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Oral Narrative and Literate Pedagogy in *The Chronicles of Narnia***

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Reading Lewis Reading: Oral Narrative and Literate Pedagogy in the Chronicles of Narnia

Nicole M. DuPlessis

Critical consensus about C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia, that they were "written to familiarize a body of people, especially children, with certain ideas, namely the Christian faith and the way of life that goes with that faith," which Paul Ford qualifies by saying that Lewis of course intended to teach *mere* Christianity (xxvii) is so commonplace that I hope that you may wonder my purpose in invoking it now. Though certainly a motivating factor behind a part of his production of Narnia, as Lewis mentions in one essay on the subject,¹ the Christian concepts associated with Lewis's statement are far from being the only concepts with which the Chronicles may familiarize the young reader. Elsewhere I have discussed a tendency toward environmental consciousness in the Chronicles which is often combined with latent anti-colonial plot structures to create a truly interesting exploration of the interrelationship between human exploitation of animals and the environment and human exploitation of other humans within these self-consciously conservative and Christian texts.² In this paper, I would like to explore a different series of aims in the Chronicles, namely, Lewis's intention to familiarize his readers with "certain concepts" centered around ways of reading and, more explicitly, what to read.

Generations of critics have been troubled by the "derivative" nature of many of the Chronicles. Among children's literature critics, this is combined with a tendency to criticize Lewis's use of the "intrusive narrator," which many associate with late-Nineteenth century didacticism in children's literature—if the narrator is *talking to* the child, then the author must necessarily be *talking (or writing) down*³ to the child, imparting a lesson or stressing the moral aspects of the tale. Though both of these critiques are based very accurately on the style Lewis employs and the content he invokes, both are limiting in their approach to the books, which, in spite of more negative critical opinion, have been consistently in print and attracting new readers and admirers since their publication. Interestingly, however, these two accusations, that the books are derivative and that the narrative voice is condescending, a concept often confused with pedagogical, may be addressed simultaneously, in part, by admitting the partial accuracy of one of the charges: the "intrusive (or obtrusive) narrator" as it is used in children's literature *is* an instructive voice, and further elucidating the nature of the instruction.

On a basic level, the narrative voice known as

"intrusive," "obtrusive," or, by one critic, "engaging" seeks to establish the presence of the implied author within the text. On a more theoretical level, this strategy implies the presence of sound—a "voice" which can, or could, be heard—and that of another person within a self-contained text, usually thought to be read silently, without the possibility of mutual interaction, by a solitary individual. When a child is young, not yet possessing the level of skill necessary to read a certain book, perhaps, or still young enough to appreciate, or prefer having a story read to him or her, the "voice" of the narrator may become, quite literally, the voice of a parent, teacher, or sibling. This fact alone suggests a "transitional" or hybrid nature of readers (or hearers) of stories for children and a corresponding "transitional" nature of children's stories.⁴ That Lewis is aware of this relationship between the orality and literacy of children's stories is evident in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," in which he describes the method of composition used by "Lewis Carroll, Kenneth Grahame, and Tolkien," whose "printed stor[ies] grow out of a story told to a particular child with the living voice and perhaps *ex tempore*" (OTW 23).⁵ If one considers the child who, having learned to read, is now transitioning from reading as an activity shared with a parent or other companion (like communal storytelling in an oral culture), to reading as a solitary occupation, it is perhaps less mysterious that the "intrusive/obtrusive" narrative voice, with its reproduction, however imperfect, of the voice of oral narration, should remain popular with child readers. The seemingly functional narrative voice appeals to the pre- or semi-literate child, who, having not yet assimilated the "private" reading of fully-literate adults, seeks the guidance and company of the implied narrator of the text.

