

Whose Lion Is It, Anyway?
Rescuing the Chronicles of Narnia from the Christian Academy

If you didn't read it, your friends probably did. The least bookish person you know will have some vague idea of traveling to some magical country by going through a wardrobe; some of the more enthusiastic may have made a few hopeful forays into some elder relative's armoire (if anecdotal spontaneous confessions are any guide, the number of people who have tried this is truly astonishing). It is always difficult to assess the impact of a work of literature, but especially so when the work in question commands a large audience of young readers who are still developing a sense of the basic shapes that life can take – but it is hard to overestimate the impact of the Chronicles of Narnia. Ask any child about *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – indeed, ask any person who has been a child in the past sixty years – and you will be met at least with recognition, more likely with the enthusiasm of somebody who, once upon a time at least, loved to read.

But of the small canon of children's works that command such a wide and passionate following, the Chronicles are perhaps the only books that also have a canonical afterlife: that is, a post-reading experience that happens so routinely that it might itself be called canonical, an unofficial postscript that many (though certainly not all) readers discover long after closing the book for the first time. For the open secret about the Chronicles of Narnia is that their author, C. S. Lewis, was a devout Christian as well as a writer of fantasy, and that several elements throughout the books – most notably Aslan's self-sacrifice in *Wardrobe* – invite parallels to the Christian salvation story.

For some readers this is a joy, an overlaying of a much-beloved realm of the imagination onto another, more significant story that they know by faith to be true. But

for many readers, the discovery of Narnia's religious dimension is less a fulfillment than a violation. Laura Miller, in her reader's memoir *The Magician's Book*, gives a (citable) voice to those readers when she recounts her own distress at the discovery:

I was horrified to discover that the Chronicles of Narnia, the joy of my childhood and the cornerstone of my imaginative life, were really just the doctrines of the Church in disguise. I looked back at my favorite book and found it appallingly transfigured.... I felt angry and humiliated because I had been fooled.¹

Miller's book is filled with interviews she conducted with other readers, many of whom similarly felt that this new explanatory element actually destroyed or took away much of what had initially made the Chronicles precious. In her description of that moment of recognition, Miller's precise language choices take the reader through a miniature version of that irretrievable interpretive crossing. The words she uses to describe the Chronicles' pivotal role in her life, cornerstone and joy, are important and resonant words in the Christian tradition (the latter largely because of C. S. Lewis himself) but also words that are thoroughly intelligible, and widely in use, outside of that context. The change wrought by this new lens, however, is not only a transformation but a transfiguration, and it is impossible to escape the religious overtones: thus was she trapped by parallels to a particular event in the New Testament. For years, the Chronicles had seemed to cohere on their own terms, without any interpretive intervention. Yet the Christian element of the books, once revealed, seemed inescapable, and even seemed to invalidate much of what the books had given her: "for a long time" after her discovery, Miller writes, "I avoided even thinking about Narnia." It cannot have helped that there was no other synthetic account available, no way to make sense of Narnia that did not pass through the church.

¹ Laura Miller, *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia*. (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008) 6.

The existence of readers like Miller – for they are legion – poses a peculiar and thorny interpretive conundrum for critics: can millions of readers be so wrong? And so wrong, moreover, in more or less the same way? The highly unusual confluence of readerships, each claiming Narnia as their own country, signals an opportunity for scholars of literature and of religion interested in the history of effects, especially now that both fields have turned more seriously to children as subjects. Approached from this perspective, the Chronicles are a rich source for new insights into the potent relationship between literature and belief, between the values that organize our thinking and the religious systems that claim to shape them.

Yet a reader-driven approach that takes seriously both reading audiences has yet to surface. Even the mere fact of the books' dual audience sets something of a problem for Narnia's academic interpreters, the vast majority of whom are confessing Christians whose faith is a wellspring of their scholarly work and whose treatments of the book consequently reflect insider concerns. Earlier critics sometimes addressed themselves, if only as an afterthought, to knowledgeable and dissenting adult readers (usually imagining them as boilerplate critics); what little recognition was given to the young (or old) reader who makes her way through Narnia without a Christian apparatus came largely on account of this older and more critical chaperone. As the specter of the critical non-Christian adult interlocutor faded – perhaps because the scholarly conversation around Narnia was stabilizing as an exchange between Christian insiders – the non-theological reader disappeared entirely. In his 1974 exploration of Narnia's philosophical underpinnings, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils*, Richard Purtill presumed that non-Christian readers already approach Narnia with caution or even hostility, but urged those readers to

“be grateful to [Lewis] for giving them a glimpse not only into a Christian mind but also into a Christian imagination.”² But it was Peter Schakel, whose *Reading with the Heart: The Way Into Narnia* was published five years later, who set the industry standard with a more conciliatory (if unrealistic) posture to the non-Christian reader when he declared that “although [the Chronicles] do have Christian themes, they are not dependent on Christianity. A non-Christian reader can approach the stories as fairy stories, be moved by the exciting adventures and the archetypal meanings, and not find the Christian elements obtrusive or offensive.”³ Several other critics followed this approach – frequently in language safer and more insipid than Schakel’s – of acknowledging a non-Christian reader’s real, if lesser or derivative, claim to the Narnia books, by granting that is it possible to read the books “simply as stories.” Now those readers have largely vanished from the scene, or else they are – as in Michael Ward’s *Planet Narnia* – “respond[ing] instinctively to [the books’] poetic harmonies”;⁴ Narnia criticism is, for the most part, written in the language of Christian insiders, to address insider concerns. David Downing’s 2005 book *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles* is in this sense exemplary: the author not only repeats the explanation (standard in books on Narnia since *Reading with the Heart*) that reading the Chronicles as allegories subverts both their imaginative power and their author’s intent, but a few pages later at pains to explain why Aslan is not portrayed in strictly Trinitarian terms, although “a Christian understanding of the Trinity is assumed or hinted at in all the Narnia stories.”⁵

² Richard Purtill, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils: Fantasy and Philosophy in C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 149.

³ Peter Schakel, *Reading with the Heart: The Way Into Narnia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 132.

⁴ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 228.

⁵ David Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005) 70-71, see also 64-65.

