C. S. LEWIS AND THE INKLINGS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE

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C. S. Lewis began his career in the wake of the devastation of World War I. Besides the enormous loss of life, the Great War also led to a collapse in the traditional art forms of western culture. Orchestral music, opera, and ballet continued to be produced, but in an academic way for a small audience. Painting and sculpture continued to be produced, but for a small audience. Poetry continued to be written, but for a small audience. Lewis and his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, along with several other friends who made up their literary circle known as the Inklings, represent one small part of a segment of the literary world that dug in their heels and determined to preserve narrative prose.

The very nature of philosophy and what one could meaningfully say about anything had fallen under suspicion. The legitimacy of value statements of any kind was questioned. The very concept of meaning and purpose came under attack. In this context, the Inklings talked and wrote about stories as some of them also began to write stories of their own.

THE DEATH OF ART FORMS

C. S. Lewis, better than most academics, understood how art forms die. As a scholar of medieval and renaissance literature, he had made a study of how the art forms of the Classical world died in

the transition to the medieval world. He also understood how the art forms of the medieval world died with the coming of the Renaissance. The way artists painted changed in the medieval world because of what people believed about the world in which they lived. The way people made music changed at the beginning of the medieval world, represented by such forms as the Gregorian chant. In his work as a scholar, however, Lewis focused on the origins and death of allegorical poetry and epic poetry.

In *The Allegory of Love* (1936) C. S. Lewis explains how allegorical poetry became the dominant form of storytelling in the West for a thousand years after the collapse of the Roman Empire. In this scholarly study, Lewis demonstrates how the Christian faith changed the very nature of love and marriage over this thousand year period from one in which marriage was only an economic transaction between two families to one in which marriage became a commitment of love between two people. Lewis marvels that a new kind of story appeared in the eleventh century that reflects the changing view of love and marriage. Because it is one of our culture's most popular kinds of story, it is hard to believe that this kind of story has not always been popular in every culture. It is the love story.

In *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) Lewis explains how epic poetry works and traces its development in several different cultures. In its primary form, epic poetry like Homer's *Iliad* with its tale of the Trojan War focuses on the exploits of individual heroes and their admirable traits that the culture hopes to perpetuate from one generation to the next. In the development of epic to its secondary form, however, the epic story becomes the story of a great nation like Virgil's *Aeneid* and the founding of Rome. The last great epic poem in English was Milton's *Paradise Lost* published in 1667. The last great allegory in English was Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* published in 1678. With the publication of these two great works, western culture abandoned the form for telling stories that it had used for over a thousand years. The old forms died, but the thirst for story only grew. Shakespeare's plays and the extended prose narrative that became the novel, replaced allegory and epic.

STORIES IN A FELLOWSHIP OF FRIENDS

In the early 1930s, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien began the habit or discipline of meeting together each week in Oxford to talk about what they were writing and to exchange criticism of each other's work. Joined by a few of their likeminded friends, they came to be called the Inklings. They met for regular discussion in Lewis' rooms at Magdalen College every Thursday night during term. Lewis was always known to his friends as Jack and Tolkien they called Ronald or Tollers. These men had survived the trenches of the Great War, so they understood conflict and they had a sense of what matters in the world. International conflict reawakened during the world-wide Depression of the 1930s. The Communists of Russia sought to spread revolution across Europe and Asia. The Fascists of Italy and Germany sought to recreate old empires. Closer at home, however, a revolution had erupted at the universities that had the potential for altering how every academic discipline understood itself and the nature of knowledge and education.

An intellectual movement came out of World War I that questioned the very idea of meaning and purpose. This kind of thinking took many forms and moved in different directions, but it had a huge impact on the arts. Narrative, or a good story, depends upon the story teller's ability to recognize what is important and what is not. A good literary detective must distinguish what is important to the case. Anyone telling an anecdote must recognize what aspects of an event have meaning. Everyone has had the experience of severe boredom whenever a certain someone we know begins to talk. They can talk for hours, but they never seem to say anything. They can recite a chronicle of everything they did, everywhere they went, everyone they met, and everything they saw over great spans of time. These people can make us aware of how long eternity must be, and they can do it in a matter of ten minutes. These people cannot tell the story of their own lives because they cannot distinguish the significance of the passing moments.

