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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume V

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

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Always Winter? C.S. Lewis and Hope for the Visual Arts

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Always Winter?
C.S. Lewis and Hope for the Visual Arts

Jerry L. Easley

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.
—Christina Rossetti*

What relevance do Lucy, Mr. Tumnus, and Narnia have to our post-modern world? In 1991, three days before Orthodox Christmas Eve, fifty artists and I traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia to celebrate the first official recognition of Orthodox Christmas and the changing of the name Leningrad back to St. Petersburg. As we rode through the night, Communist apartment blocks were lit only by candles because of power outages. When we arrived at our four star hotel, we were not allowed to go to the main entrance but were pointed to the service entrance and required to unload our own luggage and drag it through the hotel basement since we had not paid off the mafia who controlled the entrance and parking lot. It was a bleak introduction to the realities of Russian society.

Upon reflection I was struck by the similarity between atheistic Communist Russia and Narnia under the rule of the White Witch. “Always winter and never Christmas” is a stark description of both. I would suggest it is also an apt metaphor for the arts and their cultural influence today. The gradual loss of “Christmas,” or the centrality of the Incarnation, has engendered a crisis of isolation and irrelevance in the fine arts that we can ill afford. C.S. Lewis, both by his example in and his views on creativity and community, offers hope for the visual arts.

To examine the clues that Lewis gives us about creativity and community, I would like to begin with a story about Pope John Paul II. In *John Paul the Great: Remembering a Spiritual Father*, Peggy Noonan describes the Pope’s first visit to Poland while it was

still under Communist rule; a visit in which “he went to Poland and changed the boundaries of the world.”¹ The Pope was speaking on the vigil of the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on Christ’s apostles, and he enlarged upon this theme.

What was the greatest of the works of God? Man. Who redeemed man? Christ. Therefore, he declared, ‘Christ cannot be kept out of the history of man in any part of the globe, at any longitude or latitude . . . The exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man! . . . The massed crowd thundered its response: “We want God!”’²

The Pope’s clarity of vision elicited this remarkable response from the citizens of an atheist society. If C.S. Lewis were speaking to contemporary artists, I believe his message would be the same. The Incarnation of Christ redeemed and liberated the image and narrative for all time. Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation” (Colossians 1:15) and as such He shows representation to be holy and sanctified, a viable window to God. Therefore Christ cannot be excluded from art or art history, because His presence infuses and defines both. Though the trajectory of contemporary art has slowly eradicated transcendence of every sort in accepted artwork through its misguided search, I believe the unheard cry of artists today echoes that of the Poles:

“We want God!” Lewis speaks profoundly to that cry in several important ways.

First, Lewis demonstrates a deep connection to pagan myth while viewing Jesus’s Incarnation as the fulfillment of those myths. Lewis freely integrates the myths that he loved into the very stories that point to Christ as King. In *Prince Caspian*, for instance, Aslan’s mounting triumph over the Telmarines is celebrated and aided by pagan figures Bacchus and Silenus. “One was a youth, dressed only in a fawn-skin, with vine-leaves wreathed in his curly hair. His face would have been almost too pretty for a boy’s, if it had not looked so extremely wild.”³ Soon there is a call for “Refreshments!” and Bacchus, the god of wine, provides divinely delicious grapes. When Susan and Lucy later realize the identity of the creatures, Susan comments, “I wouldn’t have felt safe with Bacchus and all his wild girls if we’d met them without Aslan.’ ‘I should think not,’ said Lucy.”⁴ Lewis shows that pagan myths, under the rule of Aslan in Narnia and Christ in our world, enrich rather than threaten the work of Jesus.

Lewis patterns an older usage of myth that was prevalent in the Renaissance and before. Renaissance masters, including Giotto in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua and Signorelli in his chapel in the Duomo at Orvieto, also referenced pagan history. In both chapels, images of pagan myths stand near those of Biblical revelation. Signorelli portrays pagan philosophers and myth makers in *grisaille*, confined by decorative borders. In the Scrovegni Chapel, Giotto includes pagan myth on cameo vignettes flanking the large panels of the chapel’s narrative. For example, to the left of the fresco of the entombment of Christ he places the Old Testament scene of Jonah and the fish along with a cameo based in pagan myth of a bear feeding her cubs in a cave. This juxtaposition of images provides a visual explanation of how Christ’s entombment fulfilled those prophetic stories—both Biblical and pagan pointed toward the truth.

