

## Inklings Forever

---

Volume 5 A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
Frances White Ewbank Colloquium on C.S. Lewis &  
Friends

Article 19

---

6-2006

# C.S. Lewis and the Possibility of Creative Nonfiction

William Duffy  
UNC-Greensboro and Elon University

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Duffy, William (2006) "C.S. Lewis and the Possibility of Creative Nonfiction," *Inklings Forever*: Vol. 5 , Article 19.  
Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings\\_forever/vol5/iss1/19](https://pillars.taylor.edu/inklings_forever/vol5/iss1/19)

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for the Study of C.S. Lewis & Friends at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Inklings Forever* by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).

# **INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V**

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Fifth  
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

Taylor University 2006

Upland, Indiana

---

## **Till We Have Voice: C.S. Lewis and the Possibilities of Creative Nonfiction**

William Duffy

## Till We Have Voice: C.S. Lewis and the Possibilities of Creative Nonfiction

William Duffy

“Lewis talked as he wrote and wrote as he talked,” said Dr. Emrys Jones, who studied under C.S. Lewis at Oxford. At the fifth triennial C.S. Lewis conference at Oxford during the summer of 2002, Dr. Jones recalled his unique relationship with Lewis during an afternoon discussion session, “He helped you say better what you wanted to say.” During his time at Oxford, Lewis was a renowned lecturer, but as a private tutor, Lewis exhibited the makings of a teacher who “never lectured” as Jones put it, but instead dialogued with his students in an effort to see how they were developing as thinkers and writers. In short, he engaged his students and instilled in them an understanding that education isn’t about the passive reception of knowledge, but that it is instead about growing one’s capacity to create knowledge through critical thought and personal introspection.

This winter’s release of Hollywood’s version of Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* evidenced one more ripple, or perhaps in this case a wave, of the imaginative productivity that Lewis’s work has been inspiring for almost half a century since his death. While the blockbuster success of the film is going to inspire an entire new audience to learn about the man behind Narnia, Lewis’s reputation within certain literary and religious circles has been relatively sound for a number of decades. With that said, the critical and biographical works that have been written about Lewis are almost too numerous to count; this last year alone saw the dizzying publication of enough books about Lewis and Narnia to make the part-time Lewis scholar like myself question whether we haven’t plumbed the well too excessively. What more is there to say about Lewis? Can we look at the work of Lewis and see more than literary criticism, Narnia, and mere Christianity? In short, yes, I think we can.

Dr. Jones was most interested in Lewis the teacher, the person who inspired his writing and taught him to say better what he wanted to say. Notwithstanding all his other roles, Lewis was a writing instructor. Despite an ongoing explosion of interest in Lewis’s work and

biography, there has been little scholarship devoted to his writing about writing—mainly because Lewis scholarship has been undertaken by scholars who are chiefly interested in literature and religion rather than in the field of composition. Lewis is known for his definitive scholarly works and inspiring Christian apologetics, but his overwhelming popularity, especially within this latter field, may have overshadowed what this writer has to say about the very art of writing itself.

An important but often overlooked book, Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* is his only published work that presents what might be some of Lewis’s most profound thoughts on writing. Surprisingly, unlike the majority of his other books, *Till We Have Faces* received bad reviews and sold poorly. Lewis, however, thought it was the best writing he had ever done.<sup>1</sup> And so did some of his closest friends, who were very often his most challenging critics, such as Owen Barfield who said, “. . . *Till We Have Faces* was far the best thing he ever did in the sphere of imaginative literature.”<sup>2</sup> In this retelling of the Eros and Psyche myth, Lewis uses his own imaginative supplements to present a compelling story about love and redemption that the original Greek myth doesn’t tell, but what brilliantly stands out in this multifaceted work is the means through which the novel’s central character, Orual, experiences her redemption and self-fulfillment—she writes a memoir. As Orual writes her story, not only does Lewis paint a vivid and restless first-person narrative, he also turns formal writing theory upside down. Instead of composing an essay, Lewis lets his ideas about writing grow out of Orual’s writing, so that a unique picture depicting composition and its possibilities is created organically through the suggestive medium of story. *Till We Have Faces* is a book about writing; moreover, it is a book about the possibilities of writing, not just as a method of recording facts and history or as a means of communication, but also as an art and creative medium, as a tool of self-discovery, a venue for worship, and a

place where public and private thought interweaves into story.