Part of the reason why Narnia scholarship has developed as a conversation between Christian insiders is that the study of Narnia, as often as not, has been undertaken as part of the more general study of C. S. Lewis, a field which is still very much in thrall to biographical criticism (or rather its close cousin, organized around illuminating the mind of the author). Lewis's accomplishments were manifold and diverse, and if the Chronicles remain his most widely-read books, his works continue to have a significant impact in several registers.⁶ Lewis was already famous both in England and in America when he started writing the Chronicles – enough so that his publisher was at first unwilling to print the books for fear they would harm his reputation in other arenas. His first academic work, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* earned him high regard in scholarly circles when it was published in 1936⁷; by 1942, a series of radio addresses on Christianity – delivered from the posture of a devout layman whose own conversion had developed out what was (to him) a heady combination of logic and literary theory – made his one of the most famous voices in England.⁸ Those published talks were initially released in three separate volumes, later collected into a single volume entitled *Mere Christianity*.⁹ Those collected talks, together with *the Screwtape Letters*, a satirical work comprised of a series of letters from a senior devil to a junior tempter, won Lewis fame in America as well and landed him on the

⁶ Here and below I am drawing on several biographies of Lewis, primarily George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005); but also Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, revised edn (London: HarperCollins, 2002); and Wilson, A. N., *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1990).

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: a Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936). Several of the original academic notices have been collected in George Watson (ed.), *Critical Essays on C. S. Lewis* (Scolar Press, 1992). This helpful volume also includes contemporaneous reviews of Lewis's later academic publications.

⁸ As noted in David Downing, *Planets in Peril: a Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992) 3.

⁹ *Broadcast Talks* (1942); *Christian Behavior* (1943); *Beyond Personality* (1944). All published in London by Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press. Later *Mere Christianity* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952).

cover of Time Magazine in 1947.¹⁰ If that were not enough, during this window of time Lewis also gained considerable fame in science-fiction circles for a trilogy he called his “planetary romances”,¹¹ and published several poems (albeit pseudonymously) in various serial publications. All of this was before Narnia; and some of his most significant work, such as *An Experiment in Criticism* (a work of literary theory) and *Till We Have Faces* (a novelistic recasting of the Cupid and Psyche myth) came after. Although early studies of Lewis’s works usually took up a single dimension of his work, by the time of Lewis’s death in 1963, scholars were already seeking to exegete one Lewis text by means of another, or to develop a system for reading all these richly various works together. In the nearly fifty years since Lewis’s death, this scholarly project has burgeoned and stabilized into its own academic fiefdom in which both the currency and the lingua franca are insights into the author’s mind.

Lewis is certainly not the first thinker to be subjected to this kind of biographical or quasi-biographical analysis (although he may be the first who has explicitly written on the perils of such an approach to literary scholarship)¹² – such broadly accomplished figures (Samuel Johnson and Leonardo da Vinci are two good examples) very frequently become the focus of inquiries that become tangled up by the task of synthesizing the disparate works. But the persona of Lewis who has emerged from this close study of the maker and his mind is C. S. Lewis the Mere Christian, the muscular defender of traditional faith against the pernicious intrusions of modernity, an authorial persona whose interests reach only as far as the potential convert. This portrait of Lewis as arch-

¹⁰ *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (London: Geoffrey Blas Ltd, 1955) 36.

¹¹ *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938); *Perelandra* (1943); *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-ups* (1945) All published in London by John Lane The Bodley Head.

¹² C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965 [1989]).

Christian is due in part to the tireless efforts of Walter Hooper, Lewis's literary executor, to cast him in that light: in addition to editing several collections of previously-published writings that are organized around devotional themes, Hooper has written dozens of introductions and prefaces that stress Lewis's piety and the completeness – not to say the perfection – of Lewis's thought. The main current of scholarship (due no doubt in part to Hooper's influence) has been in this vein. There have been excellent and insightful books on Lewis's work that avoid the biographical fallacy – such as Brian Murphy's brief 1983 study of Lewis's works or Sanford Schwartz's more recent superlative study of the science-fiction trilogy – just as there have been some more totalizing studies of his work that treat Lewis's Christianity as a phenomenon that can be plausibly understood from the outside, such as Robert Houston Smith's *Patches of Godlight* or Colin Manlove's work on Lewis's fiction.¹³ But the first have made only the slightest inroads, and the latter have been folded seamlessly into the faith-driven biographical project. More recently, Cambridge University Press has produced a Companion volume on Lewis that draws on a deliberate mixture of scholars from within and without extant conversations on Lewis,¹⁴ but it is still too early to assess the impact of this volume. Because Narnia, with its Christian parallels, can be comfortably slotted into the larger evangelical project, the majority of scholarly work on Narnia begins with the image of Lewis the avuncular Christian storyteller, slipping faith to the younger generation like Turkish delight.

¹³ Brian Murphy, *C. S. Lewis*. (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1983); Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert Houston Smith, *Patches of Godlight: The Pattern of Thought in C. S. Lewis* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981); Colin Manlove, *C. S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987) and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Patterning of a Fantastic World* (New York: Twayne, 1993).

¹⁴ Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The problem is further complicated by the fact that academic studies of Lewis and Narnia have always shaded into those produced for (and by) a non-specialist audience. Initially, the Narnia books had a credibility problem in the academy simply on account of genre;¹⁵ and while the larger movement toward the study of popular media has now largely (though by no means completely) obviated that concern, the standing of Narnia studies remains tenuous because much of the scholarly work is closely bound to a non-academic audience that is looking to understand the Chronicles (as well as Lewis's other writings) specifically as aids to Christian faith.¹⁶ For example, Marjorie Lamp Mead, the associate director of the Marion Wade Center at Wheaton College (one of two major archive sites for Lewis's work), and Leland Ryken, a member of the Wheaton English department, have co-written reader's guides for both *Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, aimed at a very elementary readership ("This guidebook has two basic purposes," they write in the preface to the *Caspian* guidebook – "to introduce C.S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian* and to give readers some assistance in the basic principles of reading literature.") Ward's *Planet Narnia* was published by Oxford University Press in 2008; a heavily condensed version aimed at popular audiences and re-titled *The Narnia Code* was put out

¹⁵ An interesting microcosm of this history – which of course includes the study of J. R. R. Tolkien and other fantasy authors – can be found in the annals of the journal *Mythlore*, which was launched in 1969 by Glen GoodKnight as a venture of the Mythopoeic Society, a group dedicated to the study of Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams and others in the epic fantasy tradition. *Mythlore* began as a fanzine – albeit a "sercon", or serious and constructive one – that published essays (which varied in rigor and quality, but certainly included insightful work) alongside fan art and poetry. Now a juried journal published twice annually and indexed in several major databases, *Mythlore* has become a respected venue for scholarly work, though its mission statement (and its font choices) still marks it as something of an outsider in academic publishing. More about *Mythlore* can be found on the Mythopoeic Society website: <http://www.mythsoc.org/mythlore>

¹⁶ There is another, more positive strain of making academic work available to a more general readership, by scholars who attest to an effort to avoid jargon without sacrificing rigor, an effort I wish we could see emulated more generally throughout the academy; I mention it separately because it does not seem, to me, to rely upon (or itself to entail) any of the other blurring of audience outlined above.

by Tyndale House in 2010.¹⁷ Many of the preeminent scholars of Narnia have also published books on Christian spirituality.¹⁸ The implications of this entanglement are twofold. One is that there is a significant measure of direct trickledown from the academic study of Narnia into popular media. The other is that the influence, to some extent, moves in both directions: even if the reciprocal relationship between popular and scholarly writing on Narnia is structured to allow for two tiers of conversation – one professional academic, the other more general – these scholars nonetheless remain bound to the framing assumptions, as well as to the ultimate stakes, that these two reading communities have in common.