Early Christian artists were adept at seeing Christ as the fulfillment of all myths, as Lewis’s “true myth.” What Christians knew in the Renaissance is explained by Lewis when he refers to the “humiliation of the myth”: “The essential meaning of all things came down from the “heaven” of myth to the “earth” of history . . . That is the humiliation of myth into fact.”⁵

By utilizing pagan myth, Lewis not only illuminates the essential truth present in many human stories but also teaches a respect for artistic history. Current artists live in a very different world. Myth is dismissed as nonsense. Artists are disconnected from art history and its great symbols. This break from art history and the tyranny of the new have created an artistic myopia. The work that is created is often isolated, centered in the self or human concerns. At best, it is based on a shallow transcendence rooted in current political and social trends. Lewis’s writing offers us a vision of a different approach. His example,

along with that of earlier Christians, calls artists to a re-enlivened creativity that honors the past and embraces the importance of truth embedded within myth.

Secondly, Lewis draws a distinction between practicing religion and practicing the Incarnation—the Indwelling presence in our lives. There is a great trend today to have many discussions about “art and religion.” Have you ever noticed that most of the reviews of “religious art” are put in the back section of the paper near the obituaries, thus rendering the art powerless? As post-modernists, we accept realities that are beyond description, but we do not attempt to bring them into a cohesive connection with life and objectivity. According to Lewis, religion is intellectualized dissection of realities (that are ultimately beyond description); the practice of which is both untrue and painful. He describes his experience of religion as a child and how he nearly drove himself mad in his misguided attempts at piety: “I had rendered my private practice of that religion a quite intolerable burden. . . . No clause of my prayer was to be allowed to pass muster unless it was accompanied by what I called a ‘realization,’ by which I meant a certain vividness of the imagination and the affections.”⁶ As Lewis illustrates, the practice of religion becomes a practice of introspection that ultimately destroys itself. It is the pursuit and presence of the Other, which Christ’s Incarnation made possible for us, that allows for freedom and creation.

Contemporary artists, however, have turned inward, trying to locate a transcendence by examining the landscape of the self or stepping into a limited “other.” Olafur Eliasson illustrated this desire with his *The Weather Project* at the Tate Modern a few years ago. *The Weather Project* was a large art installation of mirrors, fog, and light simulating a sunrise or sunset, suspending the viewer in the “forces of nature.” It eliminated the walls, pedestals and labels of a museum; even the marketing avoided any visual representation of the installation (thereby avoiding a pre-conceived encounter with the art). Instead the ads simply posed provocative questions or observations about weather and its effect on human behavior. Lewis would be pleased.

Eliasson’s work challenges the given of art commodification through advertising and hype. I admire that nobility and I think post-post-modern artists are right in this insistence. However, Eliasson’s installation, which allows hardy viewers to climb up and see the mechanism that produces the fog and sun, implies that the artist with his manufactured “natural” environment is the Wizard of Oz, hiding behind a curtain. Initially he invites a view of nature as the transcendent in his artwork. With the mechanics revealed, however, even the Otherness of nature is portrayed as a ploy or trick initiated by the artist.

Lewis’s message of hope lies in escaping the autonomous self with its self-conscious religious

sensibilities and moving toward the presence of God who is beyond nature and super-nature.⁷ Lewis turns upside down the contemporary myth that the artist has to reinvent himself or become a high priest for society. Instead, the artist is a servant taking joy in the realities that surround him, the relationships that enrich him, and the discoveries of those who preceded him. We also see, through Lewis's interactions with the Inklings, that the creative process is not only a solitary occupation but also one forged in relationship with other artists. Lewis and the Inklings believed in an oral tradition. Visual artists have the same potential for conversation regarding a visual tradition. Through his own example, Lewis draws artists out of the self and its temptation toward introspective religion into a pursuit of the presence of God and the presence of others.

