THE NARNIAN

The Life and Imagination of C. S. LEWIS

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Introduction

In March 1949 C. S. Lewis invited a friend named Roger Lancelyn Green to dinner at Magdalen College of Oxford University, where Lewis was a tutor; Green, though he had not been Lewis's pupil, had attended many of his lectures a decade earlier, and their friendship had grown over the years. It was scarcely unusual for Lewis to make such an invitation—he had many friends and enjoyed their company greatly and often—but it must have been especially refreshing for him at that moment to contemplate an evening of food, wine, and conversation, for his life was very miserable.

He lived with his brother and an elderly woman named Mrs. Moore whom he often referred to as his mother—though, as we shall see, she was not his mother—and both of them were unwell and dependent upon him for their care. Just a few days before his dinner with Green he had written to an American friend that he was "tied to an invalid," which is what Mrs. Moore had become, confined to bed by arthritis and varicose veins. For her part, Mrs. Moore proclaimed that Lewis was "as good as an extra maid in the house," and she certainly *used* him as a maid, to his brother's constant disgust; she seems also to have become obsessive and quarrelsome in her later years, worried always about her dog and constantly at odds with the domestic help. Lewis had been able to hire two maids to help with cleaning and nursing when he had to be at Magdalen, where he kept up a grueling round of lectures, tutorials, and correspondence-keeping, but for a time one of the maids became unstable (she was undergoing some sort of psychiatric treatment), and he occasionally had to

return home to sort out conflicts the maids had with each other and with Mrs. Moore.

In 1947 he had been asked, by the Marquess of Salisbury, to participate in meetings, along with the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, to discuss the future of the Church of England (of which Lewis was a member), but had had to decline: "My mother is old and infirm . . . and I never know when I can, even for a day, get away from my duties as a nurse and a domestic servant. (There are psychological as well as material difficulties in my house.)" In the intervening two years the miseries had if anything intensified, and there are dark hints in some of Lewis's writings that the suffering shook his Christian faith to the core. Though he had written, and written recently, of the joys of heaven, in the year of the Marquess's letter he found himself consumed by a "horror of nonentity, of annihilation"—that is, of finding that the God in whom he had trusted had no eternal life to offer.*

As one might guess from Lord Salisbury's invitation, Lewis was a famous man, in America as well as in Britain (within a few months of receiving that letter he would find himself on the cover of *Time* magazine), and he was besieged daily by a blizzard of letters. Lewis, who was determined to answer every correspondent, was normally assisted by his brother, Warnie, who typed dictated or drafted letters and kept the files organized, but at the beginning of March 1949 Warnie was in Oxford's Acland Hospital, having drunk himself into insensibility. (He would go on such destructive binges occasionally for the rest of his life.) When Warnie was released, on March 3, he was not strong enough to fend fully for himself, so his brother had to take care of him as well as Mrs. Moore and Bruce, the elderly dog with whose welfare Mrs. Moore was so preoccupied. For a time Lewis worked away at the correspondence by himself, while continuing his labors at Magdalen. Warnie wrote in his diary, "His kindness remains unabated," but his brother's resources were failing. In early April Lewis wrote to a friend who had reproached him for not replying promptly to a letter, "Dog's stools and human vomit have made my day today: one of those days when you feel at 11 A.M. that it really must be 3 P.M." Two months

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* Here is the comment in its context: "I have, almost all my life, been quite unable to feel that horror of nonentity, of annihilation, which, say, Dr. Johnson felt so strongly. I felt it for the first time only in 1947. But that was after I had long been reconverted and thus began to know what life really is and what would have been lost by missing it."

later he collapsed at his home and had to be taken to the hospital. He was diagnosed with strep throat, but his deeper complaint was simply exhaustion, and his doctor was concerned about stress to his heart.

Though the breakdown was still to come, such, in outline, was C. S. Lewis's world the evening he had his friend Roger Lancelyn Green to dinner at Magdalen's high table, and to his rooms for talk afterward. It is unlikely that Green had any idea how miserable his friend had been, and he surely could not have suspected that Lewis would soon be in the hospital. That evening Lewis was a charming host, and (Green wrote in his diary) they had "wonderful talk until midnight: he read me two chapters of a book for children he is writing—very good indeed, though a trifle self-conscious." This book would eventually become *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* the first story about a world called Narnia.