The confluence of these factors – a whittling-down of the parameters and utility of Narnia studies, combined with the demographic lopsidedness that characterizes both the scholars of Narnia and their imagined audience – has resulted in an academic account of the Chronicles that is, for all its claims to richness and beauty, rather too thin to stand up to the actual books. Although the history of Narnia studies has all the dimensions of a lively field of study – plenty of interpretive disagreements, a regular engagement with a particular strand of the Western Christian tradition, and even a vituperative controversy over the authenticity of some manuscripts – what is striking is the remarkable sameness, most evident in the widespread and reflexive recourse to biblical allusion, symbolic readings that parallel aspects of Christian doctrine, and object lessons in virtues or vice. Joe Christopher is perhaps more mechanistically beholden than most: having professed “a purely literary approach” in the preface to his study of Lewis’s works, he goes even a

¹⁷ Michael Ward, *The Narnia Code: C. S. Lewis and the Secret of the Seven Heavens* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2010)

¹⁸ E.g. Peter Schakel, *Is Your Lord Large Enough? How C. S. Lewis Expands Our View of God* (InterVarsity Press Books, 2008); David C. Downing, *Into the Region of Awe: Mysticism in C. S. Lewis* (IVP Books, 2005).

step beyond adducing biblical parallels to suggesting that the bible is necessary for reading Narnia: “Aslan,” he writes, “is the Narnian equivalent (with some differences) of Jesus. (His creation of Narnia is based on the statement in the Gospel of St. John 1:3, referring to Christ, the Divine Logos, that ‘All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing that was ever made.’)”¹⁹ Although Ward’s *Planet Narnia* in many respects departs from prior approaches, and excels most of its peers in its attention to textual detail, it retains many of the conventions of current Narnia scholarship, supplementing or refuting any shortcomings in Lewis’s fiction (or gaps in Ward’s own account of it) by recourse to Lewis’s other writing, and casting the Chronicles’ wide appeal as a function of the reader’s intuitive grasp of harmonies and symbols that only become fully intelligible in the context of Christianity.²⁰ Whether or not some share of the Chronicles’ Christian readers are ill-served by criticism that is so consistently keyed to a particular strain of spiritual or theological constructive thought, there is no doubt that much of the books’ wider audience is.

Simply put, it is time for Narnia criticism to broaden its horizons: to acknowledge a wider array of readers, and to take seriously the question of what draws so many readers to the books without drawing them closer to Christianity. As is the case in any reading community, widely shared interpretive assumptions are very difficult to uproot. One reliable way to purge the Chronicles of the accretion of assumptions would be, of course, to (re)turn to the method of scrupulously close reading. Such an approach would shed new light on the resources and strategies that the texts of the Chronicles use to

¹⁹ Joe R. Christopher, *C. S. Lewis*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987) 111.

²⁰ See Ward, 223ff. The profound and ongoing impact that *Planet Narnia* has had on Narnia studies is far greater than this article, by virtue of its specific parameters, might suggest. For a description of Ward’s project and a response to his analysis, see n. 22 below.

create meaning, independent of authorial intent.²¹ Deeper and more productive, though, would be a very serious attempt at translating the confessional scholarship, both the new insights and the critical axioms, into language that is both useful and meaningful for non-Christian readers. In so doing, Christian scholars of Narnia stand not only to broaden the audience for their critical works, but to profoundly refresh and expand their relationships with the Chronicles.

Such claims of course require evidence to ground them; and in any case the merits of the approach I suggest will become most apparent when actually applied to the text. I therefore offer a recalibrated interpretation of a string of events that has particularly suffered from reductionist, thematically-driven Christian readings: a pair of related scenes in *Prince Caspian*, when Lucy first glimpses Aslan and when she later persuades her siblings to follow her as she follows Aslan across the gorge of the River Rush.²² This section of *Prince Caspian* – a book which is often characterized in the criticism as a story

²¹ There exist a handful of books in this vein; the two most important of these are Schakel's *Reading with the Heart*, cited above, and Doris T. Myers' *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994). Each book makes valuable contributions, but both were written with different notions of what it would mean to retrieve the Chronicles from the mainstream of Lewis criticism; and so each is still thoroughly yoked to some version of the Christian interpretation of the Chronicles that is in wide circulation in Narnia scholarship.

To focus on the text, and not the ideas that can be abstracted from it, is precisely the aim of Schakel's book; in his introduction, he writes: "I will suggest that Lewis created in his stories 'secondary worlds' which he expected readers to enter imaginatively and to respond to, initially, with their hearts rather than their heads. For such an approach, the sources of Lewis's ideas, the influences upon his techniques, the histories of the forms in which he worked, and the similarities of his other works to the Chronicles are of little importance." But he nevertheless uses *Mere Christianity* as a lens on the Chronicles because he sees a "special imaginative relationship" between that book and the Chronicles. Although Schakel is at pains to emphasize that the glosses from *Mere Christianity* are "not [offered] because its explanations are necessary to make Narnia meaningful," his frequent recourse to that book (which is, quite properly, Christian in its commitments and its paradigms of thought) signals the extent to which the readings are shaped and guided by patterns that are deeply infused with doctrinal Christianity. See Schakel, *Reading with the Heart*, xii-xiii.

Myers' goal "is to redirect attention to Lewis's fiction as art worthy of serious study," and she de-emphasizes Christianity throughout her excellent study. But her method is to illuminate the context for Lewis's thought by grounding it in contemporaneous conversation and in received traditions; she tends to supply background (Christian and otherwise) where it seems necessary. See especially Myers 126ff.

