

Sub-Creation and Imagination in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

I shall begin with Plato, a writer and a thinker who was very important to C.S. Lewis. Lewis found much in Plato that attracted him personally and which could be reconciled to his own world-view. Both believed that beyond the shallow material world of our so-called reality (“this babble that we think we mean”) there existed a spiritual world of actual reality. For Plato this was the realm of the “Forms”, the “Ideals”, the perfection of which things in this world are imperfect and incomplete copies. These ultimate realities are approached by philosophy and reason through logical stages, and the ultimate end of this search is truth – both Lewis and Plato would agree here. Both believed that the intellect must rule:

We were told it long ago by Plato. As the King governs by his executive, so Reason in man must rule the appetites by means of the “spiritual element”.
(*Abolition of Man*)

and both felt that there was divine being in charge of the world. Often Plato will use the word *theos* not of a specific god (Poseidon or Zeus or Apollo), but in a sense very close to that of our “God”, such as the end of his early dialogue, the *Crito*, “Leave the matter, Glaukon, and let us behave in this manner, since this is the way in which [the] god is leading us”. Finally, both were great writers with a marvellous capacity for imagination, and both used their fiction, their “myths” for a serious philosophical or didactic purpose.

But in his *Republic*, Plato banned the poets, especially Homer and the dramatists, from his ideal state – today he would include novelists, playwrights, popular music, video games, television and the cinema, and especially the Holodeck on *Star Trek*, in short ‘popular entertainment’. In *Republic 2* and *3* his objections are largely moral ones:

- because the stories were false;
- because they portrayed gods and heroes in a bad light and thus were bad examples for the young guardians;
- and because art was a *mimesis* (“copy”, “representation”) and obliged readers (and remember that in the ancient world one read out loud) to assume the personality of a character other than their own, often to their detriment.

But in *Republic 10* he adds a more philosophical objection:

- that art was at third remove from reality (first are the ideal forms, then the actual physical examples, and finally a depiction) and thus an inferior form of creation -- why draw a picture of a table, when one can actually build that table, or (even better) contemplate philosophically the ideal form of ‘table’?

But Tolkien, in his seminal essay “On Fairy Stories”, in certain of his letters, and especially in his poem (c.1931) *Mythopoeia*, outlined a defence of art and his own personal philosophy of life, and in so doing, whether consciously or not, created a compelling reply to Plato, especially to that in *Republic 10*.

Tolkien argued that humanity, while a fallen and “dis-graced” entity, still has a relationship with its creator, and that one aspect of that relationship is to emulate that creator in its own lesser acts of creation. This Tolkien calls “sub-creation”, and in the central panel of his poem, *Mythopoeia*, makes that clear:

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, ‘twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we’re made.

This, in my view, squarely takes on Plato’s last objection, that art is an inferior sort of creation, the third remove from reality. Rather, Tolkien would argue, an artist is merely following the example of his own creator – a lesser act of creation admittedly, a “sub-creation” to use his own phrase, but one that carries legitimacy and pride, not shame. The artist need not apologize for creating (sub-creating?) works that a detractor might dismiss as “fiction”, but rather claim them as products of the divinely created nature of humanity.

Tolkien is certainly not original in this line of defence for the artist. Plotinus (3rd c.) in *Ennead* V.8 finds a place for the artist in the universe presided over by a Being of Beauty, as the artist will keep his eyes fixed on the spiritual power that created individual examples of beauty and will be driven to create in his own turn. Likewise, Coleridge distinguished “primary imagination” from “secondary imagination”, the first being “a reception of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” and the second “as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency and differing only in degree and in the mode of its operation”. This is very close to what Tolkien does with “creation” and “sub-creation”.

Tolkien’s friend, C.S. Lewis, knew and shared Tolkien’s concept of sub-creation, although each was concerned with different approaches to art and the creative process, and in one instance takes up Tolkien’s concept in language that recalls Tolkien’s poem. In his great sermon, “The Weight of Glory” (1941), he argues that we want more than just to see beauty, we want to participate in it:

We do not want merely to see beauty ... we want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves – that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image.

Here Lewis is maintaining that the artist (or sub-creator) has that ultimate and transcendent beauty in mind when they create alternate worlds. For Plato and Plotinus “the good” must of necessity consist of beauty.

