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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
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All Shall Be Well: Redemption as a Subtext of C.S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian*

Doug Jackson

All Shall Be Well: Redemption as a Subtext of C. S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian*

By Doug Jackson

*And always keep ahold of nurse / For fear
of finding something worse.*

- Hillaire Belloc

The above line comes from Hillaire Belloc's poem, "Jim," subtitled, "Who ran away from his nurse and was eaten by a lion." *Prince Caspian*, the second of C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, is the story of a boy who was torn away from his nurse and made into a king by a lion. Somewhere in between, perhaps, comes the story of Lewis himself, who lost his nurse and did, indeed, find worse things, but also eventually found the "Lion," and brought him back to generations of readers.

Introduction: The (Im)personal Heresy

In 1939, Milton scholar E. M. W. Tillyard and Lewis published *The Personal Heresy*, a series of essays which debated the role of biography in literary criticism. Tillyard maintained that *Paradise Lost* was ultimately about "the state of Milton's mind when he wrote it" (Sayer, p.158), while Lewis believed the poet's business was to transcend his own personality and that the writing, not the writer, was the issue. George Sayer maintains that the longer the skirmish lasted the closer the two men's positions became (Sayer, p.158), and while this may be so, it is clear that Lewis disliked pseudo-psychological snooping into the author's mysterious psyche as a substitute for hard reading of the author's plain page.

In his essay "On Criticism," Lewis skewers the "amateur psychologist" who "has a Freudian theory of literature and claims to know all about your inhibitions" (*On Stories*, p.134). Among the limi-

tations of such an approach listed by Lewis are the reviewer's iconoclastic intent, his lack of information, and the intellectual dishonesty of his circular argument. As to the first, Lewis comments, "One is not here free from bias, for this procedure is almost entirely confined to hostile reviewers. And now that I come to think of it, I have seldom seen it practised on a dead author except by a scholar who intended, in some measure, to debunk him." (Ibid.)

As to the second, Lewis chides that, in addition to lacking a full psychoanalysis of the "patient's" subconscious, psychological critics also lack data from the writer's conscious mind. "I am here concerned only with what the author can say about such reviews solely because he is the author." (Ibid.)

Finally, Lewis complains that Freudian critics spin theories which cannot be falsified and therefore cannot be affirmed. "By definition you are unconscious of the things he professes to discover. Therefore the more loudly you disclaim them, the more right he must be: though, oddly enough, if you admitted them, that would prove him right too." (Ibid.) One is reminded here of creationist Philip E. Johnson's critique of Freudian psychology: "A psychoanalyst could explain why a man would commit murder - or, with equal facility, why the same man would sacrifice his own life to save another." (Johnson, p.148) What psychoanalysis will under no circumstances attempt is to predict in advance whether or when a given man will do either of these things.

All three kinds of culpability find glaring fulfillment in A. N. Wilson's biography of Lewis. Wilson clearly wields his pen with hostile intent against the memory of a dead author, and he conveniently ignores a good deal of the information which Lewis himself supplied about the origin and meaning of his works. And, of course, Wilson selects (or creates) his data from a rich and varied life in such a way as to support his preconceptions; he displays twenty-twenty hindsight as he gazes myopically into a fun-house version of a rear-view mirror.

While I have no wish to repeat Wilson's crimes, nor to anger the literary ghost of Lewis, I think it might be possible, in a biographical safari through some of his writing, to gain a fresh view of the Lion without unleashing the critical hyenas Lewis battled so tirelessly. It is my contention that C. S. Lewis wove a powerful childhood tragedy into the tapestry of his second Narnian novel, *Prince Caspian*, entwining its dark thread with brighter patterns of redemption.

This is not to accuse Lewis, as the Freudian critic does, of leaving undigested lumps of biography swimming in the broth of his fiction, like undercooked clots of flour in a poorly made gravy. He carefully smelts the biographical facts, then, with complete fidelity to both literary law and Narnian magic, redeems them. This redemption is worth understanding, not for some tabloid thrill of peeking behind a writer's psychic window-shades, but for the blessing of understanding the redemption which Lewis depicts and holds out as a hope for every subject of Aslan.