Many years later, in the biography of Lewis that Green wrote with Walter Hooper, he added a brief commentary on that diary entry (referring to himself in the third person): "Nevertheless it was a memorable occasion which the listener remembered vividly, and remembered his awed conviction that he was listening to a book that could rank among the great ones of its kind." It is hard not to see this as a case of revisionist memory—like the tale of some old baseball scout who claims that he knew from the first time he laid eyes on a seventeen-year-old shortstop that one day the boy would be in the Hall of Fame. If Green had had an "awed conviction" of the book's potential greatness, surely that would have been recorded in the diary entry written so soon after the "memorable occasion." Perhaps, after all, the draft chapters that Lewis read really *were* no more than "very good"—isn't that sufficient praise?—and perhaps they really *were* marred to some degree by self-consciousness. After all, Green and Hooper note on the same page of their biography that Lewis got "stuck" for quite some time and couldn't get the story past its opening chapters. Lewis himself had written in a letter some time earlier, "I have tried [to write a children's story] myself but it was, by the unanimous verdict of my friends, so bad that I destroyed it." And according to Green's later recollections, Lewis had already tried out the story on his friend J. R. R. Tolkien and had received a pronounced negative response. It might even be that Green was too generous to his beloved guide and friend: perhaps the story he read that night wasn't good at all—yet.

But whether what Lewis read to Green was any good seems beside the point: what is remarkable about the scene is that in the midst of all

his miseries the writing of a *story for children* is what Lewis had turned to. I have said that he was already famous, but his fame was chiefly that of a controversialist—a polemical contender for Christianity. Certainly that was the thrust of *Time*'s cover story, which emphasized Lewis's then-forthcoming book arguing for the validity of belief in miracles. He was also a highly accomplished scholar, perhaps already (in his midforties) the most accomplished on the Oxford English faculty. He had written fiction too, but of a highly intellectual character; a bachelor with no children of his own, he had relatively few friends whose children he knew. He would not seem to be a likely candidate to be writing a children's book.

Moreover, he was never an aficionado of children's books—even in the year before his death, he could tell a correspondent, "My knowledge of children's literature is really very limited. . . . My own range is about exhausted by Macdonald, Tolkien, E. Nesbit, and Kenneth Grahame"—and he never read *The Wind in the Willows* or Nesbit's stories of the Bastable family until he was in his twenties. Yet he never outgrew the love of the children's stories he *did* know. Once he discovered *The Wind in the Willows,* it was forever precious to him, both for the sheer charm of its story and for the main characters, whom he considered beautifully drawn examples of certain distinctively English "types." (He told a friend that he always read Grahame's masterpiece when he was in bed with the flu.) Perhaps most telling of all, in 1942, when presented with an opportunity to visit England's Lake District, he was primarily eager to do so in order to make a "pilgrimage" to visit Beatrix Potter, of Peter Rabbit fame, who, though elderly, still lived there. (Alas, she died the next year without receiving a visit from Lewis.) "She has a secure place among the masters of English prose," he wrote—a verdict that he would have issued, perhaps in slightly different language, when he was five years old, and from which he surely never wavered.

You can see Lewis's love of children's stories in the oddest places and in the most charming ways. In one of his most learned and scholarly books, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"*—and *Paradise Lost* is as sober and serious and adult a poem as one could imagine—Lewis quotes his eighteenth-century predecessor at Magdalen College, Joseph Addison: "The great moral which reigns in Milton is the most universal and most useful that can be imagined, that Obedience to the will of God makes men happy and that Disobedience makes them miserable." Lewis then notes that a fellow literary critic, E. M. W. Tillyard, called

Addison's comment "vague," and having stated that Tillyard's claim "amazes" him, off he goes:

> Dull, if you will, or platitudinous, or harsh, or jejune; but how *vague?* Has it not rather the desolating clarity and concreteness of certain classic utterances we remember from the morning of our own lives; "Bend over"—"Go to bed"—"Write out *I must do as I am told* a hundred times"—"Do not speak with your mouth full." How are we to account for the fact that great modern scholars have missed what is so dazzlingly simple? . . . It is, after all, the commonest of themes; even Peter Rabbit came to grief because he *would* go into Mr. McGregor's garden.