²² C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian: the Return to Narnia* (New York: Collier Books, 1970 [1951]) 119-149. All further citations of this book will be given parenthetically in-text; all other volumes of the Chronicles referred to are in this edition.

about the challenges that modernity presents to belief – is typically interpreted as a narrative about faith triumphing over skepticism and unbelief.²³ Donald Glover describes the scenes as “the test of faith in Aslan which forms the basic and central theme of the book.”²⁴ Schakel characterizes their overland trek, and the gorge crossing that completes it, as not only a literal journey but “also a spiritual journey, a journey into faith.”²⁵ Even Doris Myers, at pains to correct what she perceives as an undue emphasis on the *Chronicles*’ Christian element, refers to the scene as “the central Christian image of the book.”²⁶

If this theme seems a bit reductionist, it nonetheless meets the interpretive problem that these authors describe. Manlove reads the scene in terms of a more subtle (and less theologically determined) dichotomy of confusion and clarity; this approach yields some interesting points – such as the fact that the first step in Trumpkin’s slow passage from hard-headed naturalist to believer in Aslan is when he mistakes the four children for the legendary “ghosts” that haunt the ruins of Cair Paravel – but remains constrained by the inherited dyad structure.²⁷ None of these critics can explain how it is

²³ Ward’s *Planet Narnia* is an exception to this pattern, though mostly by omission. Ward argues that the seven books that comprise the *Chronicles* follow an organizational schematic that maps onto the seven planets known to medieval European cosmology, and that each volume is charged both with the valences associated with that planet and with the spirit of that planet’s presiding deity. Ward links *Prince Caspian* with the planet Mars, an argument he develops in chapter 4 of *Planet Narnia*; he treats the series of events discussed here as evidence of Aslan infusing first Lucy, and then the others, with the martial spirit, to make them both chivalrous and martyr-like. Ward’s argument, therefore, clearly differs from my other examples in the reading of the text; yet it is but a different example of a biased reading held hostage to a larger purpose. There is not space or time to allow a just treatment of Ward’s careful and detailed treatment of the *Chronicles*, but it is worth noting that, at a slightly earlier point in the chapter, Ward spends a page-long footnote taking *Caspian* to task for its “weakness of inspiration” (a phrase he borrows from Colin Manlove); the book’s “most serious” failure, according to Ward, is that it does not stress sufficiently the themes of knighthood and martyrdom that his own schematic has taught him to expect from it. He again levels this criticism at the series more generally (if also more gently) on p. 232-33.

²⁴ Donald E Glover, *C.S. Lewis: The Art of Enchantment* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981) 145.

²⁵ Schakel, 40.

²⁶ Myers, 139.

²⁷ Manlove, *C. S. Lewis*, 144-145.

possible for Peter to give, on behalf of all four children, an unimpeachable general defense of Aslan, right before the group fails to follow Lucy's vision. What is needed is a kind of going-behind these pre-formulated themes, phrased in loaded language, for a fresh encounter with a complex and unresolved text. As I will demonstrate below, such a posture can yield a far richer and more nuanced understanding of the text; if these readings have a greater explanatory power for those readers who do not bring a Christian lens to the text, I think they will be no less helpful for those who do.

Faith is, in fact, a recurrent theme in *Caspian*; but as a lens for interpreting the events of the story, it is far too compact, and overlooks the chain of signals internal to the text that lead the reader to conclude that faith can be a virtue. If the narrative ultimately affirms the choice to act according to faith, it does so by inviting us to evaluate how the characters reason their way to that resolution: how they organize their thoughts, and how that leads them to respond to the circumstances in front of them. In both the central passage and the story at large, the question of what and how a character believes emerges as a complex and nuanced exploration of the human mind: a diagnostic binary such as "belief/unbelief" cannot help but overlook most of the interior activity that gives rise to faith, and to doubt. By distilling some of the lines along which Lewis builds his treatment of faith – particularly the trajectories of the three Old Narnians who help Caspian begin to organize his revolt – we can then return to the episodes by the gorge better prepared to see beyond the received interpretive dichotomy.

It is certainly true that Caspian is a fitting figure to anchor the Old Narnian uprising that coalesces around him because he learned to love the things of Old Narnia

when he was young.²⁸ Moreover, he believes in Aslan – which not all of the surviving Old Narnians do – and he is able to articulate a way in which belief in the Old Narnians themselves and their claim to Narnia is connected to his belief in the Great Lion of legend. As Caspian explains to Trumpkin, Nikabrik and Trufflehunter shortly after they have taken him in and treated his injuries:

“I do [believe in Aslan]... And if I hadn't believed in him before, I would now. Back there among the Humans the people who laughed at Aslan would have laughed at stories about Talking Beasts and Dwarfs. Sometimes I did wonder if there really was such a person as Aslan: but then sometimes I wondered if there were really people like you. Yet there you are.” (66)

Here the contrast is simple, between believers and those who laugh at them; belief in Talking Beasts and in Aslan are different species of the same problem, and the believers clearly have the right of it.²⁹ But the question of what grounds or motivates a person's belief is already in play, and quickly emerges as a matter of equal importance: the three Old Narnians who shepherd Caspian through the first stages of the revolt each have a different attitude toward the legends of Aslan and of Narnian Antiquity, and their reasoning processes tell us at least as much as (if not more than) their conclusions do about their character.³⁰

Trufflehunter the badger is the most simply sketched of the three, but his own self-explanation demonstrates that belief is, in part, a function of disposition. His faith in the veracity of all the old legends (including Aslan) is certainly a virtue, and it helps him guide Caspian rightly. But this steadfast faith appears to be inborn: as the badger himself

²⁸ This is evident throughout *Prince Caspian*, but see especially 37-51.

²⁹ It's worth noting that the “right” that is here at stake is about which side correctly understands the situation, rather than which side has the moral high ground. Of course these two things will converge in the end, but for the sake of precision it is worth keeping them distinct.

³⁰ It is interesting to notice that many of the critics who depend on a rubric of belief vs. unbelief end up offering patently inaccurate descriptions of these three characters in their summaries of the story. For an example of the smoothing-out of the more complex particularities of these characters, see Bruce Edwards, *Not a Tame Lion* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 69-72.

repeatedly explains, he is a beast, he is, and it is their nature to hold on, whereas, he asserts, “Dwarfs are as forgetful and changeable as the Humans themselves.” (65)³¹ This insistence on nature suggests an insuperable gap between animals and humanoids – it’s unclear that anyone who has ever fenced seriously with doubt can emulate the Talking Beasts’ simple devotion, and Trufflehunter’s rebuke to the Dwarfs seems to be aimed more at demonstrating why their thinking cannot be trusted on the matter, rather than changing their minds. Even Caspian, whose love of Old Narnian history and childlike enthusiasm for its creatures are his most salient character traits, admits (as quoted above) to having wondered whether the stories he loved were true as well as beautiful. Though Caspian seems to have believed in Aslan before meeting any Old Narnians, his ability to set aside doubt in Aslan’s existence is the consequence of logical inference.