Tolkien has more to say about sub-creation in his important essay, “On Fairy Stories”, where it becomes clear that he is talking less about “fairy-tale” and more about what we would call “fantasy” or “speculative fiction”, and hardly at all about “children’s literature”. In one letter Tolkien replies to an invitation to speak at a symposium on writing for children: “I am not specially interested in children, and certainly not in writing for them: i.e. in addressing directly and expressly those who cannot understand adult language” (Letter 215 – 1959). Here he differs markedly from Lewis, whose stories of Narnia were specifically aimed at children, not as allegories of Christianity, but as a way to prepare children for an encounter with Christ in our world. In an arresting phrase Lewis called this “pre-baptising the child’s imagination”.

In his development of what he means by ‘sub-creation’, Tolkien emphasises three important aspects that the artist (and the reader) should consider:

(i) **RECOVERY** – that is, by creating a new and internally consistent world, one can get a better look at our own world – we tend to take our world for granted and think we know how our world operates, but by entering a new world, we return to our world with a different and better perspective. He begins his poem *Mythopoeia* with the observation:

You look at trees and label them just so,
 (for trees are ‘trees’, and growing is ‘to grow’);
 you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace
 one of the many minor globes of Space:
 a star’s a star, some matter in a ball
 compelled to courses mathematical
 amid the regimented, cold, Inane,
 where destined atoms are each moment slain.

a cold and pragmatic (the “scientific”?) way of looking at the world, but then nails his own personal colours to the mast later in the poem:

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
 of things not found within recorded time ...
 Such isles they saw afar, and ones more fair,
 and those that hear them yet may yet beware.
 They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,

and yet they would not in despair retreat,
 but oft to victory have turned the lyre
 and kindled hearts with legendary fire,
 illuminating Now and dark Hath-been
 with light of suns as yet by no man seen.

Was the first passage in C.S. Lewis's mind when the voyagers in the *Dawn Treader* meet a retired star:

“In our world,” said Eustace, “a star is a huge ball of flaming gas”.
 “Even in your world, my son, that is not what a star is, but only what it is made of”?

And did the business about names and identities inspire Lewis in *The Magician's Nephew*, when Aslan instructs the new King to “rule and name all these creatures”, on in *Perelandra* when Ransom witnesses the naming of the new creation on Venus? When in the passage quoted above Tolkien talks of “Death and ultimate defeat”, we should remember that as a Christian and a Catholic he did “not expect ‘history’ to be anything but a ‘long defeat’ – though it contains some samples or glimpses of final victory” (Letter 195, 15 December 1956). One of these glimpses would be the triumph over Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien had a life-long distaste for technology, for what he called “the Machine”. In fact creating fantasy (“faerie”) was for him an antidote to the destructive forces at work in the 19th and 20th centuries. We may notice that the Shire does not lack all technology: the hobbits can cure tobacco, make beer, and work a mill – the mill incidentally takes Tolkien back to his childhood outside Birmingham, where the most distinctive aspect of his village of Sarehole was the Mill – but it does lack aggressive technology for its own sake or whose aim is power over others. And the Ring is the ultimate symbol of technology gone bad, where its wielder can be seduced by Power, and even more than Sauron, the villain here is Saruman, who by his nature is a “lesser angel” but one who has turned to the dark side – you will remember from both the books and the films how he has ravaged the region around Isengard to create an industrial wasteland and an environmentalist's nightmare. Thus the first aspect of sub-creation is ‘recovery’.

(ii) **ESCAPE** – some of you will know and have enjoyed the incident of the “novel of the century” contest. In 1997, first Waterstone's book stores along with TV Channel 4, then *The Daily Telegraph*, and finally the Folio Society asked readers to vote for the “greatest book of the century”. In the last instance over 10,000 members voted. Each time the winner was Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, to the delight of his fans and the absolute despair and consternation of the so-called critical world. Reactions such as:

Novels don't come more fictional than that. Most novels are set in a recognizable place at a recognizable time; Tolkien invents the era, the place, and a race of fictitious beings to inhabit it. The books that come in Tolkien's train are more or less what you would expect; flight from reality is their dominating characteristic. (Germaine Greer)

A depressing thought that the votes for the world's best 20th-century book should have come from those burrowing an escape into a nonexistent world. (Susan Jeffreys)

Tolkien – that’s for children isn’t it? Or the adult slow ... It just shows the folly of these polls, the folly of teaching people to read. Close the libraries. Use the money for something else. It’s another black day for British culture. (Howard Jacobson)

The most damning comment seems to have been that it was the sort of thing that appealed to adolescent boys. But Tolkien replied to such charges, by wondering out loud who is it who would be the most worried about people escaping, and the answer is of course “gaolers”, those who “confound the escape of the prisoner with the flight of the deserter ... who prefer the acquiescence of the quisling to the resistance of the patriot” (*On Fairy-Stories*). Joseph Pearce in his stirring defence of Tolkien (*Tolkien: man and myth*) concludes that “the myth Tolkien sub-created is not a flight from reality but an escape to reality” (152). A more accurate phrase might be “escape back to reality”.