### Writing the Myth

That Lewis chose to present this story as myth offers some indication into why the subject of writing fits so nicely into the novel. Myth often eludes the riggers of time as it tells universal narratives of human experience, yet it still possesses a strong anchor in the ancient. It feels old and wise, so it has a seemingly transcendent aspect that allows it to reach out and touch the human condition regardless of circumstance. Kath Filmer suggests “By locating the action of this novel in what is obviously a pre-Christian era, Lewis distanced it from modern experience and avoided overt identification of it as a work of Christian polemic.”<sup>3</sup> While I agree with Filmer that the story’s setting distances the tale from a recognizable Christian epoch, I don’t think Christian persuasion is what Lewis was aiming for through this novel, or at least not in the same way as his earlier apologetics and the Narnia chronicles. In fact, when you put Orual’s act of writing her complaint against the gods into the context of the book’s mythic structure, an important message is conveyed about the timelessness of writing and its possibilities. A story that can survive so long brings experience, durability, and credit. More than Christian persuasion, the novel is about personal reflection, critical doubt, and the discovery of selfhood.

I believe Peter J. Schakel comes the closest in uncovering why Lewis was so attracted to myth and why it fits so nicely as this novel’s plot base, “. . . myth for Lewis, of course, meant not ‘a fictitious story or unscientific account,’ but a use of narrative structure and archetypal elements to convey through the imagination universal or divine truths not accessible to the intellect alone.”<sup>4</sup> Lewis of course knew mythology, being an avid reader of Norse mythology, but that he would have Orual write her own story makes *Till We Have Faces* notable because never before had Lewis written anything like this before. Not only does he abandon his role as an omniscient narrator, but the character telling the story is a woman—how many of Lewis’s contemporaries wrote first person, female narratives? Commenting about his retelling of the myth, Lewis says, “Nothing was further from my aim than to recapture the peculiar quality of the *Metamorphoses*—the strange compound of picaresque novel, horror, comic, mystagogue’s tract, pornography, and stylistic experiment” (313).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Lewis does capture those qualities in Orual’s story, yet he does so through her writing, thus showing how directly writing can instill that wonder and intrigue despite its age, history, or creator.

Throughout her story it is apparent that Orual is looking for a balance between the rational thinking of the Fox and the religious traditions of Glome. Orual

admits that she wants answers—why her sister was taken from her, why her father despises her, why she’s ugly, and perhaps the most important question of them all, why are the gods so hateful? But these questions neither the Fox and his reason nor the priests and their superstitions can solve for Orual, so she writes in hope of finding a way through her confusion. Having never come to terms with her past, writing her book is all Orual has left. If in the future some traveler from the “Greeklands” comes to Glome, then maybe they will understand Orual’s book. She confesses, “Then he will talk of it among the Greeks where there is great freedom of speech even about the gods themselves. Perhaps their wise men will know whether my complaint is right or whether the god could have defended himself if he had made an answer” (4). Through the act of retelling the priest’s incorrect story, Orual hopes to come to an understanding of her life and the direction that it has taken, and to be at peace with her past. For Orual, writing is a way of knowing and making reconciliations.

Orual’s complaint against the gods is an example of one of the possibilities of writing—to make sense out of confusion. Orual desires tangible proof of either release or acceptance from the gods, nothing in between; and perhaps they will respond to her book, or at least that is what she hopes. But her writing is also an appeal, if not to the gods themselves, then to the Greeks—the people whose society is the embodiment of reason itself, yet she still cannot completely abandon her home—her history. Orual explains, “I write in Greek as my old master taught it to me . . . but I write all the names of people and places in our own language” (3-4). For the time being her comfort comes through writing. She writes what she believes is true, because what she is seeking is truth.

### Bridging the Gap

Through the literal development of Orual’s character as the story progresses, we see more of Orual’s own emotional and spiritual weakness. Her shortcomings become painfully apparent as Orual herself continues to write. Upon finishing her manuscript and reading it over she becomes aware of the gap that separates her frustrated incomplete self from the fulfilled and contented Psyche. It is here in part two of *Till We Have Faces* where Lewis uses Orual to deliberately convey the power of writing. When talking about her manuscript, Orual writes, “I know so much more than I did about the woman who wrote it. What began the change was the very writing itself” (253). The previous accusatory tone that resonated throughout her manuscript in part one of the book has been replaced with a voice that speaks with recognition, surprise and urgency.

She now sees her book, her complaint against the gods, as an incomplete text. “It would be better to

rewrite it from the beginning, but I think there's no time for that . . . Since I cannot mend the book, I must add to it. To leave it as it was would be to die perjured . . ." (253). She realizes that her original intent for writing her story was to maintain a sense of control—her writing was just another projection of her self-centered outlook. What she thought would be a weapon against the gods, her written complaint, turned out to be the very instrument that helped lead to her own salvation. "The change which the writing wrought in me (and of which I did not write) was only a beginning—only to prepare me for the gods' surgery. They used my own pen to probe my wound" (253-4). Writing is a way to remember and recall and make sense of experience, and these acts become means to self-discovery. Though this idea is hardly novel, the manner through which Lewis emphasizes this point is significant because it gives us a glimpse into what kind of writing influenced him not just as a writer, but also as a husband, friend and teacher.