Trumpkin and Nikabrik further demonstrate the inadequacy of belief as a controlling paradigm. Both the Dwarfs are more complex and more dynamic than Trufflehunter, and to account for their respective trajectories, it is necessary to attend to the way each character understands his responsibility to the truth and to his community. Trumpkin is as valuable a part of Caspian’s company as Trufflehunter, though possessed of a far more skeptical temperament – he is valuable, indeed, in large part because of his skepticism.³² There is certainly merit to the observation that part of Trumpkin’s role is to

³¹ Trufflehunter seems to think that Dwarfs generally have more in common with Humans than do the beasts, even the Talking Beasts; in addition to this statement, Trufflehunter declares later in the same conversation that Narnia is not meant to belong to humans, adding that he knows that better than any of them. The implication of that small side comment is that, as a beast, Trufflehunter is more distant from human concerns and human estates than the two Dwarfs, or perhaps Dwarfs in general, can be.

³² See also the Seven Brothers of the Shuddering Wood, who are among the people in hiding that Caspian’s hosts introduce him to in the early days of the revolt. These red dwarfs do not give their loyalty so easily as the fauns and Talking Beasts to whom Caspian is introduced, but their allegiance is uniquely valuable among all those whom he meets: “It took some time to satisfy them that Caspian was a friend and not an enemy, but when they did, they all cried, ‘Long live the King,’ and their gifts were noble – mail shirts and helmets and swords... the workmanship of [which] was far finer than Caspian had ever seen.” 71.

furnish the company with the presence of a fair-minded, good-hearted skeptic with a practical, self-reliant bent, and to the argument that his presence, as such, underscores the validity of the faith of the faithful.^{33, 34} But Trumpkin's skepticism is more than ornamental. He is also a cautious and observant thinker, offering good counsel to Caspian³⁵ and helping him (along with centaurs and other dwarfs – that is, the more nearly-human Old Narnians) to bring order to the well-meaning but somewhat unfocused Talking Animals of the army. It is the same temperamental caution which disposes him to doubt the ancient stories about Aslan, even while it prompts him to value old customs such as the traditional code of hospitality.³⁶

Nikabrik the black Dwarf, who in Caspian's judgment "had gone sour inside from long suffering and hating" (168) before his death at council, demonstrates even more clearly the shortcomings of a simple belief/unbelief dichotomy. Nikabrik's unstinting loathing of the Telmarines drives him beyond caring about intellectual or moral coherence, such that he is willing to believe in any force that will work as he wants.

"Do you believe in Aslan?" said Caspian to Nikabrik.

"I'll believe in anyone or anything," said Nikabrik, "that'll batter these cursed Telmarine barbarians to pieces or drive them out of Narnia. Anyone or anything, Aslan or the White Witch, do you understand?"

³³ "Practical" is a fraught word in Narnia stories: as we learn in *the Magician's Nephew* (New York: Collier Books, 1970 [1955]), witches tend to be "terribly practical", in that they are only interested in people they can make use of; Uncle Andrew, though not nearly so powerful a magician, shares in the vanity that animates this quality. But the word can also have positive connotations, especially with reference to dwarfs: see *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: Collier Books, 1970 [1954]) 163ff, just after Shasta has crossed into Narnia.

³⁴ See for example Paul Karkainen, *Narnia: Unlocking the Wardrobe* (Revell, 2007 [1979]) 108-109, although Karkainen misses the character's astuteness; Trumpkin's misunderstandings of Aslan lead Karkainen to write of his "babbl[ing]" and "his muddled mind."

³⁵ For example, he cautions against letting the army know about Queen Susan's horn. The havoc this rumor wreaks on the army's morale (as Nikabrik testifies later on) signals the wisdom of Trumpkin's advice.

³⁶ Trumpkin's first words in *Caspian*, before he has even been identified, come when he and his housemates are discussing what to do with Caspian: "'We ought to have killed it at once, or else let it alone.... [for] we can't kill it now. Not after we've taken it in and bandaged its head and all. It would be murdering a guest.'" 61.

"Silence, silence," said Trufflehunter. "You do not know what you are saying. She was a worse enemy than Miraz and all his race."

"Not to Dwarfs, she wasn't," said Nikabrik. (72-73)

Nikabrik's problem is not his capacity for faith but rather his capacity for skepticism: lacking, like Trumpkin, the steady faith of an animal, he also lacks Trumpkin's hard-headed resistance to wishful thinking – which seems to be the force behind Nikabrik's faith-for-hire – as well as the red dwarf's instinctive adherence to received norms and social convention (which seems to be the reason Trumpkin rejects out of hand the idea of recruiting hags and ogres to their side). He becomes so entangled in his own picture of the world – in which the Telmarines must be driven away at any cost, and nobody else can be trusted to care enough – and so narrowly focused on Dwarfish welfare that he cannot think clearly enough to discern a difference between Aslan and the White Witch.

It is at root an error in thinking, complemented by a lack of emotional discipline, that allows Nikabrik to convince himself that Aslan and the White Witch are essentially the same: it is another instance of the category error that he makes almost every time he speaks, dividing the world into friends and enemies according to whatever parameters allow him to justify and sustain his hatreds, which in turn cripples his ability to consider the claims of others. This tendency surfaces at his first appearance, when he first assumes that Caspian wants to "go back to [his] own kind and betray us all," (63) and then attempts to kill Caspian for being Miraz's nephew, even though the Prince has already explained that Miraz also wants him dead. Later in that same conversation, he calls Caspian a murderer for having been hunting, even though the animals he hunted were not Talking Beasts; but "it's all the same thing" (67) to Nikabrik, a comment which

prompts Trufflehunter (the one who is actually an animal) to outline the many factors which distinguish Talking Beasts from dumb ones. Yet, though Nikabrik will in this instance share a tent with all the animals born in Narnia, he loathes half-Dwarfs and deems them renegades. He also believes the (pure) Dwarfs to be exceptionally oppressed, and later on insists that they have been unfairly burdened in the war; thus the Witch becomes an acceptable alternative to Aslan because, however badly she treated most of the Narnian creatures, she was not so bad to his own race. It is difficult to determine to what extent this faulty reasoning is a result of Nikabrik's profound and barely-controlled anger, or whether his anger has reached such a pitch because of how he interprets the world, but in either case, his posture on belief is a product of that crucible. Not only is Nikabrik too complex to be mapped into belief vs. unbelief, but to do so is to miss most of what animates this compelling and unhappy character whose deep commitment to the right side leads him so profoundly awry.³⁷

With the motif of faith thus complicated, it seems worth reconsidering the “central Christian image” of faith, which culminates in Aslan leading the five travelers across the gorge. Belief has emerged as a complex product of temperament, reasoning ability, and attention to the realities of the external world. As much as we have seen characters' choices being shaped by their beliefs and their willingness or ability to “have faith”, we have equally seen the observations and the reasoning that they bring to bear in making their choices – and seen, too, that the relative merits of these habits of thought