This is as delightful as it is wise: any literary critic who can, in the course of a few sentences, take us from the great Milton's account of the Fall of Humanity, in twelve books of stately and heroic blank verse, to Beatrix Potter's rather humbler account of Peter Rabbit's rather humbler troubles, is a critic of (to put it mildly) considerable range. And the *naturalness* with which he achieves this!—clearly it never occurs to Lewis to imagine that there is some great disjunct between Milton's world and Beatrix Potter's, and once he puts the likeness before us it's easy for us to see too. After all, leaving aside the one fact that Adam and Eve's decision was disastrous for all of us, while Peter's was (nearly) disastrous just for himself, the two stories have a great deal in common. But it takes someone of Lewis's peculiar stamp to recognize (and more, to declare, in a public, academic setting) the ethical shape of a narrative world in which obedience to Just Authority brings happiness and security, while neglect of that same Authority brings danger and misery. Few writers other than Lewis could open to us that sphere of experience in which John Milton and Beatrix Potter can be seen as laborers in the same vineyard—that sphere in which a *moral* unity suddenly seems far more important than those otherwise dramatic differences in time, genre, and purpose.

And it was not just a few children's classics of the past about which Lewis was enthusiastic. Lewis served as almost a midwife to many children's stories, including those of Green (drafts of whose books he often read and responded to) and, most famously, those of his friend and Oxford colleague Tolkien. In 1932 Tolkien took the chance of reading aloud to Lewis a story he had written. Lewis adored it and insisted that others would too—he badgered Tolkien into seeking to

have it published, which eventually he did, in 1938: the story was called *The Hobbit.* So those who knew Lewis best were not surprised at all when he brought forth drafts of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* or when he published it, in late 1950. But perhaps they would have been surprised had they known that that story, and the six that followed it into Narnia, would bring him greater fame and influence than all his other books combined, making his name known all over the world. The Chronicles of Narnia have been translated into more than thirty languages and, worldwide, have sold more than eighty-five million copies. No one could have guessed that *that* was the future of the little story for children that Lewis was struggling with—along with all the other things he was struggling with—that evening in 1949 when he invited Green to dinner.

In 1944, when Lewis was beginning to be quite famous—though not nearly as famous as Narnia would later make him—the American publishing house Macmillan asked him for a brief biographical sketch that they could include in his books. Macmillan had started to publish his more popular ones the year before and clearly expected their audience to want to know something about the life of this remarkable writer. Lewis was not especially interested in writing or talking about himself; indeed, his close friend Owen Barfield thought this one of Lewis's more noteworthy traits ("there was so much else, in letters and in life, that he found much *more* interesting!"). But when asked for a statement he would sometimes comply; some years later he wrote a whole book (*Surprised by Joy*) to satisfy the curious. Here's what he sent to the people at Macmillan:

> I was a younger son, and we lost my mother when I was a child. That meant very long days alone when my father was at work and my brother at boarding school. Alone in a big house full of books. I suppose that fixed a literary bent. I drew a lot, but soon began to write more. My first stories were mostly about mice (influence of Beatrix Potter), but mice usually in armor killing gigantic cats (influence of fairy stories). That is, I wrote the books I should have liked to read if only I could have got them. That's always been my reason for writing. People won't write the books I want, so I have to do it for myself: no rot about "self-expression." I loathed school. Being an infantry soldier in the last war would have been nicer if one had known one was going to survive. I was

> wounded—by an English shell. (Hence the greetings of an aunt who said, with obvious relief, "Oh, so *that's* why you were wounded in the back!") I gave up Christianity at about fourteen. Came back to it when getting on for thirty. An almost purely philosophical conversion. I didn't *want* to. I'm not the religious type. I want to be let alone, to feel I'm my own master: but since the facts seemed to be the opposite I had to give in. My happiest hours are spent with three or four old friends in old clothes tramping together and putting up in small pubs—or else sitting up till the small hours in someone's college rooms talking nonsense, poetry, theology, metaphysics over beer, tea, and pipes. There's no sound I like better than adult male laughter.

The sentence fragments, colloquialisms, and general bluntness of tone—all uncharacteristic of Lewis's public writings—suggest that he dashed this off without editing it, perhaps without even thinking about it too seriously. Lewis undoubtedly expected the people at Macmillan to recognize this as a rough pile of facts from which they were at liberty to construct a more formal narrative. (As it happened they did not, and published this scribbled note just as they received it.) But the very casualness of the paragraph is what makes it interesting: what we have here is something like the self-understanding that came readily to Lewis's mind, the basic narrative *shape* of his experience. (When he got around to writing *Surprised by Joy*—which is something like a three-hundred-fold expansion of the paragraph for Macmillan—he subtitled it "The Shape of My Early Life.") Much is revealed in these few sentences that will govern the story I wish to tell.

