1 Approaching C.S. Lewis

1.1 Vocation

C.S. Lewis's tutor, William T. Kirkpatrick, fondly known as "The Great Knock," wrote to Albert Lewis about his son's prospects: "You may make a writer or a scholar of him, but you'll not make anything else. You may make up your mind to *that"* (Lewis 1955b: 183). Kirkpatrick was right on both counts: Lewis became both a writer and a scholar. His initial ambition was to be a poet, and his first publications were a collection of poems, *Spirits in Bondage*, first published in 1919 (Lewis 2015: 73–123), and a lyrical poem, *Dymer*, published in 1926 (2015: 145–218). Lewis would write poetry for the rest of his life, although his ambition to be a great poet would fade.

Lewis's scholarship reflected his studies at Oxford, initially in Classical Languages and Literature, together with Philosophy and Ancient History, and to increase his job prospects, English Literature. Lewis's work in philosophy is apparent in *The Abolition of Man*, *Miracles*, and essays like "The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment." His literary scholarship is evidenced in works such as *The Allegory of Love*, *English Literature in the 16th Century Excluding Drama*, *Studies in Words*, and *The Discarded Image*.

Lewis's fiction includes his children's stories (The Chronicles of Narnia, in seven books), a science fiction trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*), a reinterpretation of the myth of Cupid and Psyche (*Till We Have Faces*), as well as satire (*Screwtape Letters*, and *The Great Divorce*).

Among Lewis's apologetic writings is *The Problem of Pain*, the work that caught the attention of J.W. Welch (Hooper 1996: 303), Director of the BBC's Religious Broadcasting Department, and led to an invitation to do a series of radio broadcasts that would become his best-known apologetic work, and one of the most influential Christian books in the twentieth century, *Mere Christianity.* A survey of church leaders conducted in 2000 by the influential American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* ranked it first among the "100 books that had a significant effect on Christians in this century" (Marsden 2016:1).

Lewis wrote four autobiographical volumes: *All My Road Before Me: The Diary of C. S. Lewis, 1922–1927*; *The Pilgrim's Regress*, a semi-autobiographical allegorical account of his conversion; *Surprised by Joy*, a more accessible and mature conversion account; and *A Grief Observed*, Lewis's heart-wrenching reflections after the death of his wife Joy.

Kirkpatrick's assessment of Lewis's prospects as a scholar and writer was spot-on. He would have been shocked, though, to learn that the young man he tutored, who thrived on reading and reflection, would spend so much time

outside of his study: lecturing to the RAF (Babbage 1980; Gilmore 2005); addressing the nation on the BBC (Phillips 2002); enjoying the companionship of a circle of Christian friends, the Inklings (Duriez 2015b; Glyer 2007; Zaleski and Zaleski 2015); and serving as the president of the Oxford Socratic Club (Aldwinkle 2015; Hooper 1979; Lewis 1970: 126–8; Mitchell 1997). Of his time studying with Kirkpatrick, Lewis wrote, "For if I could please myself I would always live as I lived there" (1955b: 141), and emphasized a key component of those pleasant days: "it is an essential of the happy life that a man would have almost no mail and never dread the postman's knock" (143). At this time, Lewis loathed interruptions and interference. After his conversion, he had a different perspective on such things as "the postman's knock":

> The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's "own," or "real" life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life – the life God is sending one day by day. (Lewis 2004b: 595)

From Lewis's public persona and his belief that he had "a duty to answer fully" letters from "serious inquirers" (504), "grew hundreds – eventually thousands – of letters replete with spiritual guidance to a wide range of inquirers among them spiritual seekers, recent converts . . . others struggling with temptation and guilt, and many healthy Christians simply in search of sound teaching" (Dorsett 2004: 116).

Although Lewis's writings and activities were diverse, they all reflected a sense of vocation. At the outbreak of World War II, Lewis gave a sermon "Learning in War-Time," in which he addressed the topic of vocation and underscored two principles:

All we do should be done to the glory of God:

> All our merely natural activities will be accepted, if they are offered to God, even the humblest, and all of them, even the noblest, will be sinful if they are not. (1980: 25)

> The work of a Beethoven and the work of a charwoman become spiritual on precisely the same condition, that of being offered to God, of being done humbly "as to the Lord." (26)

A person's interests are a good indication of his vocation:

> An appetite for these things [knowledge and beauty] exists in the human mind, and God makes no appetite in vain. We can therefore pursue knowledge as such, and beauty as such, in the sure confidence that by doing so we are either advancing to the vision of God ourselves or indirectly helping others to do so. (27)

For Lewis himself, a vocation-shaping circumstance came in the form of a physical defect:

> What drove me to write was the extreme manual clumsiness from which I have always suffered. I attribute it to a physical defect which my brother and I both inherit from our father; we have only one joint in the thumb. The upper joint (that furthest from the nail) is visible, but it is a mere sham; we cannot bend it. But whatever the cause, nature laid on me from birth an utter incapacity to make anything. With pencil and pen I was handy enough . . . but with a tool or a bat . . . I have always been unteachable. It was this that forced me to write. (Lewis 1955b: 12)

While Lewis's physical defect contributed to his sense of vocation, it was not what he would call a life-bending circumstance:

> Our life has bends as well as extension: moments at which we realize that we have just turned some great corner, and that everything, for better or worse, will always henceforth be different. (Lewis 1961: 36)

The great turning point in Lewis's life was his realization that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. That change led to a special calling: "Since my conversion, it has seemed my particular task to tell the outside world what all Christians believe" (quoted in Hooper 1996: 297).