³⁷ It seems worthwhile to note that Trumpkin makes a category error of this kind when he mocks Trufflehunter's belief in dryads, saying “why stop at Trees and Waters? Wouldn't it be even nicer if the stones started throwing themselves at old Miraz?” (76-77) Whether this error is somehow characteristic of Dwarfish reasoning, or simply a commonality between two characters whose beliefs are not yet well-ordered (for Trumpkin has not even met the Pevensies yet, let alone Aslan) is not clear. In any case, it is also worth remarking that this habit of thought seems to be a less-successful analogue to the kind of category-extension logic that moves Caspian to greater certainty about Aslan, as discussed above.

play a substantial role in how we understand the characters. There is a moral valence to believing, but it is associated at least as much with the quality of thinking being brought to bear, as with the question of one's initial attitude toward Aslan. The choices that characters make are certainly telling, but can only be understood in light of the complicated blend of factors that bring them to that point.

The vectors that shape the "test of faith" scene begin in chapter 9, when the children and Trumpkin, having nearly gained Caspian's camp, find their way blocked by a gorge that Peter, who has been acting as guide, does not recognize. Their decision not to take their direction from Lucy's momentary glimpse of Aslan is the bookend to their later crossing, when the others agree to trust Lucy as she follows the guide they cannot see; this structural point has prompted most critics to interpret this earlier scene as an instance of unbelief (Manlove here offers confusion as the complement to later clarity). But the actual conversation between the five travelers reflects not doubt or even confusion so much as four exhausted travelers strained to their limits (and one hardy Dwarf who has never believed in Aslan) falling back on their own personal stock responses rather than giving serious energy and attention to a new challenge. That the children are worn down is indubitable: the day has begun with the four siblings sniping at one another about their course of travel, and in the intervening time they have a shocking near-fatal encounter with a bear, which reminds them afresh that this Narnia is wilder and less safe than the one they knew. By the time they find their way barred by the gorge, the children are more or less at their worst, impatient and ungenerous as they snap at one another. Trumpkin is the only member of the party still able to think clearly; and when he respectfully doubts Peter's account of Narnian topography, offers an insightful theory

of why Peter has misread their surroundings, and then suggests a prudent and well-reasoned plan of action on the basis of that revised understanding, he becomes the de facto leader of the party. It is in this moment, when things finally seem well settled, that Lucy sees Aslan and insists that the group must go in the opposite direction: and in the conversation that follows, the resistance to her suggestion clearly presents as an extension of the emotional dynamic described above, rather than lack of faith in Aslan or a reflexive distrust of Lucy.

"Trumpkin, you're a brick," said Peter. "Come on, then. Down this side of the gorge."

"Look! Look! Look!" cried Lucy.

"Where? What?" said everyone.

"The Lion," said Lucy. "Aslan himself. Didn't you see?" Her face had changed completely and her eyes shone.

"Do you really mean –" began Peter.

"Where did you think you saw him?" asked Susan.

"Don't talk like a grown-up," said Lucy, stamping her foot. "I didn't *think* I saw him. I saw him."

"Where, Lu?" asked Peter.

"Right up there between those mountain ashes. No, this side of the gorge. And up, not down. Just the opposite of the way you want to go. And he wanted us to go where he was – up there."

"How do you know that was what he wanted?" asked Edmund.

"He – I – I just know," said Lucy, "by his face."

The others all looked at each other in puzzled silence.

"Her Majesty may well have seen a lion," put in Trumpkin. "There are lions in these woods, I've been told. But it needn't have been a friendly and talking lion any more than the bear was a friendly and talking bear."

"Oh, don't be so stupid," said Lucy. "Do you think I don't know Aslan when I see him?"

"He'd be a pretty elderly lion by now," said Trumpkin, "if he's one you knew when you were here before! And if it could be the same one, what's to prevent him having gone wild and witless like so many others?"

Lucy turned crimson and I think she would have flown at Trumpkin, if Peter had not laid his hand on her arm. "The D.L.F. doesn't understand. How could he? You must just take it, Trumpkin, that we do really know about Aslan; a little bit about him, I mean. And you mustn't talk about him like that again. It isn't lucky for one thing; and it's all nonsense for another. The only question is whether Aslan was really there."

"But I know he was," said Lucy, her eyes filling with tears.

"Yes, Lu, but we don't, you see," said Peter.

"There's nothing for it but a vote," said Edmund.

"All right," replied Peter. "You're the eldest, D.L.F. What do you vote for? Up or down?"

"Down," said the Dwarf. "I know nothing about Aslan. But I do know that if we turn left and follow the gorge up, it might lead us all day before we found a place where we could cross it. Whereas if we turn right and go down, we're bound to reach the Great River in about a couple of hours. And if there *are* any real lions about, we want to go away from them, not towards them."

"What do you say, Susan?"

"Don't be angry, Lu," said Susan, "but I do think we should go down. I'm dead tired. Do let's get out of this wretched wood into the open as quick as we can. And none of us except you saw *anything*."

"Edmund?" said Peter.

"Well, there's just this," said Edmund, speaking quickly and turning a little red. "When we first discovered Narnia a year ago – or a thousand years ago, whichever it is – it was Lucy who discovered it first and none of us would believe her. I was the worst of the lot, I know. Yet she was right after all. Wouldn't it be fair to believe her this time? I vote for going up."

"Oh, Ed!" said Lucy and seized his hand.

"And now it's your turn, Peter," said Susan, "and I do hope —"

"Oh, shut up, shut up and let a chap think," interrupted Peter. "I'd much rather not have to vote."

"You're the High King," said Trumpkin sternly.

"Down," said Peter after a long pause. "I know Lucy may be right after all, but I can't help it. We must do one or the other." (121-124)

Each of the children, in his or her own way, falls short of the measure set by Trumpkin (who is in fact doing no more than what the children themselves did when they worked out the identity of the ruined castle in the first few chapters), who here continues to offer clear and prudent reasons for his thoughts. And each of the four, by failing to discipline their emotions and rise to the level of reasoned conversation, contributes to the mistake of following Trumpkin's plan.

Peter, who has been flummoxed by the gorge, errs mainly by failing to take the responsibility that is, as Trumpkin reminds him, properly his as High King. After nearly losing his temper with the Dwarf midway through the latter's explanation, an impressed Peter is content to let Trumpkin steer the group. He briefly attempts to take control of the conversation and reframe the discussion around the question of "whether Aslan was really there," but does not sustain this brief burst of executive purpose; when Lucy fails to be persuasive enough to make the decision easy, Peter shies away even from the partial responsibility of voting on which way to go. His final decision is, in fact, a declaration of helplessness and uncertainty regarding what he earlier called the "only question", and he makes clear that his choice to follow Trumpkin's plan rather than Lucy's is an arbitrary consequence of the fact that the group "must do one or the other."