Storytelling involves more than a chronicling of information. An extract from the diary of Major Warren Lewis will illustrate the art of telling a story. In this brief anecdote, Warnie meets Hugo

Dyson who with Tolkien had taken part in the critical conversation about myth that finally turned C. S. Lewis toward faith in Jesus Christ. The diary entry for Saturday, February 18, 1933 begins in the rooms of C. S. Lewis in Magdalen College where Warnie has gone to help his brother:

> …in came J[ack]'s friend Dyson from Reading—a man who gives the impression of being made of quick silver: he pours himself into a room on a cataract of words and gestures, and you are caught up in the stream—but after the first plunge, it is exhilarating. I was swept along by him to the Mitre Tap, in the Turl (a distinct discovery this, by the way) where we had two glasses of Bristol milk a piece and discussed China, Japan, staff officers, Dickens, house property as an investment, and, most utterly unexpected "Your favourite readings Orlando Furioso isn't it?" (deprecatory gesture as I get ready to deny this) "Sorry! Sorry! My mistake". As we left the pub, a boy came into the yard and fell on the cobbles. D[yson] (appealingly) "Don't do that my boy: it hurts you and distresses us". We parted outside, D[yson] inviting me to dine with him in Reading on the 18th of next month, and J[ack] to dine and spend the night. "We'll be delighted to have you for the night too, if you don't mind sleeping in the same bed as your brother". This part of the invitation I declined, but I think I shall dine….

This brief anecdote forms almost a perfect story. It has a clear beginning, a development, and a conclusion. More to the point, the story means something. Warnie did not write the diary for publication. The story meant something to him that we can share as we read over his shoulder. It is the story of the beginning of a friendship that would last for over forty years. The ability to tell a story involves the ability to weave the incidents together in a meaningful way. Warnie would have appreciated the fact that in French, the word for story and for history is the same word (*histoire*). The well crafted story, however, has an impact on the reader in its conclusion. It is

not necessary that we know that Warnie and Dyson became friends afterward. The story tells us all we need to know and leaves us wanting to be part of the friendship.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF STORIES

The Inklings appreciated and told different kinds of stories. Hugo Dyson preferred the telling of stories to the writing of stories, and his impatience with elves was legendary among the Inklings to the point that Tolkien held off reading his hobbit stories when Dyson was present. C. S. Lewis never cared for detective stories, though his good friend Dorothy L. Sayers and his literary hero G. K. Chesterton excelled at mysteries. Tolkien did not care for modern novels, which for him meant anything after Chaucer. Literary tastes differ, even among great scholars.

Tolkien was the first of the Inklings to begin writing stories as an adult (though Jack and Warnie Lewis had written stories as children). He began creating another world, now known to us as Middle Earth, by the end of World War I. Lewis offered him the encouragement he needed to write the *Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In 1938 Tolkien delivered a lecture "On Fairy Stories" that provides us with not merely an apologetic for this form of story, but also an insight into how he believed stories work upon people. Tolkien explained that *Faërie* is an entire realm rather than a particular magical creature. He further insisted that fairy stories were not originally composed for children. As cultural tastes changed after the Enlightenment, Tolkien argued that "Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the 'nursery' as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused."

The "story maker" of fairy stories "proves a successful 'sub-creator'" who "makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter." As long as the hearer accepts the norms of the Secondary World, they have entered the Secondary World. On the other hand, "the moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed." Tolkien argues that entering the Secondary World involves more than Wordsworth's "willing suspension of disbelief;"

it must involve positive belief. Tolkien's success with this aspect of Faërie is reflected in the slogan so popular on college campuses in the 1960s – "Frodo Lives!"

Imagination allows the story teller to create a Secondary World. Imagination involves the mental power of forming images of things not actually present. This mental power of Imagination includes the perception of the image, the ability to grasp its implications, and the control over it necessary for successful expression. Tolkien calls the actual expression of the image "Art" which actualizes the sub-creation work of humans made in the image of the Creator. Tolkien's word for the sub-creative Art and its fantastic origin in Imagination is "fantasy."

Tolkien regarded Fantasy as a "natural human activity," no more given to evil or delusion than any other human activity in a fallen world. People create Fantasy "because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker." Tolkien embraces the charge that fantasy is "escapist" in nature, but faults the critics for confusing escape with desertion. Fantasy may allow one to escape certain forms of ugliness, like factories and smoke stacks, but it does not allow one to desert the human condition. Fantasy allows humans to escape the limitations of existence. This very longing for escape provides the fuel that drives the Imagination to scientific discovery, but Tolkien was not prepared to allow the intimate relationship between science and art that Lewis had begun to grasp. With escapism, however, fantasy also brings consolation and the joy of a happy ending. Tolkien argues that the sudden and miraculous turn at the moment of the greatest danger represents grace more than mere escapism. He argues that this grace does not deny the existence "of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." Here we find Tolkien providing Lewis with the vocabulary to describe his own conversion, as "Joy" becomes the word Lewis chooses to reflect upon as he tells his own story in *Surprised by Joy*.