For Further Reading: In *C.S. Lewis's List* (Werther & Werther 2015), ten Lewis scholars introduce and discuss the works Lewis identified as having had the greatest impact on his sense of vocation. Will Vaus devotes a trilogy to these works (2014; 2015; 2018). For a selection of Lewis's letters of spiritual counsel, see (Lewis 2008).

1.2 *Mere Christianity*

That calling was nowhere more apparent than in *Mere Christianity*, where he sought "to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times" (Lewis 2001b: viii), and – by extension – in The Chronicles of Narnia:

> At some point during the time he was writing the Chronicles (between 1949 and 1953) Lewis revised the three separate BBC talks into a single volume . . . Thus *Mere Christianity* was fresh in Lewis's mind during the time he was writing the Chronicles and that may account, in part at least, for the numerous parallels in imagery and word choice between it and various Chronicles. Those parallels, in several instances, seem to be central to the plot or structure of the stories and to have a significance far beyond clarification of a particular idea or doctrine in the stories. (Schakel 1980: xiii)

In *The Fame of C.S. Lewis*, Stephanie L. Derrick underscores the ongoing influence of The Chronicles of Narnia and *Mere Christianity:*

> While there are no official sales numbers available, one of Lewis's heirs recently claimed that over 100 million copies of the Narnia books had been sold in more than forty languages . . . His non-fiction book *Mere Christianity* is annually one of the top fifty bestselling religious titles, at 250,000 copies a year and another 50,000 in audio books. (Derrick 2018: 2)

In contrast to these bestsellers, Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism* is one of the literary writings Mark Neal and Jerry Root include in their volume, *The Neglected Lewis*. In *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis makes a fundamental distinction between receiving and using a work:

> A work of (whatever) art can be either "received" or "used." When we "receive" it we exert our senses and imagination and various other powers according to the pattern invented by the artist. When we use it we treat it as assistance for our own activities. (1960a: 88)

> The first demand any work of art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way. (There is no good asking first whether the work before you deserves such a surrender, for until you have surrendered you cannot possibly find out.) (19)

Although Lewis had art and literature in mind, the receiving/using distinction can be applied more broadly to cover not only The Chronicles of Narnia, but *Mere Christianity* as well. In order to understand what sort of work *Mere Christianity* is, it is helpful to know how it came about. The first step in receiving a work is to identify its genre. *Mere Christianity* combines three earlier works, each consisting of scripts from Lewis's BBC broadcasts, with minimal editing (Marsden 2016: 189–91). Lewis was allotted ten or fifteen minutes for each talk. The BBC's 1942 handbook gives a good indication of the kind of talk the BBC wanted:

> In a time of uncertainty and questioning it is the responsibility of the Church – and of religious broadcasting as one of its most powerful voices – to declare the truth about God and His relation to men. It has to expound the Christian faith in terms that can be easily understood by ordinary men and women, and to examine the ways in which that faith can be applied to present-day society during these difficult times. (quoted in Phillips 2002: 78)

Within these parameters, Lewis's goal was to "to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times" (Lewis 2001b: viii). Continually focusing on Lewis's objective is the key to "receiving" *Mere Christianity.*

Lewis reported that there was something of a consensus regarding his identification of core Christian claims: "So far as I can judge from reviews and letters written to me, the book did at least succeed in presenting an agreed upon or common, or central, or 'mere' Christianity" (2001b: xi). Given Lewis's coverage of the objectivity of the moral law, the deity of Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity, "the central Christian message" (the atonement), the cardinal and theological virtues, and so forth, the consensus is not surprising.

Identifying core doctrines is one matter; staying within that core is another. Consider the doctrine of purgatory. Lewis scholar Jerry Walls writes, "Lewis's belief in purgatory flows easily and consistently out of his theology, particularly his [transformational] account of the nature of salvation" (Walls 2012: 157). The theology Walls has in mind finds expression in *Mere Christianity* (2001b: 158–63). Though Lewis does not draw undue attention to that implication of transformational salvation in *Mere Christianity* – the word "purgatory" nowhere appears in *Mere Christianity*, as it does in *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer* (108–9) – the implication is there: "Whatever suffering it may cost you in your early life, whatever inconceivable purification it may cost you after death" (2001b: 202), Christ will not rest "until you are literally perfect" (202). If Walls is right, and an affirmation of purgatory is not among central Christian beliefs, then Lewis seems to have strayed from core Christian beliefs. What might Lewis have said in response? He might well have agreed, and – as already noted – pointed out that he avoided using the word "purgatory" because he did not want to highlight a divisive doctrine. However, he might have argued that because salvation is transformational, he could not have both correctly portrayed salvation and completely avoided the implication of purgatory.