This exegesis will be undertaken within a careful orthodoxy, and will avoid heresy by eschewing the three sins previously dictated by the Archbishop of Magdalen himself. First, far from hostile intent, I

write with an absolute admiration for Lewis; far from "debunking" him, I wish to cast one additional (if weak) ray on the glittering gem of his literary legacy. Second, I will confine myself either to the author's own words or verifiable biographical facts as the basis for any conclusions drawn. Finally, because of a reliance on Lewis's own writing, I hope to offer conclusions which can be either substantiated or dismissed with some certainty by the reader.

Seed and Shoot: Biographical Hints

In Chapter Four of *Prince Caspian*, "The Dwarf Tells of Prince Caspian," we meet the young prince's nurse. Four aspects about the youngster's relationship to this woman stand out: she is a story-teller, she awakens wonder in the child for whom she cares, she is exiled as a result of his unwitting denunciation, and her departure provides opportunity for the next necessary phase in the youngster's development.

She is, first of all, a story-teller. We encounter her as "the person Caspian loved best," even better than his wonderful toys, because of her enchanting tales of the old days in Narnia when the beasts talked and strange creatures populated the land. From Nurse, Caspian absorbs a true, if limited, theology, centered on Aslan "the great lion who comes from over the sea."

The second feature of Caspian's relationship to Nurse surfaces in the effect these yarns have on the young prince: they awaken his sense of wonder. What strikes the reader is the completely Lewisian touch that Caspian likes this make-believe world much better than the real world he inhabits, even though the latter holds, for him, a crown. Asked by his bewildered, and disapproving, uncle what he could desire more than the throne of Narnia, Caspian stammers, "I wish—I wish—I wish I had lived

in the Old Days." One is reminded of Puddleglum's apologetic to the Witch in *The Silver Chair*:

I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one thing more to be said. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks your real world all hollow. (Silver Chair, p.182)

The third important feature of this relationship, Nurse's exile and Caspian's culpability in it, emerges when King Miraz interrogates the boy, discovers the well-head of this stream of "nonsense" (he uses the word twice), and sends her right out of the story. "Next day Caspian found what a terrible thing he had done, for Nurse had been sent away without even being allowed to say good-bye to him, and he was told he was to have a Tutor." Lewis stresses the youthful naïveté of Caspian which absolves him of guilt, but not responsibility, for the fiasco. "He was only a very little boy at the time," we are told, and "if Caspian had been a very little older, the tone of his uncle's voice would have warned him that it would be wiser to shut up. But he babbled on."

This introduces the fourth point of comparison, the appearance of a mentor to take the growing boy on the next phase of his journey. Dr. Cornelius, the tutor who arrives after Nurse's departure, proves to be

a sort of dwarfish dialectician. He sharpens Caspian's growing mind so that, to his emotional yearning for Nurse's fantasy, he adds intellectual discernment of the reality of such a world. In asserting the veracity of Old Narnia, Cornelius offers himself, a half-dwarf, as proof that the dwarves once existed, and from that fact argues the deduction that the other creatures of that fantastic time are historical as well. Ever the logical thinker, the Doctor refuses to assert positively that such beings still exist. "I don't know—I don't know," he laments in response to Caspian's questions along this line, and goes on to detail his wearisome search for proof and the slender evidence it has produced. Lewis himself, in the autobiographical *Surprised By Joy*, provides a striking germ for this fictional growth. As a boy of eleven, Lewis attended the boarding school of Cherbourg. Here he met "Miss C," (as he calls her in *Joy*) the school Matron, identified by Sayer as Miss Cowie (Sayer, p.30). At this point, it is worth noting that Lewis's own account of his life prefigures what later happens to Caspian.