Susan, though she seems to be the least willing to listen to Lucy, is essentially doing the same as Peter, reacting out of habit and emotional exhaustion rather than mustering the energy to consider what Lucy has seen. Susan is habitually resistant to following other people's plans, regardless of the reasons or the stakes: and she has been known both to quail in the face of mysterious or unknown undertakings (and perhaps particularly so when she is tired, for she exhibits fewer reservations about morning ventures) and to voice her objections from a posture of cautious common sense, as when she tries to prevent her brothers from excavating the treasure-house door their first night back in Narnia.³⁸ It is also a sign that Susan is responding mechanically, rather than with sensitivity and attention, that she lapses into a "grown-up" manner. She has a habit, in evidence even in *Wardrobe*, of taking on a parental high-handedness with her little sister and brother: her insistence that they keep their shoes on while on the beach is only one of the many times she does so in *Caspian*. (5-6) Unlike Peter, Susan's error is one of commission, letting her worst mental habits govern her behavior; but like her brother, her capitulation to her feelings is the reason she does not adequately consider the possibility and possible implications of Lucy's vision.

Even Edmund, who takes Lucy's part, does not do justice to his own capacity for reasoned argument, but makes recourse to his emotions to explain himself and persuade the others. Edmund is typically the most careful and systematic thinker of the four, which is why he is the most troubled by the chronological gap between their first sojourn in Narnia and their second, and later the one who works out how such a forward leap was

³⁸ "Oh, do let's leave it alone," said Susan. "We can try it in the morning. If we've got to spend the night here I don't want an open door at my back and a great big black hole that anything might come out of, besides the draught and the damp. And it'll soon be dark." (19-20)

possible. (17-19; 27-28) But Edmund trips up on his commitment to reasoned, empirical argument when he is required to offer his own explanation for why he is siding with Lucy: ill-accustomed to making decisions based on principles or evidence around which he cannot wrap his own very agile mind, Edmund is at something of a loss to explain himself. Although there is a clear logical underpinning to his decision to trust Lucy – namely, that she has a history of being both truthful and right about improbable experiences – his defense of her ends up coming across as a point about fairness, rather than about Lucy’s reliability as a witness. Whether Edmund intends to build a case on this emotional territory, or simply gets his points jumbled in his struggle to incorporate second-hand evidence (which he would not normally accept), his uncharacteristically quick, stumbling speech reflects his discomfort with an argument whose every detail he cannot personally vouch for. Such a speech would be unlikely to persuade Edmund himself, were he the listener rather than the speaker, and that is perhaps why he fails to persuade any of the others. Edmund’s capitulation to emotion inflects the argument he makes for his choice, rather than the choice itself, but that capitulation nonetheless plays a key role in making Edmund an ineffectual advocate for Lucy’s side.

And Lucy herself, though committed to following Aslan up the gorge, also falls short of her responsibility in conversation with the others, not by her failure to construct a reasoned and prudent argument (for such has never been her approach) but by exhibiting the worst dimensions of her unusual receptivity, rather than the best. Lucy, generally even-tempered, lets herself be provoked to anger and impatience when the others do not immediately take her vision of Aslan to heart. As a result, the very nexus of qualities that typically make Lucy so trustworthy instead render her abrupt and overwrought, and make

it harder for the others to put faith in the external reality of her fleeting vision just when the stakes are highest. It is essential to recognize that Lucy's impatience and irritation here are not only connected to her unusual sensitivity but are a direct outgrowth of it. Lucy is sometimes impatient with others whose alertness to Narnian magic is less keen than her own: she has flared up at Trumpkin before, calling him stupid because she thought he hadn't figured out that she and her siblings were the four Kings and Queens of the Golden Age; and when she does finally find Aslan, he reproves her for "slanging the others" – that is, for criticizing them for the failures of the previous day.. (136-137) By these lights, Lucy's failure by the gorge is of the same kind as her siblings'. Caught up in her own frustration, she cannot understand why the others might be confused or hesitant; her inability to countenance their questions is part of the reason that Peter and Edmund, both of whom initially indicate that they are prepared to believe her, are reduced along with Susan and Trumpkin to "puzzled silence." Her highly-charged agitation makes it harder for her siblings to believe that her vision of Aslan would stand up to tranquil recollection, and difficult to ask her more about it. Lucy, as much as her siblings, must claim a share of their collective failure.

The concluding chapter in this chain of events, when Aslan leads the travelers across the gorge even though none but Lucy can see him, similarly rewards an interpretation focused on the intellectual and emotional dynamics of the characters, and builds on the trajectories identified above by solving the "problems" posed by each of the children's earlier failures. Here, as in that prior scene, the notion of faith simplex is inadequate. Rather, the focus remains on how one's emotions can inflect or even cripple the process of deciding how to respond to circumstances: that the final decision will

appear to reflect one's faith commitments, or will in time even condition one's interior state in a particular direction, is a very plausible way to develop the meaning of this scene, though by no means necessary for grasping its psychological or noetic nuances. But by any account, the children's ability to master themselves and act in the way dictated by reason, properly applied, is central. If their gain is to be measured in clarity, it is not as a resolution of confusion, but rather as a newfound clarity of purpose that helps them arrive at the right decision, the seeds of which they have had all along.

In contrast to the earlier scene, the actual crossing of the gorge is animated almost entirely by the children deciding to de-privilege their emotions and anxieties. In fact Lewis's narration emphasizes, at every crucial juncture, that the character in question is acting in spite of, rather than in keeping with, his or her feelings. In this way, the children's actions become the solution to the very same problems that derailed them earlier. During her reunion with Aslan, Lucy moves from rapture to consternation, much as she did after first glimpsing him. But the second time around, Aslan is there to give her strength so that she will be prepared to blaze past her own discomfiture; so although the narrator explains at length the "terrible thing" that is her immediate task, Lucy is able to steel herself by thinking "I mustn't think about it, I must just do it." (139) The narrator's sympathy for her plight continues, but so does her resolve.