It's clear that the foundational elements are the early death of his mother and his subsequent aloneness—not necessarily loneliness, but a kind of personal and intellectual independence forged in solitude. The last thing he wants is to achieve "self-expression"; he's not interested in sharing his "self" with others. Thus his hatred of school, more particularly the English public school with its determination to socialize boys into a certain kind of citizenship, its manifold schemes of regimentation; thus his sense that if people won't write the books he likes, he'll just have to write them himself. Note also the stubbornness: he's not going to start liking a certain kind of story just because it's the kind that people nowadays write—he will continue to stick with his own preferences, even if they cause him the enormous trouble of becoming an author. A few years earlier he had written—in a scholarly

study of medieval allegory, of all things—that his "ideal happiness . . . would be to read the [Renaissance] Italian epic—to be always convalescent from some small illness and always seated in a window that overlooked the sea, there to read these poems eight hours of each happy day." In this vision of bliss, there's no writing, because writing is work—and a convalescent can't be expected to work, now can he? (I might add that this paradise has no *people* in it either, at least not during the reading day.)

And clearly Lewis is a man who values friendship above almost all else—look at how he concludes his little self-portrait—but equally clearly, his core convictions have not been formed while walking country lanes or warming his feet around a shared fire; rather, he has worked out his beliefs alone, in houses full of books. "I am a product," he would later write, "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 tiles. Also, of endless books." Describing a period of his childhood when a "small illness" kept him at home when he otherwise would have been at school, he writes with evident nostalgia, "I entered with complete satisfaction into a deeper solitude than I had ever known."

In the "endless books" that peopled his solitude, Lewis discovered a range of interests ("nonsense, poetry, theology, metaphysics") that, nurtured and matured, would almost all find their way into his career as a writer. The books by Lewis that Macmillan published in the years 1943 and 1944 alone (though some of them had been written several years earlier) included two science fiction novels, a theological treatise about suffering, a satire in the form of letters from a devil, and two brief works in explanation and defense of the Christian faith. It is so hard to imagine one person managing all these kinds of writing—plus works of serious scholarship and still another kind of writing that we will soon turn our attention to—that one can understand why Owen Barfield once wrote an essay about his famous friend called "The Five C. S. Lewises."

And yet the chief point of Barfield's essay is that what's really remarkable about Lewis is not the *diversity* of his writings, but the *unity*—the sense that something ties them all together. But what precisely *is* this alleged unity? What does it consist in? Barfield's attempt to answer this question is tentative but highly intriguing:

> I am not sure that anyone has succeeded in locating it. Some have pointed to his "style," but it goes deeper than that. "Consistency"?

> Noticeable enough in spite of an occasional inconsistency here or there. His unswerving "sincerity" then? That comes much nearer, but still does not satisfy me. Many other writers are sincere—but they are not Lewis. No. There was something in the whole quality and structure of his thinking, something for which the best label I can find is "presence of mind." If I were asked to expand on that, I could say only that somehow what he thought about everything was secretly present in what he said about anything.

Whether or not Barfield has rightly identified this "presence of mind" as *the* unifying feature of Lewis's writings, and indeed of his character, it is surely a notable trait, one that we see repeatedly in the course of this book. Certain Lewisian themes, ideas, concerns, and convictions can find their way into almost anything he writes, for almost any audience. But even if we agree that Lewis is particularly, even uniquely, characterized by such omnivorous attentiveness, one might go further and ask what *kind* of attentiveness it was—what, specifically, was present to his mind.

And here I would like to suggest something that is the keynote of this book: my belief that Lewis's mind was above all characterized by a *willingness to be enchanted* and that it was this openness to enchantment that held together the various strands of his life—his delight in laughter, his willingness to accept a world made by a good and loving God, and (in some ways above all) his willingness to submit to the charms of a wonderful *story,* whether written by an Italian poet of the sixteenth century, by Beatrix Potter, or by himself. What is "secretly present in what he said about anything" is an openness to delight, to the sense that there's more to the world than meets the jaundiced eye, to the possibility that *anything* could happen to someone who is ready to meet that anything. For someone with eyes to see and the courage to explore, even an old wardrobe full of musty coats could be the doorway into another world. It is the sort of lesson a child might learn—even a stubborn, independent child—if his mother has died and his father and brother are often away and he spends his days alone in an old house full of books, thinking and drawing and writing and thinking some more.