Lewis establishes the tone of his narrative voice early in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. It is the voice of a storyteller, who introduces *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by telling children that this is "something that happened to [Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy] when they were sent away from London because of the air-raids" (LWW 1), giving the names of the servants, "Ivy, Margaret, and Betty, [though] they do not come into the story much" (LWW 1). The voice adds parenthetical description, both of relative ages of the characters and of the scene as it is happening: "('one for me and one for a friend,' said Mr. Tumnus)" (LWW 12), at times indicating by the parenthetical

nature of this narrative “intrusion” how it is best read if read aloud. It is also the voice of a teacher, who says very seriously of Lucy, “(She had, of course, left the door open, for she knew that it is a very silly thing to shut oneself into a wardrobe.)” (*LWW* 7). This may be read as a disclaimer, of sorts—Lewis’s admonition to children who might imitate his characters to their own misfortune. It is certainly a preparation for the actions of Edmund, who forgets “what a very foolish thing it is” to shut the wardrobe door behind him (*LWW* 24). But in an age well-accustomed to humor on television, when we should certainly recognize a running “gag,” it is all-to-frequently overlooked that encountering this phrasing on page 5, then again on page 7, twice on page 24, and again on page 49 (phrased slightly differently), most readers will cease to regard it as a lesson after perhaps the second repetition; rather, this becomes a shared joke between the narrative companion and the reader—all the more memorable because of this element of humor.

Instances of the narrator of the Chronicles acting as storyteller, companion, co-conspirator and teacher extend beyond *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. *The Silver Chair* has received attention from specialists in both children’s literature and Lewis’s own fiction analyzing or critiquing the rather heavy-handed narrative opposing “mixed” schools; here, a narrator who is clearly speaking to children and adults, or perhaps children as future adults, self-consciously admits that, “This is not going to be a school story, so I shall say as little as possible about Jill’s school, which is not a pleasant subject. It was ‘co-educational,’ a school for both boys and girls; what used to be called a ‘mixed’ school; some said it was not nearly so mixed as the minds of the people who ran it” (*SC* 1). Lewis devotes a full paragraph to his criticism of this type of school, whose administrators “had the idea that boys and girls should be allowed to do what they like” (*SC* 1). Kath Filmer cites this as an insertion of explicit commentary on “a number of [Lewis’s] *betês noirs*, including the Humanitarian Theory of Punishment” (Filmer 83), which she implies is social criticism intended for adults rather than children.⁶ Though Lewis admittedly acknowledges another potential reader besides the child, he creates “layers” of meaning suitable for different readers without excluding the primary audience of children.

Almost certainly drawing from his own school experiences as described in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis, by way of a sympathetic though stern narrative voice, tells how “what ten or fifteen of the biggest boys and girls liked best was bullying the others” (*SC* 1). This of course will register differently with a child who has or has not been the victim of bullying; the didactic tone seems reserved primarily for adults, whether school administrators, parents who exert influence over the

school environment of their children, or even (as Filmer suggests) politicians. Coinciding with the intrusive narration, this scene may offend the political sensibilities of some critics, notably David Holbrook (22-24, 141), who may then see this as an unpardonable instance of “writing *over*” or “writing *down to*” the child reader. A similar instance of overt narrative teaching, implicitly critiqued by Filmer (79), occurs in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, when Eustace is described as “liking beetles if they were dead and pinned to a card”; certainly more condescending narrative interventions are targeted at characters who need reform and who, more often than not, are reformed through the course of the book. This particular intervention is striking because it provides an additional lesson on the wrong way to experience nature. Examples of more lighthearted narrative interventions are to be found in *The Magician’s Nephew*, when the narrator (class-conscious though he may be) indicates the gleeful experience of the housemaid, “(who was really having a lovely day)” (81), seeing the chaos at the front door and the disruption of the household at the arrival of Jadis of Charn in late Nineteenth Century England, three times in a matter of a page or two. But the narrative intervention with the most significance for my discussion centers on the time-continuum that separates Narnia from the children’s life in England.

If the narrative strategy used by Lewis in the Chronicles may be described as mediating between oral storytelling modes and the solitary experience of texts, a connection between the narrative voice and another underlying, “familiarizing” aspect of the Chronicles is revealed in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by way of an “intrusive” narrative moment. In *Dawn Treader*, Lewis has the task of re-familiarizing the reader with the concept of the time differential between England and Narnia, and perhaps explaining this phenomenon to those who have not read the preceding books. The narrative voice, to illustrate this phenomenon explains that “when the Pevensie children had returned to Narnia last time for their second visit, it was (for the Narnians) as if King Arthur came back to Britain as some people say he will. And I say the sooner the better” (*VDT* 10). While it is possible that the last statement would gain more of a snicker from an adult reader than a child, this moment in the text serves an essential function by reintroducing a concept that is central to the series as a whole. However, the *modus operandi*, the allusion to King Arthur, is also revealing in its reference to a literary figure (albeit one rooted in a distant oral tradition), arguably the earliest and most enduring figure of fantastic literature. While children are likely introduced to this tale at a later age now than when Lewis was writing, with the possible exception of Disney’s *The Sword and the Stone*, adapted from T.H. White’s *Once and Future King*, the tale of Arthur and