Joe R. Christopher writes, "It seems that Lewis's choice of form was influenced by his experience of writing his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, published the year before *Till We Have Faces*. It had probably taught him a greater inwardness than the writing of his earlier books had."<sup>6</sup> In *Till We Have Faces*, like in *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis isn't speaking to our minds and our intellects, as he had before in his formal works of nonfiction, instead he is speaking directly to our hearts and our sense of imagination. In short, Lewis discovers the genre of creative nonfiction through these works and explores his experience as the springboard for his imaginative writing. When we write through imagination we can discover voice, and voice is what transforms our writing from simple words on paper to powerful messages about life that transcend time and experience.

### Discovering the Story

The biographical history of *Till We Have Faces* is rich with significance. The novel appeared the same year that Lewis married Joy Davidman, and to say that she helped influence *Till We Have Faces* would be an understatement. In fact, not only does Lewis dedicate the text to her, but one of Lewis's stepsons, Douglas Gresham, observes, "I know that the character of Orual . . . was written not only by Jack (Lewis), but also by my mother . . . and the character does contain elements of both people."<sup>7</sup>

But why did Lewis want to retell the Eros and Psyche myth in the first place? Lewis did admit that this particular myth had always fascinated him and that he was instantly drawn to it. In a postscript to the text Lewis explains, "The central alteration in my own version consists in making Psyche's palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes—if 'making' is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at

my first reading of the story, as the way the thing must have been" (313). As Schakel adds, "The tale frustrated Lewis, partly because he saw that such interpretations miss the real point and vastly oversimplify the story, and partly because he saw that Apuleius missed the whole point himself."<sup>8</sup> Essentially, Lewis sensed that the story needed more and that its full potential had not been realized in its current form. So Lewis desired to correct the story, or if "correct" is the wrong word here, he wanted to tell a similar tale to that of Eros and Psyche, but in his story focus would be on Psyche's sister. That Lewis is creating a vivid and complex story for this previously minor character in his own retelling of the myth not only testifies to his own vision as a storyteller, but it adds importance and necessity to the very idea that writing should not diminish the stories around us, but that it should yield even more discoveries and further complexities to what we already recognize as familiar.

In the preface to *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis writes, "The story is, I fear, suffocatingly subjective; the kind of thing I have never written before and shall probably never write again."<sup>9</sup> But sure enough Lewis did write a similar story when he composed *Till We Have Faces*. The relationship between *Till We Have Faces* and *Surprised By Joy* is noteworthy because it gives us some idea of how Lewis was simultaneously thinking and remembering and piecing together both the story of his youth and that of Orual. Referring to *Surprised By Joy*, Lewis biographer A.N. Wilson comments, ". . . in a sense, even as he was writing it, and impishly choosing its title, which by then was charged for him with double meaning, Lewis was becoming aware that it is not so easy to tell the truth about ourselves. And it was out of that dilemma that his novel *Till We Have Faces* would grow."<sup>10</sup> So in one perspective, the writing of Lewis's book coincides with the writing of Orual's. The way through which Orual remembers and pushes through her past and present circumstance is similar to the way that Lewis recalls Apulias's myth and wrestles with how to best retell the story—until both Orual and Lewis discover what is necessary to complete their respective tasks. Orual comes to know herself and discover voice, while Lewis, through his relationship with Joy and the completion of his own autobiography, finally comes to discover how to write creative nonfiction.

### Till We Have Voices

The very writing of her complaint against the gods is what makes Orual see the true nature of her life and it is what finally gives her voice, but her written manuscript is only the material product of her writing—Orual's writing, that is, the development of her voice, has been a lifelong experience. As Lewis said himself in the preface of the first edition of *Till We Have Faces*, "This re-interpretation of an old story has lived in the

author's mind, thickening and hardening with the years, ever since he was an undergraduate. That way, he could be said *to have worked at it most of his life*. Recently, what seemed to be the right form presented itself *and themes suddenly interlocked*" (italics mine).<sup>11</sup> Writing is not conveyed in this story as a quick transference of thought to paper. To say that Orual could have at any point created her text is not the meaning that Lewis wants to get across. Instead, he paints a picture of the writing process in terms of learning, seeing and feeling over an extended period of time, indeed over a lifetime.