(iii) ‘Recovery’ first, then ‘escape’, and finally the **CONSOLATION** of the Happy Ending – here Tolkien needed a term to describe the opposite of the devastation of tragedy; for the joy of the unexpected happy ending, “a sudden and miraculous grace”, he coined the term ‘eucatastrophe’. Its greatest expression, he argued, lay in the Gospel story of the Resurrection, but in his own work we see the unexpected intervention of Gollum after Frodo has yielded to the seductive power of the Ring, or when in *The Hobbit* Bilbo hears the cry go up, “The eagles are coming”, or in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, where the table cracks and Death starts working backwards.

But in the ‘eucatastrophe’ we see a brief vision that the answer may be greater – it may be a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world. (*On Fairy-Stories* 155).

The ultimate creator deals with reality – and here we get close to Plato’s world of ideals – while the sub-creator attempts to achieve an “inner consistency of reality”. “Consistency” was an important word for Tolkien, for he spent a lifetime trying to get the languages, names, creatures, customs, and history of Middle-Earth just right, and it explains why he found Lewis’s world of Narnia so unsatisfactory – it was created all too quickly and contained, in his view, a jumble of mythologies (Greek, Roman, Norse, Germanic etc.).

Tolkien appended the following dedication to his poem *Mythopoeia*: “To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver’. Philomythus to Misomythus”. Now we know from other sources that this “one who said that myths were lies” (“Misomythos”) was his friend C.S. Lewis, and that this refers to the time when Lewis, having accepted the existence of God, was wrestling with the claims of Christianity. The crucial conversation between Lewis and Tolkien took place in September 1931, and thus his poem *Mythopoeia* should be dated to the early 1930s, a dating which his phrase about filling the world “with elves and goblins” supports, since “goblins” are what Tolkien called those creatures in *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. Thereafter they become “orcs”. The terms “Philomythus” and “Misomythus” mean respectively “Lover of Myth” and “Hater of Myth”, and “myth” is a crucial term in the religious and philosophical thinking of Lewis and Tolkien.

To the modern ear, “myth” means something that is not true, the opposite of reality, and Lewis uses the term in precisely this way in an early letter to his friend Arthur Greeves: “all religions, that is all mythologies to give them their proper name, are merely man’s own invention” (Letter to Arthur Greeves, 12 October 1916). But as Lewis grappled with his return to Christianity, he encountered the problem of myths: why should he believe the story [myth] of Christianity as opposed to the stories of other religions, since after all myths were lies, though “breathed in silver”? Why should he believe the stories about Christ and not those about Baldur or Osiris or Adonis? Tolkien’s answer to Lewis has become famous: “Christianity is a true myth”, a phrase that Lewis would use some weeks later when writing to Arthur Greeves about his final return to Christianity in September 1931. Here he admits that his problem with the Christian story was needing to know “what it meant” -- what exactly happened on the Cross? – while for myths of the dying gods, or of a god “sacrificing himself to himself”, he “liked it very much and was mysteriously moved by it”, and did not need to know “how it worked”. “But the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others; and one must be content to accept it in the same way” (Letter to Arthur Greeves, 18 October 1931).

Myths, in the best sense of the word, are stories with power and deal with the great issues of humanity. To take one splendid example from the ancient world, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (c.600 BC) recounts the abduction of Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter, the Earth Mother, by her uncle Hades, god of Death; the search by Demeter for her daughter; and her attempt to take her revenge upon Death by making humans immortal. When that fails, she institutes her Mysteries, through which, if one undergoes an initiation and lives a good life, one may be ‘saved’ in the next life. This myth is set, as all myths are, in an indefinite place and time, and handles such issues as:

- the relationship between men and women (Zeus can promise his daughter to his brother, Hades, without consulting either the Maiden or her Mother);
- the relationship between parents and children (at the end of the poem the Maiden cannot simply return to her Mother, since she has now become a Wife herself);
- why all men must die, even though a god may try to intervene;
- what hope humanity does have for the next life (the Mysteries);
- the dependence of humanity upon the Earth (Demeter is not just an angry mother, she is The Great Mother who is angry).