Christmas on Earth, A Modern Alternative: Becoming the Unman

Is it possible to have Christmas without the Incarnation? Many modernist artists have thought so. Early modernism began by denying any search for spirituality. Indeed, "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985,"⁸ published in 1986, was the first contemporary admission that modern artists explored more than just paint on canvas and actually did seek a spirituality through their artwork. These investigations led artists to a deep occult and non-material spirituality that sidestepped the Incarnation. They were only doing what artists have to do. Art always flows from worship, and artists could not live with the consequences of a purely rational, non-spiritual world. What happened with artists is similar to the development of Weston in Lewis's *Space Trilogy*.

In Lewis's story *Out of the Silent Planet*, the character Weston is originally a materialist. He, like many modernist artists, dismissed any presence of the divine as only a projection of the self. In Lewis's later story, *Perelandra*, Weston has gotten rid of his materialism. He now locates God within himself. His self-centeredness has become self-worship. He begins to explore what he calls "the Force"—pure spirit, where there is no distinction between good and evil.

In a similar way, largely unknown artist Barbara Rubin, a member of Warhol's Factory, began Weston's search. Art critic Daniel Belasco recounts in the "The Vanished Prodigy" what he considers her brilliant and all too brief career, lasting from 1963 to 1968. Rubin's 29 minute film, *Christmas on Earth*, is a record of an orgy staged in a New York City apartment. Her work, according to Belasco, "deepens our understanding of a period when artists pushed self-determined and guiltless sexuality into the public sphere to catalyze social revolution."⁹

Christmas on Earth is a filmed version of a search for joy that was birthed in modernism. In Rubin's words, *Christmas on Earth* is "pure experience in every

way. The people in it were beautiful. Nobody censored what they themselves did or anybody else was doing."¹⁰ Belasco quotes Rubin's words recorded by *Newsweek* art critic Jack Kroll: "When I shoot I'm just emanating feeling all over—it's like it's someone else shooting, not me."¹¹ Rubin's description eerily reminds me of the words of Weston: "Call it a Force. A great, inscrutable Force, pouring up into us from the dark bases of being. A Force that can choose its instruments. . . . I'm being guided."¹²

Weston's search for spirituality without Jesus leads him to interact with the occult, an experience that eventually strips him of his humanity. As Leanne Payne describes, "the rest of Weston's story is one of incarnational evil: a supernatural evil force speaking and acting through one who has lost the good of reason and of humanity. Weston has become "the Unman."¹³ Or, as Rubin said of her experience, "It's backward living . . . We watch it rather than live it."¹⁴ As Weston rejects the Incarnation of Christ, he is forced to a different kind of incarnation that destroys and defeats. Similarly, the rejection of Christ's Incarnation in art history and the fine arts leads to the pursuit of a dark incarnation of the "life force" as a desperate attempt to produce a transcendence and spirituality apart from God. Ironically, in the late 1960s Barbara Rubin experienced a dramatic personal and artistic reversal. She joined a counter-cultural Orthodox Jewish group and effectively disappeared from the art world, requesting that *Christmas on Earth* and her other works be burned.

Here again, Lewis speaks powerfully to the artistic search for meaning. His message is condensed through a brilliantly visualized scene from the new cinematic version of *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Lucy joins Mr. Tumnus for tea. Slowly Mr. Tumnus appears to become a genuinely creepy figure, much like a sexual predator. After serving her tea, he picks up his pipe (Lewis brilliantly casts him in the form of Pan); the camera closes in on the fireplace and the dancing flames as he plays a mesmerizing tune. The flames become dancers dancing in a circle, visually repeating Matisse's dancers. Suddenly Aslan appears roaring in the flames, extinguishing the fire and the candlelight in the room. He literally sucked the oxygen out of the room. Here the movie taps into Lewis's understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.