Before Orual can discover voice through writing, she has to progress through the experiences that made her writing possible. Furthermore, before she had ever written a word of her manuscript, the actual thought of writing began to play more heavily within her. Orual says, "So back to my writing. And the continual labour of mind to which it put me began to overflow into my sleep. It was a labour of shifting and sorting, separating motive from motive and both from pretext; and this same sorting went on every night in my dreams . . ." (256).

There came a point when Orual knew she was going to write, it was a time when she realized she *had* to write. And that's when her story began to come together in some form and order, but the decision to compose her manuscript came upon Orual deliberately and with great urgency, "I could never be at peace again till I had written my charge against the gods. It burned me from within. It quickened; I was with book, as a woman is with child" (247).

It had been a long road for Orual, but her story came together nonetheless and it even provided her with a new way of seeing. The implication here is found in the way we *perceive* the act of writing. Orual's description of her spiritual discovery is profound, "I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces?" (294). Fittingly, how can we *really* write until we have something to say? Words that are thrown down on paper idly with hardly any feeling behind them are boring and fake. The real face of bad writing is not found in poor style and structure but in empty sentiment. When words really move a reader it is because he or she can empathize with the feelings that pushed those words to paper—and that's the key to what Lewis indirectly suggests about how we think about composition. The importance is not so much that we say things correctly and according to the proper rules, but the importance is that we have something to say that matters to us. The importance is that we *speak* through our words and not mumble; that we react and respond instead of sitting back; that we not only think about what we are saying, but we feel it as well.

In the majority of his books Lewis rationalizes and deduces, he presents his arguments and defends them.

After all, Lewis was the champion of Oxford's Socratic Club, and the majority of his nonfiction works are quite forthright in manner and tone. And whether or not we choose to agree or disagree with Lewis's ideas and opinions, it would be safe to assume that most of us recognize the vigorousness within his writing. But *Till We Have Faces* is not a forceful book despite its dynamic characteristics and thrust of its meanings. However, the role of writing, specifically how writing is a means of discovery, stands out as one of the book's most significant statements. Not only do we see Lewis evolve as a writer, but we also see him bring the uniqueness of his voice in *Surprised By Joy* into the character of Orual. John Sykes adds, "Lewis here gives us a character who presents herself as author. But her most important task in the novel is to become her own best reader."<sup>12</sup>

With creative nonfiction we learn to become our own best reader, and we learn to write for an audience through writing for ourselves. In *Till We Have Faces* Lewis challenges how we think and talk about writing by conveying the act not as an objective tool for *persuading*, but instead conveying it as a lens for seeing and as a vehicle for *suggestion*. Lewis describes writing instead of defining it. That Lewis developed from a staunch persuader into a humble adviser shows that he had discovered more of himself and the kind of writing that really matters, and this at least partly through his creative nonfiction. Dabney Adams Hart writes, "What C.S. Lewis represents for a wide range of readers is what he said we all look for in literature: an enlargement of our own limited experience."<sup>13</sup> But what Lewis shows us about himself in his later works like *Till We Have Faces* and *Surprised By Joy* is that he too desires an enlargement of his own limited experience—and for us, by using his written experience, he's willing to offer his counsel along our own journeys. And for writers he especially offers us his own experience as a means of reference and suggestion. Lewis never tried to directly tell us about writing, but he lets us indirectly get a feel for it. And as a writer speaking to other writers, he does not cater to our intellects, but instead to our imaginations.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Letters of C.S. Lewis*. W. H. Lewis and Walter Hooper, eds. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988. p.492.
- <sup>2</sup> Owen Barfield. *Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan UP, 1989. p.7.
- <sup>3</sup> Kath Filmer. *The Fiction of C.S. Lewis*. London: St. Martin's Press, 1993. p.39.
- <sup>4</sup> Peter J. Schakel. *Reason and Imagination in C.S. Lewis*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984. p.5.
- <sup>5</sup> All quotations from *TWHF* are from the Harcourt paperback edition, 1984.

- <sup>6</sup> Joe R. Christopher. *C.S. Lewis*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987. p.121.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p.120
- <sup>8</sup> Schakel, p.5
- <sup>9</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Surprised by Joy*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955. p.viii.
- <sup>10</sup> A.N. Wilson. *C.S. Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Norton, 1990. p.252.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid* p.6
- <sup>12</sup> John Sykes. "Till We Have Faces and the Broken-Hearted Reader" *Premise*. Vol 5, No.3, July 1998. p.17.
- <sup>13</sup> Dabney Adams Hart. *Through the Open Door: A New Look at C.S. Lewis*. U of Alabama P, 1984. p.146.