his knights is one that most readers could expect to encounter during a lifetime of reading. The centrality of this figure in fantastic literature points to a complaint, shared by Lewis and Tolkien, that if they were to be able to read the types of books they preferred, they would have to write them themselves. This could undoubtedly be modified to mean “new” books that they liked to read, because both men were acquainted with books that filled many if not all of their criteria for enjoyable literature. The figure of Arthur, important as it has been in the formation of fantasy literature before and since Lewis and Tolkien and read against the backdrop of their critiques of fantastic literature, thus provides a possible “suggestion for future reading.”

In describing one method of writing for children, one which is rooted in the oral telling of tales to an actual child—a method which, I have argued, is approximated, though imperfectly, by the companion/storyteller narrator—Lewis acknowledges a community that emerges because of the interaction between adult and child in this context:

In any personal relation the two participants modify each other. You would become slightly different because you were talking to a child and the child would become slightly different because it was being talked to be an adult. A community, a composite personality, is created and out of that the story grows. (OTW 23)

Though the method of writing for children described is not the method that Lewis used, he was certainly affected by this concept of a “community” existing between adult writer and child reader. In another critical essay, “On Stories,” Lewis explains his belief that, through his criticism and perhaps, by extension, through his stories, he is “contributing to the encouragement of a better school of prose in England: of story that can mediate imaginative life to the masses while not being contemptible to the few” (OS 18). And so the reader and critic may find that, in addition to “mediating the imaginative life of the masses” by providing stories that suit popular taste while possessing literary merit, Lewis uses the opportunity provided to him by the newly formed “community” of writer and young reader, to provide a “reading lesson” of sorts; having successfully “bridged the gap” between the child’s preliterate communal experience of stories and the future life of the solitary reader. In a discussion of Lewis reading in which he concludes by noting the relationship, for Lewis, between reading and love, Thomas Martin notes that “reading with C.S. Lewis takes us far beyond C.S. Lewis” (388). The Narnia Chronicles provide, for those who wish to take their advice, numerous textual recommendations, the most

overt of which is the reference to Arthurian literature in the *Dawn Treader*.

Dabney Adams Hart introduces the aim of education, according to Lewis’s *Experiment in Criticism*, by saying that “[i]nstead of presenting students with material predigested for their assimilation, the teacher should direct them to the raw ingredients, show them the basic techniques of following recipes, and then let them experiment and taste for themselves,” deriving his own “culinary metaphor” from “Lewis’s frequent use of ‘taste’” (91). Certainly some of these raw materials are to be found in the Chronicles. The most frequently discussed are Lewis’s allusions to earlier children’s books, such as those by George MacDonald and E. Nesbit, whom Lewis admired; however, many imaginative works of Western literature also find representation in the pages of Lewis’s stories for children as well, as P. Andrew Montgomery, Kath Filmer, Colin Manlove, Marsha Ann Daigle and others have noted. Among the works linked to the Chronicles are those by Aesop, Homer, Dante, Anderson, Coleridge, and even Orwell. Filmer additionally suggests that “one of the greatest accolades accorded to Lewis is that his writings have encouraged readers to go on reading someone else: William Morris, George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, and Rider Haggard”; she also mentions Milton, Bunyan, and Apuleius (7). While not all of these might be “recommended reading,” Lewis certainly allows for a broad literary selection; and though some of the items may be more easily recognized by highly specialized scholars than casual reader, a pattern of imaginative reading does emerge.