After all the Narnia books were done, he wrote a little essay in which he explained that the stories began when he started "seeing pictures in [his] head"—or rather, when he started paying attention to pictures he had been seeing all along, since the "picture of a Faun carrying

an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood," which we find near the beginning of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* first entered Lewis's head when he was sixteen years old. It was only when he was "about forty" that he said to himself, "Let's try to make a story about it." As we have seen, it was a particularly trying time in his life when he wrote the first tale of Narnia. Yet something—some instinctively strong response to the offer of enchantment, I would say, perhaps all the stronger because of the difficult circumstances in which the offer presented itself—made him start writing, even though he "had very little idea how the story would go." (It was only when the great lion Aslan "came bounding into it" that "He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him.")

What made Lewis write this way, and why it is such a good thing that he was able to write this way—these are hard things to talk about without being (or at least seeming) sentimental, yet they are necessary to talk about. In most children but in relatively few adults, at least in our time, we may see this willingness to be delighted to the point of self-abandonment. This free and full gift of oneself to a story is what produces the state of enchantment. But why do we lose the desire—or if not the desire, the ability—to give ourselves in this way? Adolescence introduces the fear of being deceived, the fear of being caught believing what others have ceased believing in. To be naïve, to be gullible—these are the great humiliations of adolescence. Lewis seems never to have been *fully* possessed by this fear, though at times in his life he felt it: "When I was ten, I read fairy stories in secret and would have been ashamed if I had been found doing so. Now that I am fifty I read them openly. When I became a man I put away childish things, including the fear of childishness and the desire to be very grown up." But even in his adolescent unbelief he was always capable of a kind of innocent delight; his greatest and deepest affection was always reserved for the bards, the tellers of tales—and the taller the tales the better. It was Wagner's vast landscapes of heroic myth that captured him, and the gentler "Faerie" world of the English imagination, from Spenser to Tennyson and William Morris and (above all) George MacDonald. He once wrote that stories that sounded "the horns of Elfland" constituted "that kind of literature to which my allegiance was given the moment I could chose books for myself." It was therefore perhaps inevitable that he would become a scholar of medieval and Renaissance literature, and unsurprising that his first work of fiction would be an elaborate allegory based on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's*

Progress (that alluring sugared spiritual medicine for so many generations of English children) and that he would consume works of fantasy and then science fiction—in which genre he would write his first novels. It was probably not likely that such an *open* mind would remain atheist long, though Lewis did manage to hold out as an unbeliever until he was nearly thirty.

One could say, then, that Lewis remained in this particular sense childlike—that is, able always to receive pleasure from the kinds of stories that tend to give pleasure to children. This trait in him was evident to his close friends, though they described it in different ways. I think his friend Owen Barfield has this childlikeness, or some component of it, in mind when he refers to "a certain psychic or spiritual immaturity . . . which is detectable in some of his religious and philosophical writings." Ruth Pitter—a poet who was a close friend of Lewis's for some years—makes a similar but more comprehensive statement: "In fact his whole life was oriented & motivated by an almost uniquely-persisting child's sense of glory and of nightmare. The adult events were received into a medium still as pliable as wax, wide open to the glory, and equally vulnerable, with a man's strength to feel it all, and a great scholar's & writer's skills to express and to interpret." Surely Lewis himself would have said that when we can no longer be "wide open to the glory"—risking whatever immaturity thereby—we have not lost just our childlikeness but something near the core of our humanity. Those who will never be fooled can never be delighted, because without self-forgetfulness there can be no delight, and this is a great and a grievous loss.

When we talk today about receptiveness to stories, we tend to contrast that attitude to one governed by reason—we talk about freeing ourselves from the shackles of the rational mind and that sort of thing—but no belief was more central to Lewis's mind than the belief that it is eminently, fully rational to be responsive to the enchanting power of stories. As we see in detail later on, Lewis passionately believed that education is not about providing information so much as cultivating "habits of the heart"—producing "men with chests," as he puts it in his book *The Abolition of Man,* that is, people who not only *think* as they should but *respond* as they should, instinctively and emotionally, to the challenges and blessings the world offers to them. It was with this idea in mind that Lewis dedicated *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* to his friend and fellow writer Charles Williams. In his dedicatory letter he fondly remembers a series of lectures that Williams

gave at Oxford about the poetry of Milton: "It is a reasonable hope," Lewis writes, "that of those who heard you in Oxford many will understand that when the old poets made some virtue their theme they were not teaching but adoring, and that what we take for the didactic is often the enchanted." Lewis is known as a moralist, but I think we can infer from this comment that his teaching is often a function of his adoration—so that the moral elements of his writing are not so easily distinguished from the enchantment of storytelling and story-loving. It is the merger of the moral and the imaginative—this vision of virtue itself as adorable, even ravishing—that makes Lewis so distinctive.