It all sounds terribly modern and engaging – but that is the characteristic of a good myth.

Lewis was well known for his treatises on Christianity and upon an approach to faith by reason (for instance the first part of *Mere Christianity* is called “Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe”), but using myth as a way to reality is something that operates, not in the realm of reason, but in the area of imagination. Peter Schakel has argued in his excellent study of *Till We Have Faces*, that in the late 1940s Lewis changed his emphasis from a heavy reliance on argument via reason (the capacity for analysis, abstraction, logical deduction), especially as demonstrated in *The Problem of Pain*, *Mere Christianity*, and *Miracles*, to one based on imagination, as shown particularly by *The Chronicles of Narnia* and his last novel, *Till We Have Faces*, which bears the sub-title “A Myth Re-told”. Some have connected this shift with the story of

Lewis's alleged defeat in debate at the Socratic Club in February of 1948, at the hands of the Roman Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. Much anecdotal milk has been spilt over this incident, some claiming that Anscombe boasted in her triumph, some that Lewis felt his entire defence of Christianity undermined, others that it was only an energetic debate over a highly technical section of *Miracles*, which caused Lewis to re-write one section of that book.

In an essay, "Myth Became Fact", Lewis makes the important observation that reading a myth does not convey any sort of direct (or, to use a word that Tolkien detested, 'allegorical') meaning, but rather the experience itself is the be-all and end-all of the encounter.

You were not knowing but tasting; but what you were tasting turns out to be a universal principle. The moment we state this principle, we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely. When we translate, we get abstraction – or rather, dozens of abstractions. What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always about something, but reality is that about which truth is).

In other words, do not attempt to understand or de-construct a story or to find out "what it means", but rather experience and respond to the myth in all its mythical power. In that crucial letter to Arthur Greeves (18 October 1931) Lewis makes the important point:

The "doctrines" that we get *out of* the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual, crucifixion, and resurrection.

These are doctrines expressed in the language of words, while the reality is expressed in the language of The Word.

Peter Schakel puts it this way: "reason may lead you to truth, but imagination will lead you to reality". Madeline L'Engle, a writer who owes much to Lewis, said something similar in a rather different context:

When I receive communion, I am partaking in the most sacred myth and ritual of the Christian church (and let us remember that myth is about truth). When we receive the bread and wine, we receive the truth of Jesus' promise, the truth of his love. We don't need to get hung up on words like 'transubstantiation', which tend to take the Eucharist out of the truth of myth into the wimpiness of fact.

And even Lewis's great teacher, Plato, expresses the same sentiment in his *Timaeus* (29d):

Therefore, Sokrates, do not be surprised if in dealing with a great many matters touching the gods and the creation of the universe we are unable to supply accounts that are always self-consistent and perfectly exact ... we must be content with a likely story [*mythos*] and refrain from seeking beyond it.

Thus for the creation of the world, for the nature of Love, for what happens after Death, these are places that reason cannot go, and here we must trust to a “likely myth”.

It is clear that from his earliest days there operated a tension in Lewis’s personality and in his literary expression between his reliance upon reason and his response to imagination. Tolkien mentions this in a letter written after Lewis’s death: “I noticed for the first time consciously, how dualistic Lewis’ mind and imagination [were]” (Letter 291, to Walter Hooper, 22 November 1966). Lionel Adey has explored this tension as the central theme in his 1998 work, *C.S. Lewis; writer, dreamer, and mentor*, which unfortunately suffers from Adey’s undisguised preference for the Dreamer over the Mentor. But I would call your attention to a sonnet (“Reason”) by Lewis, in which he contrasts Reason (“the Maid” or Athena) with Imagination (“the Mother” or Demeter). The second half of the poem runs:

Oh who will reconcile in me both maid and mother,
 Who make in me a concord of the depth and height?
 Who make imagination’s dim exploring touch
 Ever report the same as intellectual sight?
 Then could I truly say, and not deceive,
 Then wholly say, that I BELIEVE. (*Poems* p. 81)

Unfortunately we do not know the date of this poem, but it is very tempting to place it in the early 1930s, during the period of his return to Christian belief.