Miss C. was, like her fictional counterpart, a storyteller whose themes were theological and who believed the stories that she told. She was, Lewis says, "floundering in the mazes of Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Spiritualism; the whole Anglo-American Occultist tradition." (*Joy*, p.59) Matron quickly became Lewis's favorite. Caspian is an orphan; Albert Lewis was living when young Jack encountered Miss C., but his mother was dead and he was both physically and emotionally distant from his father. "We all loved her," Lewis writes of Matron, "I, the orphan, especially." (*Ibid.*)

Like Nurse, Matron's tales fired her young charge's imagination. It is to this, in part, that Lewis attributes his apostasy from the Christian faith. He is careful to mute his

criticism, pointing out that his faith was ripe for the fall, but he is honest in admitting that Miss C.'s spiritualism emboldened his apostasy. However, her rich, imaginative heresies also opened for him the exciting possibility of a world inhabited by much more interesting beings than prosaic adults, like his father and schoolmasters, on the one hand, and the stern and distant God of his orthodox upbringing on the other.

Finally, like Nurse, Matron met her downfall through Lewis's innocent involvement. While Lewis himself makes no mention of her dismissal from Cherbourg, Sayer states that she was fired for two indiscretions, both involving young Jack—being caught holding him in a maternal embrace, and taking his part in a protest regarding censorship of his mail. (Sayer, p.30) The parallels are hard to ignore. An imaginative young boy in dull surroundings finds a source of love and a wealth of imagination, but the effects are judged to be detrimental by the authorities and the friend suffers as a result, creating a sense of guilt in the child. It is important to realize that Lewis makes it clear that he regarded Miss C. as a work in progress. She "was still in her spiritual immaturity, still hunting, with the eagerness of a soul that had a touch of angelic quality in it, for a truth and a way of life." (Joy, p.59)

Ultimately, although not as a direct result of Miss C.'s dismissal, Lewis ended up under the tutelage of W. T. Kirkpatrick, "The Great Knock." Of course, Kirkpatrick cannot stand as an exact prototype of the dwarfish tutor. Cornelius is, after all, a magician, something the old materialist would have abhorred and, at bottom, a man of faith. There is not here, for instance, the curmudgeonly Socratic dialogue and Platonic idealism of Professor Kirk in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the avuncular humanism of the Fox in *Till We*

Have Faces, or the semi-comic tunnel-vision of MacPhee of *That Hideous Strength*. Still, certain likenesses persist, and one could almost say that Cornelius draws many of his strengths from a magnification of what, in Kirkpatrick, were inconsistencies and weaknesses.

"I have said," Lewis writes of The Great Knock, "that he was almost wholly logical; but not quite. He had been a Presbyterian and was now an Atheist. He spent Sunday, as he spent most of his time on weekdays, working in his garden. But one curious trait from his Presbyterian youth survived. He always, on Sundays, gardened in a different, and slightly more respectable, suit. An Ulster Scot may come to disbelieve in God, but not to wear his weekday clothes on the Sabbath." (Joy, p.138)

After Kirkpatrick's death, the still atheistic Lewis wrote to his father,

Yet, as you say, he is so indelibly stamped on one's mind once known, so often present in thought, that he makes his own acceptance of annihilation the more unthinkable. I have seen death fairly often and never yet been able to find it anything but extraordinary and rather incredible. The real person is so very real, so obviously living and different from what is left that one cannot believe something has turned into nothing. It is not faith, it is not reason—just a "feeling". "Feelings" are in the long run a pretty good match for what we call our beliefs. (Letters, 4/23/21)

These comments hint that Kirkpatrick's rationalism, far from cementing Lewis into his professed atheism, actually had a counter-revolutionary, if unintended, effect. The force of the tutor's personality outweighed, in the end, the force of his arguments. Indeed, one can see here a hint of the Fox, who "was ashamed of lov-

ing poetry." (*Till We Have Faces*, p.8) It recalls Basil Grant's comment about his brother, Rupert, in G. K. Chesterton's *Club of Queer Trades*, "His reasoning is particularly cold and clear, and invariably leads him wrong. But his poetry comes in abruptly and leads him right." (*The Club of Queer Trades*, p.115) This seed of weakness in Kirkpatrick becomes the peculiar strength of Cornelius, who applies his formidable intellect to the task of affirming the emotional excitement raised in Caspian by nurse's stories. In Kirkpatrick, Lewis found, as his fictional prince would later find in Cornelius, the resources to discipline his spiritual yearnings into Christian truth without leeching them dry of their emotional richness.