Charles Williams wrote an entirely different kind of story that appeared to be a conventional realistic novel, until things began to happen. Lewis explained that Williams wrote neither the classic novel nor the fantasy, but a third kind of story that begins with the supposal, "Let us suppose that this everyday world were, at some one point, invaded by the marvelous. Let us, in fact, suppose a violation of frontier." Williams is interested in both sides of the frontier in a way that illumines the material world but also provides a reflection of the spiritual world.

Lewis wrote yet another kind of story that in its way tripped between the realistic and the fantastic. He gained recognition as an important writer of science fiction when that genre first began to "take off." In a letter to Ruth Pitter, Lewis explained that he had realized "what other planets in fiction are really good for: for *spiritual* adventures." With the blossoming of science fiction after *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the exploration of spiritual issues has become recognized as an integral feature of science fiction done well.

While Tolkien focused all of his literary energies on fantasy, other Inklings realized that the ideas Tolkien expressed had wider application throughout many forms of storytelling. In his lecture on Thomas Hardy given at Cambridge University in 1942, Lord David Cecil concludes his brilliant analysis of Hardy with the conclusion that Hardy's deep pessimism is only possible because he believed in the Christian virtues but did not have the Christian hope. Lord David points out that Christian teachers (alluding to Paul) have always taught that if the Christian faith is not true, then life is a tragedy. The deepest instincts of his heart as reflected in the very act of storytelling taught Hardy that the Christian virtues were true, yet Lord David noted that Hardy accepted "a philosophy of the universe that was repugnant to the deepest instincts of his heart." Lord David did not blush to add, "He may have been mistaken in this. Myself, I think he was."

If we think on the boring talk that has no point, no direction, no moment that stands out from all the rest, we find ourselves in the company of King Solomon groaning in Ecclesiastes over the meaningless repetition of events. In a cyclical universe of nature deities

or reincarnation, no one event has any more meaning or purpose than any other. The very act of telling stories that have movement from start to finish tells us something about the nature of the universe. This search for a meaningful universe drove Solomon back to Yahweh from the nature deities he had courted. Tolkien argued that this aspect of story represents good news that leads to a happy ending: "The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the 'happy ending.' The Christian has still to work, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed."

The human quest for meaning and purpose has always expressed itself in the process of storytelling, regardless of the form, whether drama, prose fiction, poetry, or dance – even in painting, sculpture, tapestry, and pottery. The narrative persuades us that life and the universe must have meaning, at least it was this way until the twentieth century. In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, Lewis lamented the abandonment of meaning in the arts during the twentieth century and insisted that it represents a unique phenomenon in world civilization. Though every culture has its preference for forms of expression and Western culture has tired of old forms and replaced them with new forms, Lewis could not see in any of these changes

> ...the slightest parallel to the state of affairs disclosed by a recent symposium on Mr [T. S.] Eliot's Cooking Egg. Here we find seven adults (two of them Cambridge men) whose lives have been specially devoted to the study of poetry discussing a very short poem which has been before the world for thirty-odd years; and there is not the slightest agreement among them as to what, in any sense of the word, it means.

The Inklings rejected the modern materialist view that the universe and life have no meaning. At the conclusion of his essay "On Stories," Lewis observed,

> In real life, as in story, something must happen. This is the trouble. We grasp at a state and find only a succession of events in which the state is never quite embodied . . . . in real life, the idea of adventure fades when the day-to-day details begin to happen . . . . In life and art both, as it seems to me, we are always trying to catch in our net of successive moments something that is not successive.

Narrative teaches us to notice the unique moments of life that break the endless cycle or dull repetition and give life its meaning.

As academic writing with its emphasis on brute realism and subjective expression dominated the critical market in literature, the culture quickly dropped poetry and meaningless fiction as viable artistic expressions of the culture, just as allegory and epic had been dropped several centuries earlier. The strong narrative of modern fantasy, detective stories, and science fiction in which the Inklings and their friends were involved became the new literary forms through which Western culture began to understand itself.

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