I have suggested that the theoretical list should begin with Arthurian Tales; it would continue (in an undetermined sequence) with Dante’s *Commedia* and *The Odyssey*, to which, as many have noted, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* owes its episodic structure, its journey motif, and its series of more or less treacherous islands. The *Odyssey* connection itself is significant to my discussion, given the emergence of criticism that linked the *Odyssey* to the emerging recognition of oral-formulaic tradition. However, the *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* makes a more general recommendation of fantasy literature, specifically books containing dragons—perhaps especially a dragon named Smaug. In stressing the importance of reading, correct ways of reading, and reading material to Lewis as a scholar and teacher, Dabney Adams Hart cites the fact that “Eustace must learn about dragons painfully, through personal experience, because his education has not prepared him for that kind of reality. He has been cheated of part of his cultural inheritance” (Hart 91). Reading about dragons becomes practical knowledge for the Pevensies, but for any child would contribute to the “longing for wonder” that Lewis describes in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children.” *The Silver Chair*,

described by Manlove as highly literary, offers many often overlooked literary word-plays as contributions to our list: the “Lady of the Green Kirtle” suggests the girdle given to Gawain in *Gawain and the Green Knight*; the giants’ hunting party suggests the days of hunting in the Green Knight’s lands. The chapter titled “Parliament of Owls” might give one leave to add Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* to the reading list, while *Hamlet* is mentioned explicitly in *The Silver Chair* when Prince Rilian’s looks are said to be reminiscent of Prince Hamlet’s. The voyage on a subterranean sea invokes the Epic of Gilgamesh and the subterranean room with sleeping beasts recalls *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. And the crumbled inscription in the Giant City Ruinous might have been left there by Shelley’s “Ozymandius.” Certainly the list continues—to be discovered and lengthened by anyone who “recognizes” an element of Narnia in the canonical texts of Western Literature. Such connections might be more valuable now, with the disappearance of such works from English course syllabi. To suggest that Lewis’s allusions and “borrowings” are pedagogical recommendations for future readings seems plausible, logical, and, on the whole, a functional contribution to the future reading life of his current readers and, one might extrapolate further, future writers, as he saw his hoped that his own critical writing might contribute to the improvement of prose stories in English during his lifetime and noted the connection between reading good books and producing good writing in his writing advice to an American girl, quoted by Hart (76).

Although I have presented it as a positive aspect of the Chronicles, this frequent allusion is more frequently criticized as a lack of originality on the part of their author. David Quinn voices another criticism of the Chronicles, a purported lack of detail, when he quotes Dorothy Sayers as saying, in reference to Dante, that “[i]f you want the reader to accept and believe a tale of marvels, you can do it best by the accumulation of precise and even prosaic detail” (qtd. in Quinn 117). Notably, Dante may be included on the previously mentioned list of “suggested readings.” However, it is perhaps necessary to ask whether Lewis *wanted* his readers to “believe” in Narnia, either literally or in the way it is possible to “believe” in Middle Earth, which certainly operates differently, having been created on a different scale and with a different intention, than Narnia. My suggestion is, probably not. Indeed, Lewis asks in “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” if “anyone suppose[s] that [the child] really and prosaically longs for all of the dangers and discomforts of a fairy tale” (29) to which Lewis provides references, for example when he discusses how unpleasant it is to skin a bear or pluck a fowl. And if an adult reader finds the characters in Narnia thin, the plots of the stories uninteresting, the details lacking, it is perhaps because

he or she has already read the works to which Lewis gives not only a deferential nod, but also, perhaps, a new generation of readers, those who would perhaps understand the wonder of these “classics” in a whole new way because of the wonder imparted by the Narnia books. For, whatever critics may deride in the Chronicles, the truth is that their young readers *did* “believe” in Narnia in a very literal way, to such an extent that one young reader expressed his concern over “lov[ing] Aslan more than Jesus” (Lewis *LTC* 52). I wonder what Lewis might have responded to a reader who professed to loving *Dawn Treader* more than *The Odyssey*? The concepts are not equivalent, but exist in parallel, as Lewis’s texts are certainly preparing readers for a deeper enjoyment and understanding of the *all* of the texts and concepts to which he refers.

In the Chronicles of Narnia, it is possible to observe the way in which Lewis approximates oral modes of discourse in order to transition to the literate, retaining and promoting aspects of both. This interaction between “oral” modes of discourse and literate genres and overall goals relating is also reflected in how the stories were composed, and how they were originally presented to the public. Lewis emerges as an interesting model of a highly literate academic who nevertheless, in his children’s literature, approximates a more “oral” structure (or perhaps, in Ong’s terms, “secondarily oral”) than did Tolkien, though Tolkien was also influenced by oral storytelling and epic traditions.⁷ Tolkien’s primary objection to Lewis’s children’s fiction, that the compositions had too many inconsistencies and blended too many incompatible mythological elements,⁸ may be answered again by referring to oral storytelling: like a storyteller from an oral-formulaic tradition, Lewis drew on embedded “story elements” in his compositions, arranging them as he saw fit and speaking, it is reasonable to suggest, to a different (decontextualized, though perhaps reconsidered) audience with each new volume. Though the books “fit together” chronologically, they are not always consistent, owing to the method of production. Similarly, they were composed in a nonlinear manner, beginning *en medias res*.