This struggle is complicated for Peter and Edmund by the fact that they have not only emotional but intellectual discomforts to overcome, and each brother, in turn, also has to overcome that intellectual discomfiture in order to correct his mistake from earlier in the day. The challenge to logical, perceptive Edmund is to fully accept the fact that there are phenomena beyond the limits of his sensitivities. Earlier on, it becomes clear,

Edmund seems to have succeeded only by half-measures: believing that Lucy briefly saw Aslan (and that perhaps he might have, too, had he been looking at the right time) is far less an affront than believing that Aslan is in front of him but still beyond his own powers of perception. It is a stiff demand, and Edmund struggles to preserve his belief that his own faculties are equal to the task of explaining the world. He first suggests that she has been fooled by an optical illusion, an explanation that would at once acknowledge what Lucy sees while leaving undisturbed his faith in his own powers of perception. When Lucy continues to insist that Aslan is there, he repeatedly appeals to her for a reason that can satisfy his desire to understand why there would be such a gap in his perception. But Edmund eventually has to be satisfied with not understanding. He marks his concession to this hard truth by stressing the unpleasant emotions that he is choosing to ignore: ““Oh, bother it all... I do wish you wouldn't keep on seeing things. But I suppose we'll have to wake the others.”” (140)

Peter, in turn, is faced with the task of rising to a decision, which he was unable to do earlier. For him, as for Edmund, the task is harder than it was before. In addition to Susan's increasingly strident complaints and Trumpkin's continued bilge-and-beanstalks line, Peter is aware of even more complicating factors than he was earlier. The notion of an invisible Aslan who disregards the late hour is unfamiliar and unnerving to him, just as he earlier was unnerved by coming across the gorge: but here, neither Trumpkin nor even Lucy can offer assurances that the world will continue to behave as he expects. It is an even more daunting situation in which to make a judgment, but Peter nonetheless rises to his responsibility as High King, having solicited opinions from his companions but making the decision to go with Lucy on his own.

The theme of moving beyond emotions and other circumstantial discomforts is reiterated in the moment when the travelers gather themselves for the night march, as Edmund, Peter and Lucy each set themselves to their appointed task in the face of not wanting to. Further, once the children overcome their feelings and begin to act on the conclusions to which they have held themselves, they each discover in turn that it is easier to ignore their physical and emotional discomforts. Edmund, who “fully intend[s] to back Lucy up” but is “annoyed at losing his night’s sleep,” voices his support for Lucy as crankily as possible; and Peter, we are told, knows that Lucy feels awful about a situation that is not her fault, but is nonetheless brusque because “he couldn’t help being a little annoyed with her all the same.” (143) Lucy is able to forget her frustrations with Susan when she focuses on following Aslan, though not until she has put some energy into dwelling on the various sharp things she might say to her. Yet after this rough start, they all find that having begun to do as they have resolved, in spite of their feelings, makes it easier for them to prevent those emotions from regaining a foothold. Lucy is too busy keeping up to worry about Aslan’s sudden plunge over the edge of the cliff; Peter discovers that, once on the march, “[he does]n’t feel half so tired now, either.” (144;146)

The importance of keeping the emotions in perspective receives its final seal from the negative example of Susan, who unlike her siblings does not manage to overcome her exhaustion and resentment of difficulty. It is because Susan does not master the desires born of discomfort, and makes the night crossing of the gorge under duress and without giving interior assent, that she does not experience the consolations that her siblings do, continuing to fear the path down the gorge even after her four companions have

discovered that it is safe and ceased to worry.³⁹ And Susan is the only one of the four siblings whose inner turmoil continues even after she sees Aslan, because unlike the others her task is not yet done.

Susan's negative example is also the final blow to the prospect of interpreting this series of events according to a belief/unbelief dyad. Susan is the clearest example of obstinate unbelief on offer in the entire book, yet her confession to Lucy is not about either flat unbelief or a clear-cut faith that she deliberately smothered through malice or apostasy. Rather, the thing she describes feeling "deep down inside... if I'd let myself", is the possibility of belief, stifled not by malice or apostasy, but only by a lack of the patient consideration that might have coaxed it into a full-fledged conviction strong enough to outweigh the anxieties and discomforts that were competing for her attention. The crossing of the gorge may indeed be a test of faith, but the paradigm of what faith should look like is rooted in Lewis's complex understanding of the many forces that determine human actions, and the conclusion that faith can make up for our failures of character comes on the far side of much labor and disappointment and even shame. All this can be gleaned simply by reading the text carefully and repeatedly, and letting it teach us on its own terms.

What is especially interesting about this particular gap between critical consensus and the results of close scrutiny of the text – for it is far from unique – is that the alternate interpretation I have suggested not only is friendly to a theologically-motivated reading, but also is an interpretation we might almost have expected to have surfaced earlier, because it could be discovered nearly as easily by cross-reading Lewis's fiction with his

³⁹ "Get on, King Edmund, get on,' came Trumpkin's voice from behind and above: and then, farther behind and still nearly at the top, Peter's voice saying, 'Oh buck up, Susan. Give me your hand. Why, a baby could get down here. And do stop grouching.'" (145)

theological works – a seasoned and respected critical practice among Lewis scholars. Lewis wrote frequently on the untrustworthiness of feelings, both in general and as a guide to religious practice in particular: one should not wait for religious feelings – let alone seek them out as an end in themselves – but rather undertake to practice as one has resolved or one knows to be good, whatever the feelings.⁴⁰ For a reader who is, first of all, disposed to understand Lucy and her siblings’ midnight crossing as a figural rendition of the Christian life of faith, and secondly inclined to seek points of consonance between the Chronicles and Lewis’s religious writings, it is no great stretch to see that the children’s mistake is the result of letting their feelings – on the one hand, the incidental weariness and frustration that they are feeling, and on the other hand, the difficulty of overcoming their own comfortable habits of mind in order to attend to the world around them – dictate their actions.

While the above interpretation does not require a Christian slant to account for the chain of events it evaluates, it certainly admits of one. If anything, it offers what might be a more nuanced or useful image of how a believer in Christ might alter the course of his or her life, and an image of that believer’s experience of distractions and doubts that might complicate his or her initial resolve. The subtle but definite alignment between the development of the focal scene in *Caspian* and Lewis’s views on the role of feelings in the Christian life strongly suggests that the reading proffered here is an enrichment of his Christian vision, one that can only be achieved by reading the scene in terms that also open it up to a completely non-religious reading. It is my hope that the foregoing

⁴⁰ See in particular “Letter 1”, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996 [1942]); *Surprised by Joy*, 148-160; for examples from Lewis’s personal correspondence, see C. S. Lewis to Mary Van Deusen, July 12, 1950, and C. S. Lewis to Genia Goelz, May 15, 1952, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Vol. III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950-1963* ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 68-69 and 191-192.

argument will be recognized and received by these, its fruits—and my hope, too, that the bumpy and uneven terrain of this middle ground, though it is no one reader's private utopia, is nonetheless a Narnia that all of us can live with.