality, looked at steadily, is unbearable. (Lewis, 1966, p. 25)

Reality is iconclastic (Lewis, 1966, p. 52), shattering all the ideas we have spun to protect and console ourselves. Real life, and especially real death, is precisely not a novel, not a fiction—and this is coming from a man quite conscious of the fact that from his youth his life had always already been structured by his reading of literature. But in reality, he has learned:

... you never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. (Lewis, 1966, p. 21)

In the end Lewis found all his dreams and his faith smashed by the reality of death. Reality, looked at steadily, is unbearable.

Yet Lewis survived, and survived by writing, by writing *this* book. It was, he says, 'a defence against total collapse' (Lewis, 1966, p. 47). And at the very end, incorrigibly, almost defiantly, Lewis finishes this story about the uselessness of stories in face of the reality of death—with a quotation from one of the most perfect and serene pieces of literature ever written in praise of life and light and love, Dante's *Paradiso*. Of course the quotation is about the smile of a grace-filled woman whom the poet has lost, and hopes to find again after death. In *Canto XXXI* Dante sees Beatrice 'in all her glory crowned/by the reflections of eternal light (ll. 71–72) and addresses to her the following prayer (it is with the last line of this extract—*Poi si torno all' eterna fontana*—that Lewis concludes *A Grief Observed*):

"O lady in whom all my hope takes strength,  
 and who for my salvation did endure  
 to leave her footprints on the floor of Hell,  
 through your own power, through your own excellence  
 I recognize the grace and the effect  
 of all those things I have seen with my eyes.  
 From bondage into freedom you led me  
 by all those paths, by using all those means  
 which were within the limits of your power.  
 Preserve in me your great munificence,  
 so that my soul which you have healed may be  
 pleasing to you when it slips from the flesh."  
 Such was my prayer. And she, so far away,  
 or so it seemed, looked down at me and smiled;  
 then to Eternal Light she turned once more.

(ll. 79–93)

## Note

- [1] For a full discussion of this debate see PURTILL, R.E. (1990) 'Did C.S. Lewis Lose his Faith?', in A. WALKER & J. PATRICK (Eds) *A Christian for all Christians: essays in honour of C.S. Lewis* (London, Hodder & Stoughton), esp, pp. 46–57.

\*This is one of the papers read at this year's NATFHE Religious Studies section conference—a selection of the conference papers will be published in the April 98 issue of *Journal of Beliefs and Values*.

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