To illustrate, I would like you to come with me on a visit the Holy Land; specifically Caesarea Philippi, reputedly the birthplace of Pan. Caesarea Philippi was the religious and cultural capital of Jesus's day. It was filled with temples and built around the sacred spring that served as the center of Dionysian worship. Pagan nuns (who probably looked like Matisse's dancers gone bad!) would dance themselves into a frenzy and then perform animal or human sacrifice. It is here that Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" and gave us His cultural directive: ". . . on this rock I will build My

church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”¹⁵

Immediately following Jesus’s question and Peter’s affirmation, Jesus goes to the Mount of Transfiguration. Archeologists now believe that the Transfiguration took place on the top of Mount Hermon, which towers above Caesarea Philippi in the distance. Why do Elijah and Moses appear here with Him? I believe that it is because Elijah and Moses both dealt with and overcame Baal worship: Moses by throwing down the tablets and repenting for the children of Israel, and Elijah by calling down fire on the prophets of Baal. Pan, Baal, Dionysian worship are all connected with the dark forces of occult spirituality, the landscape through which modern man, along with Weston, seeks the spiritual Other (Lewis calls it the “life force.”)

As Lewis would describe, here too at Caesarea Philippi there is a deeper magic. The springs, the birthplace of Pan, were known as “the gates of hell,” made reference to by Jesus. These springs are fed by the melted snows of Mount Hermon. Christ’s presence ironically pours forth from the mountain where He was recognized as God to the springs of the pagan god over whom He rules. The obvious is made clear to us: Jesus is over all and the only source of our true spirituality.

The snows of Mount Hermon may be melting, but it is still winter in Narnia. During tea, Mr. Tumnus describes to Lucy his longing for the days before the reign of the Witch, such as “. . . summer when the woods were green and old Silenus on his fat donkey would come to visit them, and sometimes Bacchus himself, and then the streams would run with wine instead of water and the whole forest would give itself up to jollification for weeks on end.”¹⁶ Through Tumnus’s description, Lewis, like Matisse, brilliantly describes the joy found in this life. However, instead of a limited knee-jerk reaction against the misuse of sexuality and celebration in a Bacchanalian feast, he also uses this pagan celebration to point to a truer experience of joy. Lewis gives us a clue to that joy when he speaks through Tumnus who says, “the streams would run with wine instead of water.” Lewis’s hand directly points us to another celebration; the wedding feast at Cana and the scene of the first miracle performed by Christ in His ministry when He turns water into wine. This miracle is a declaration of the end of winter and the Queen’s robbery of joy. The wedding feast at Cana, in turn, points to the ultimate wedding feast of Christ and the Church. The humiliated myth, which became historical truth at the wedding of Cana, points to the celebration that is fulfilled beyond time.

In conclusion, Lewis is the modern seer—the bridge between the spiritual in a post-modern society and God’s presence in the world. His personal struggles enable him to articulate the modern dilemma that rationalism and the idolatry of the self have not been able to solve. As we move more deeply into the post-

post-modern reality, Lewis’s works point us to that which most satisfies our soul. It is a place where deep spirituality meets human need. It is a place where art is empowered and is liberated back into its proper relationship with worship. Truly, “*now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer . . .*”¹⁷

Notes

- ¹ Peggy Noonan, *John Paul the Great: Remembering a Spiritual Father* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 24.
- ² Noonan, 27.
- ³ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, (New York: Harper Trophy, 1994), 167.
- ⁴ Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 169.
- ⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: Harper Collins, 1976), 130-131.
- ⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, (United States: Harvest Books, 1966), 61-62.
- ⁷ To explore these categories, see Leanne Payne’s trio of books, *The Healing Presence, Real Presence and Restoring the Christian Soul*.
- ⁸ Maurice Tuckman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985, L.A. County Museum of Art*, (New York: Abeville Press Publishers, 1986).
- ⁹ Daniel Belasco, “The Vanished Prodigy,” *Art in America*, December 2005: 61.
- ¹⁰ Belasco, 64.
- ¹¹ Belasco, 65.
- ¹² C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*, (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), 92.
- ¹³ Leanne Payne, *The Healing Presence*, (Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 252.
- ¹⁴ Belasco, 65.
- ¹⁵ Matthew 16:18, New King James Version.
- ¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 16.
- ¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1996), p 9, lines 1-2.

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