Though it has since been accomplished, Colin Manlove expressed reservations about reordering the Chronicles according to internal chronology, noting that “to read them simply in narrative sequence would impose something of a grid on the series,” destroying both the sense of mystery and limiting the novels’ ability to represent Lewis’s concept of reality as composed of co-present acts (*Literary Achievement* 125). Another way to understand this sense of a “superimposed structure” is the transformation of the Chronicles from a non-linear form more closely related to oral storytelling to one which conforms to

expectations of linear plot, which Ong links to “internalized” literacy, describing how “literate and typological cultures are likely to think of consciously contrived narrative as typically designed in a climactic linear plot often diagrammed as the well-known ‘Freytag’s Pyramid’” (Ong 142). Unlike Tolkien, or Ong’s example, Milton, Lewis did not rely on a preconceived notion of the entirety of his works in his head before they were composed in writing. His beginning, *en medias res*, while contrary to the expectation of the mind which has internalized the linearity of novel, does not frustrate the sensibility of the child, whose expectations it is nevertheless difficult to characterize, but who may be characterized as somehow in transition from orality to internalized literacy, and in its resemblance of the structure of oral-formulaic poetry, a nonlinear structure across books should not frustrate the reader of *The Odyssey*. The decision to “linearize” the chronology of the Chronicles, however, reverses the residual orality which characterizes many of the conventions of children’s literature, and though they may still be seen as texts which somehow represent both “stages” of mental development simultaneously, it is difficult to overcome the impression that something—some part of this transitional process, perhaps, or the experience of wonder—is lost.

Notes

- ¹ Lewis. “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said.” *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*. Ed. Walter Hooper. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- ² DuPlessis, Nicole. “Conservation and Anti-Colonialism in the Chronicles of Narnia” in “Wild Things: Ecocriticism and Children’s Literature” Ed. Sid Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd. Wayne State UP. Forthcoming (2004).
- ³ The phrase “writing down,” often used in children’s literature criticism, is derived from Lewis’s “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to be Said” (OOW 38).
- ⁴ Among other theorists of literacy and orality, Walter Ong recognizes the solitary reader as a defining feature of literate culture. My discussion assumes that in children’s literature there are problems with the categories of “orality” and “literacy” if understood as dichotomous, and instead represents childhood acquisition of literacy as a progressive movement from a more oral to a more literate state.
- ⁵ A similar connection between written and oral rhetoric is discussed by Robyn Warhol, who links the narrative “intrusions” of Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot to sermons and Evangelical proselytizing, and Ong writes of Nineteenth Century novelists who

“self-consciously intone, ‘dear reader’, over and over again,” and, so doing, “remind themselves that they are not telling a story but writing one in which both author and reader are having difficulty situating themselves” (103).

- ⁶ Barbara Wall, whose book *The Narrative Voice* is the primary work on narrative theory as applied to children’s literature, asserts the opinion, still dominant in children’s literature criticism, that writing that acknowledges an adult audience, excluding the child reader from all or part of the meaning of a narrative intervention, is a symptom of “writing down” to the child reader (14-15).
- ⁷ One of the chief creative differences between Lewis and Tolkien might productively be considered in terms of “levels” of literacy and orality. Tolkien, though he originally composed *The Hobbit* orally to his children and delivered the Ring trilogy orally to the Inklings, refined the stories on paper, in the manner of Greek rhetoricians who delivered their orations and later copied them to paper from memory. However, Tolkien is known for the meticulous detail with which he worked over every detail of his fantasy world to make it acceptable to the reader. By Tolkien’s own definition, fantasy writing, for whatever age, should be a highly literate composition (though his plot structures may be seen as resembling oral compositions to a degree).
- ⁸ See, for example Christopher, “J.R.R. Tolkien, Narnian Exile.”

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