Identifying basic beliefs is but one step. After that comes explanation and defense, and both admit of degrees. It would be inappropriate to hold Lewis to the same standard as a theologian writing for scholars. When Lewis thought he was being judged according to that standard, he wrote:

> My task was therefore simply that of a *translator* – one turning Christian doctrine, or what he believed to be such, into the vernacular, into language that unscholarly people would attend to and could understand. For this purpose a style more guarded, more *nuancé*, finelier shaded . . . would have been worse than useless. (Lewis 1970: 183)

> Suppose the image [comparing the Trinity, three persons while remaining one being, to a cube, six squares while remaining one cube] is vulgar. If it gets across to the unbeliever what the unbeliever desperately needs to know, the vulgarity must be endured. (182)

Readers who do not hold *Mere Christianity* to an inappropriately high academic standard may nonetheless point out shortcomings in some of Lewis's explanations and defenses. If they do, they may find themselves in the company of the author himself. For example, when Lewis wrote on the Christian doctrine of marriage, he acknowledged that his perspective was limited: "I have never been married myself, and therefore can only speak second hand" (2001b: 104). "If you disagree with me, of course, you will say, 'He knows nothing about it, he is not married.' You may quite possibly be right." (2001b: 109). And regarding his defense of the deity of Christ, he came to recognize the need for a more comprehensive account: "something must be said about the historicity" (Lewis 1970: 101).

Receiving Lewis's work well – reading it in light of his stated goal – requires careful thought. The result may be agnosticism, acceptance of Christianity, or even rejection of it. Lewis was clear: "I am not asking anyone to accept Christianity if his best reasoning tells him that the weight of evidence is against it" (Lewis 2001b: 140).

For Further Reading: Thomas C. Oden devotes three volumes (2001a; 2001b; 2001c) to expressing "an ordered view of the faith of the Christian community upon which there has been generally substantial agreement between the traditions of East and West, including Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox" (2001a: ix).

1.3 The Chronicles of Narnia

As with *Mere Christianity*, so too with The Chronicles of Narnia: When determining the nature of this work it is helpful to know how it came about. In his essay, "It All Began with a Picture," Lewis wrote:

> One thing I am sure of. All my seven Narnian books, and my three science-fiction books, began with seeing pictures in my head. At first they were not a story, just pictures. The *Lion* all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood. This picture had been in my mind since I was about sixteen. (1982: 53)

Lewis explained in an essay, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children," how a story may emerge from pictures:

> I have never exactly "made" a story. With me the process is much more like bird-watching than like either talking or building. I see pictures. Some of these pictures have a common flavour, almost a common smell, which groups them together. Keep quiet and watch and they will begin joining themselves up. If you were very lucky . . . a whole set might join themselves so consistently that there you had a complete story; without doing anything yourself.

> But more often (in my experience always) there are gaps. Then at last you have to do some deliberate inventing, have to contrive reasons why these characters should be in these various places doing these various things. (1982: 41)

As Lewis wrote in "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said," his deliberate inventing was not a matter of fitting in predetermined morals:

> Some people think that I began by asking myself how I could say something about Christianity to children; then fixed on the fairy tale as an instrument . . . then drew up a list of basic Christian truths and hammered out "allegories" to embody them. This is all pure moonshine. I couldn't write in that way at all. (Lewis 1982: 46)

Rather, any moral from the author should arise "inevitably from the whole cast of the author's mind" (42), "from whatever spiritual roots you have succeeded in striking during the whole course of your life" (41). What arises from pictures in the author's mind and spiritual roots will find its way into print only if the author can find an appropriate form for his material:

> In the Author's mind there bubbles up every now and then the material for a story. . . . This ferment leads to nothing unless it is accompanied with the longing for a Form: verse or prose, short story, novel, play or what not. (45)

In the case of The Chronicles of Narnia:

> As these images sorted themselves into events (i.e., became a story) they seemed to demand no love interest and no close psychology. But the Form which excludes these things is the fairy tale. And the moment I thought of that I fell in love with the Form itself. (46)

In *Reading with the Heart: The Way into Narnia*, Peter J. Schakel aptly describes the Narnian stories as fairy tales embodying fantasy and romance:

> As fairy tales, then, the Chronicles will be characterized by strangeness and wonder, usually produced by magic, but at the same time, as fantasies, they must be believable and have an internal consistency. Such believability is attained, in fairy tales which are also fantasies, by creation of a separate, "enchanted" world into which characters and readers are taken. (Schakel 1980: 2)

> In the case of the Chronicles of Narnia, one must begin with the understanding that, within their form as fairy tales, they employ the narrative pattern, or *mythos*, of romance. The romance is characterized by a standard plot, one of quest or adventure . . . it is set in a courtly or chivalric age, often of highly developed manners and chivalry; it stresses knightly ideals of courage, honor, mercifulness to an opponent. (11)