Both Lewis and Tolkien employ their imaginations, and invite their readers to employ theirs, to create new worlds and people them with appropriate inhabitants, not in any allegorical sense, for as I have said Tolkien disliked allegory and denied that there was any allegory in *The Lord of the Rings* – the most common such interpretation was that the story was an allegory of World War II, by which the coalition of the Shire, Gondor, and Rohan “equalled” the Allies, Mordor the Axis powers, and the Ring represented nuclear weapons or nuclear power. In a foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings* he writes:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations and have always done since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse ‘applicability’ with ‘allegory’; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.

In an earlier letter to his publisher, Sir Stanley Unwin, he distinguishes between ‘allegory’ and ‘a moral’, the latter being present “in any tale worth telling”, and observes that “the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it” (Letter 109, 31 July 1947). Of course, Tolkien’s personal experiences in the Great War, when only one friend from his Oxford days survived that conflict, and his distaste at what had happened to the rural area where he had grown up will have found expression in his epic novel – that is why so many perish in the battles before Gondor and at Helm’s Deep, why Mordor is described as a slag-heap from some demonic factory, and why Saruman is a destroyer of trees. Tolkien loved trees -- “In all my works

I take the part of trees against all their enemies” (Letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 June 1972). But while we may bring our own attitudes and experiences to a story, we should not expect to find a deliberate one-for-one correspondence, unless we are dealing with a work of conscious allegory such as, say, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Orwell’s *Animal Farm* or Barbara Garson’s play *MacBird* (1966).

Lewis also was not happy with an allegorical interpretation of his works, especially of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and stated firmly in his essay, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What’s to Be Said”:

Some people seem to 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 collected information about child psychology and decided what age group I’d write for; 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. It all began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion.

In a little-known essay, “The Vision of John Bunyan”, Lewis argues that to look for allegory often takes the reader in the wrong direction:

We ought not to be thinking ‘This green valley, where the shepherd boy, is singing, represents humility’; we ought to be discovering, as we read, that humility is like that green valley. That way, moving always into the book, not out of it, from the concept to the image, enriches the concept. And that is what allegory is for.

What matters for Lewis and Tolkien, for both artist and reader, is to create a new and consistent reality, to enter fully into that new reality, and invite anyone who wishes to join them. Tolkien spent a lifetime sub-creating Middle-Earth, while Lewis sub-created smaller, but no less vivid, realms: Malacandra (Mars) and Perelandra (Venus) in *The Space Trilogy* – Tolkien did approve of Lewis’s creation of the language of Old Solar, that spoken on Earth before the Fall and everywhere else in the Solar System, the world of Narnia (of which Tolkien did not approve), and finally the kingdom of Glome in *Till We Have Faces*, “a little barbarous state on the borders of the Hellenistic world with Greek culture just beginning to affect it.” (Letter to Clive Kilby, 1957). While we hear very little about the distant Greek world, Lewis sub-creates a vivid and memorable picture of the city up-stream on the River Shennit, with its mud-flats, the temple of Ungit, and looming above all the Grey Mountain. *Till We Have Faces* is not an easy novel to explain “what it means”. More than one of my students has wondered what is going on in the second part of the novel, when the principal character, Orual queen of Glome, comes to a true realization about the gods and humanity, that we cannot speak face to face with the gods “till we have faces”. It is a “myth re-told”, the myth of Cupid and Psyche first related by the Roman writer Apuleius in the 2nd c. AD. But this story is not misunderstood history, that is behind the marvellous tale in Apuleius lies sober and explainable fact – Plutarch and Mary Renault write this sort of historical fiction – but rather in Lewis’s own words he is re-telling the *myth* that Apuleius “got all wrong” (Letter to Katherine Farrer, 2 April 1955). And since it is a myth, we apprehend the story with imagination, not reason; we let ourselves enter the story set in the little barbarous kingdom of Glome and journey to the Grey Mountain where a real god resides, the son of

Love, and witness with the eyes and ears of our imagination what happens when the divine world intersected with our world briefly, in a time before the Incarnation.

In his well-known inaugural lecture (“*De Descriptione Temporum*”), delivered in 1954 when he took up his professorship at Cambridge, Lewis claimed to belong “far more to that Old Western culture than to yours”. By “Old Western” Lewis meant an undivided continuum that ranged from the early Greeks, through classical Greece and Rome, the mediaeval period, and well into the early modern; Lewis would have set the break between that culture and our own early in the 19th century, the time of the industrial revolution (“the birth of the machines”) that Tolkien also saw as a dark and significant break in human history. Lewis continued in his inaugural speech:

Where I fail as a critic, I may yet be useful as a specimen. I would even dare to go further. Speaking not only for myself but for all Old Western men whom you may meet, I would say, use your specimens while you can. There are not going to be many more dinosaurs.