Oddly enough he achieves this merger most perfectly in his children's books. I say "oddly" because Lewis was quite aware of the restraints and limitations imposed on a person writing for children: "Writing 'juveniles' certainly modified my habits of composition. Thus (a) It imposed a strict limit on vocabulary. (b) Excluded erotic love. (c) Cut down reflective and analytical passages. (d) Led me to produce chapters of nearly equal length for convenience in reading aloud." But, he added, "all these restrictions did me great good—like writing in a strict metre." I think we can infer from the context that writing for children forced him to concentrate on what was most essential—in the story, yes, but also in his own experience. In writing these tales for children, he found something like the bedrock of his own imagination and belief.

In 1954, when Lewis had finished writing the Narnia books (though *The Last Battle* remained to be published), he got a letter from the leadership of the Milton Society of America informing him that they wanted to honor him for his contribution to the study of John Milton's poetry—by which the Society meant, primarily, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost."* They also asked him to "make a statement" about his published works. Looking them over—noting the presence of novels, literary history and criticism, poetry, Christian apologetics—he admitted that his works amounted to a "mixed bag." Nevertheless, he wished to insist that through them all "there is a guiding thread."

> The imaginative man in me is older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic. It was he who made my first attempt (with little success) to be a poet. It was he who, in response to the poetry of others, made me a critic, and in defense of that response, sometimes a critical controversialist. It was he who, after my conversion led

> me to embody my religious belief in symbolic or mythopoeic forms, ranging from *Screwtape* to a kind of theologised science-fiction. And it was, of course, he who has brought me, in the last few years to write the series of Narnian stories for children; not asking what children want and then endeavouring to adapt myself (this was not needed) but because the fairy-tale was the *genre* best fitted for what I wanted to say.

I think Lewis's message here, though couched in the politest of terms, is quite clear. He is honored by the approval of the Miltonists, but he also must admit that he is not really one of them—he is not one for whom scholarship is an end in itself or a life's calling. He wrote as a "controversialist" about Milton, he sought to rescue Milton from misinterpretation, not because it was his vocation to do so, but rather because he loved Milton's poetry and wished to defend it against those who would slight it or attack it. At the heart of his impulse to write, then—to write even scholarly works of literary criticism—was the warm and passionate response to literature of an "imaginative man." A deeply learned book about John Milton is important to its author largely because it witnesses to something else: a child's love of the rhythms of verse and the excitements of story. And it would seem that Narnia taught him this about himself: that, in the forty years since his childhood in Belfast, Northern Ireland, he hadn't really changed very much. The same impulse that had produced *The Allegory of Love* and *Miracles* and *Mere Christianity* also produced the Chronicles of Narnia, but it was only Narnia that *revealed* that truth to him. Aslan has gifts for everyone, and perhaps that was what he gave Lewis: a certain, and very important, piece of self-knowledge.

Clearly Lewis's imagination was a transforming one: he took the people he knew and loved, the great events he experienced, the books he read, and swept them all together into the great complicated manifold world of Narnia. (As A. N. Wilson shrewdly writes, the "whole theme" of the Narnian books is "the interpenetration of worlds, and [Lewis] poured into them a whole jumble of elements.") Or perhaps this is a better way to say it: Lewis could make Narnia because the essential traits of Narnia were already in his mind long before he wrote the first words of the Chronicles. His reading and his other experiences had formed him that way. He was a Narnian long before he knew what name to give that country; it was his true homeland, the native ground to which he hoped, one day, to return.

At the darkest moment in the first tale of Narnia, when Aslan's tortured and humiliated body lies stone dead on the Stone Table, Lewis tells us what Susan and Lucy are feeling:

> I hope no one who reads this book has been quite as miserable as Susan and Lucy were that night; but if you have been—if you've been up all night and cried till you have no more tears left in you—you will know that there comes in the end a sort of quietness. You feel as if nothing was ever going to happen again.

Obviously, only one whose misery had taken him to this devastated "quietness" could write these sentences. Lewis had known such misery as a child; he knew it again as a middle-aged man. Yet it was quite directly out of this misery that a story for children came—at first a bumbling story, flat and uninspired, but one that Lewis could not ignore. As he wrote when all the Narnia stories were done, it was only when the great lion Aslan "came bounding into it" that he stopped bumbling and the story began to move in its proper course: "He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him." And into Narnia he also pulled Lewis; and then, us.