Divergence: The Triumph of Truth over Fact

None of this should obscure the fact that *Prince Caspian* is a work of fiction. Any parallels to Lewis's own life are of interest only as they enable us better to understand the story itself, and the effect it has, or can have, on the reader. Lewis might just as usefully have based certain aspects of Caspian's adventures on the life of a friend or stranger, or on pure invention. His experiences at Cherbourg are important for my purposes only because of what Lewis did with them.

Caspian's story ends differently from Lewis's as far as the observable facts are concerned. What ultimately became of Miss C. is unknown. What happened to Caspian's nurse is described in delightful detail in Chapter 14, "How All Were Very Busy". As Aslan romps through Narnia, releasing it from Miraz's Telmarine bondage, he encounters an old woman on her death bed. She recognizes him at once. "She was at death's door, but when she opened her

eyes and saw the bright, hairy head of the lion staring into her face, she did not scream or faint. She said, 'Oh, Aslan! I knew it was true.'" Shortly after her miraculous recovery, the woman meets Caspian and they fall into each other's arms; she is his old nurse, and his past damage is forgiven and repaired.

It could be argued that the parallel breaks down because Nurse, though holding an unpopular theology, held a true one, while Miss C. embraced ideas which were both unapproved and in fact heretical. But remember Lewis's charitable description of her as a soul in search of truth. This is a major theme in the writing of Lewis: that God rewards the sincere seeker by giving him, not what he finds, but what he wanted to find. Thus Trumpkin, who disbelieves in lions in general and the Great Lion in particular, is immediately loved of Aslan when they finally meet, and Emeth, servant of Tash, finds his way through the stable door and into Aslan's Country in the end; the Fox meets Orual in the underworld and apologizes for misleading her with his Greek rationalism, and Screwtape complains to Wormwood in Letter Five that "He often makes prizes of humans who have given their lives for causes He thinks bad on the monstrously sophisticated ground that the humans thought them good and were following the best they knew." Thus Lewis rewrites the ending of his own story, but does not falsify, or even in any meaningful sense change it. He draws the logical line of progress for a soul sincerely seeking a sovereign God who has willed Himself to be found.

All Shall Be Well: The Irrelevance of Time in Light of Eternity

The point here is not just that Aslan cleans up the mess made by young Caspian

and his nurse. Rather, the mess becomes in itself the vehicle of ultimate victory. Had the nurse not planted the seed of the true Narnia in Caspian's imagination when he was too young to reject it, he would have grown up as another dull Telmarine. Instead, his plastic soul conforms itself to the Narnian mold, never to lose that shape again. Had not Caspian unwittingly indicted her before the King, she would have remained his nurse until the birth of Miraz's son, at which point Caspian would have been assassinated to make room for the scion of the usurper on the throne. Instead, her departure opens the door for Dr. Cornelius who is otherworldly enough to be in love with Old Narnia, and worldly enough to spirit the young prince away before his execution is decreed. Redemption is the theme; not just the redemption of our deliberate sins or innocent errors, but the redemption of the very suffering which is later seen as necessary and, when known to be necessary, hardly seen as suffering at all.

Lewis's friendship with Charles Williams is well known, as is the fondness of the former for the prayer of Juliana of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and every manner of thing shall be well," (see *Letters*, 6/2/40 to Owen Barfield) and the coda appended by the latter, "That which shall be well, is well already." And perhaps this explains why, in addition to the practical mechanics of plot, Lewis makes Narnian time inconsequential in terms of our world. The seed of Caspian's tribulations can die, germinate and produce the bloom of his joy between two ticks of the clock in an English railway station.

Thus Lewis offers a healing touch to the raw memories of all those who tried to hold tight to Nurse but were pulled loose by stronger hands, and all those who, in a moment of betrayal as real (if not as signifi-

cant) as that of Judas, released their grip and lived to repent. To Narnians, while "what might have happened" is forbidden knowledge, what will happen, despite our faults and failures, is a tale of joy in which childhood is never a false start, but always the necessary seed of the final flourishing.

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