Whereas Lewis felt more of a spiritual disconnection between himself and his own age – incidentally Lewis seems to blame the woes of the 20th century equally on Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and T.S. Eliot – for Tolkien the matter was more of a physical nature. He grew up in an unspoiled area of Warwickshire, which he saw corrupted and incorporated into a modern suburb of Birmingham. For him the great enemy was the Machine, which tempted men into thinking they could rebel against their own creator and gain Power over their own sub-creation. He speaks of the “abominable chemists”, the “lunatic physicists” who have developed the atom bomb at a time “when their moral and intellectual status is declining” (Letter 102, 9 August 1945), and “the destruction, torture and murder of trees perpetrated by private individuals and minor official bodies” (Letter 339). One very nice letter (Letter 213, 25 October 1958) gives an intriguing self-description:

I am in fact a Hobbit (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking; I like, and even dare to wear in these dull days, ornamental waistcoats. I am fond of mushrooms (out of a field); have a very simple sense of humour (which even my appreciative critics find tiresome); I go to bed late and get up late (when possible). I do not travel much.

But central to both their views of life and art was the notion of going back, or of going home. The sub-title to *The Great Divorce* was “Who goes home?”, Psyche in *Till We Have Faces* speaks of her longing for the Grey Mountain as “it now feels not like going but like going back”, in *Mere Christianity* when one is on the wrong road, “progress” is going back. In *Mythopoeia* Tolkien expresses his feelings on “progress” or “evolution”:

I will not walk with your progressive apes,
erect and sapient. Before them gapes
the dark abyss to which their progress tends --
if by God's mercy progress ever ends,
but does not ceaselessly revolve the same

unfruitful course with changing of a name.
 I will not tread your dusty path and flat,
 denoting this and that by this and that,
 your little world immutable wherein no part
 the little maker has with maker's art.
 I bow not yet before the Iron Crown,
 nor cast my own small golden sceptre down.

In a letter to his son, Christopher Tolkien, some years later he cites these last two lines, clearly expecting that his son will know them in their larger context (Letter 52, 29 November 1943). For Tolkien the essence of true sub-creation was that it took the artist and the reader *back* to the level of the actual creator, to the depths and splendour of that primary world, and was not a modern quest for novelty and originality, but rather a re-statement of older and more heroic values. Much of the appeal of the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 was that it made movies fun *again*, that it took us *back* to when movies were heroic and exciting.

In *Republic* 10 (607) Plato laid down a challenge: “we shall allow the supporters of poetry to plead for her, that she is not merely a source of pleasure but a benefit to society and to human life. We shall listen favourably, since we shall clearly be the gainers if that can be proved”. Whether intentionally or not, Tolkien with his concept of sub-creation has taken up Plato's challenge and argued that the craft of the writer as sub-creator is both a spiritual and a mystical one. The influence of Plato is especially clear in Lewis's fiction. To take a few examples, Orual the main character in *Till We Have Faces* asks her teacher, the Fox, symbol in the novel of Greek rationality, whose answer clearly recalls Plato's *Phaedo* 65-66:

You don't think – not possibly – not as a mere hundredth chance – there might be things that are real though we can't see them?
 Certainly I do. Such things as Justice, Equality, the Soul, or musical notes.

Or Puddleglum in *The Silver Chair* is told by the Green Witch that the sun is only a dream based on a lamp, a clear allusion to and parody of the famous analogy of the Sun and the Cave in *Republic* 8: Your *sun* is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing; the *sun* is but a tale, a children's story.

One stanza from his tongue-in-cheek poem, “Evolutionary Hymn”, meant to be sung to the hymn tune “Lead us Heavenly Father, lead us”, expresses his distaste for evolution or ‘progress’ and relativistic moral standards.

Ask not if it's god or devil,/ Brethren, lest your words imply, / Static norms of
 good and evil / (As in Plato) throned on high; / Such scholastic, inelastic, /
 Abstract yardsticks we deny.

Perhaps the most famous example is the professor's realization at the end of *The Last Battle* about reality and copies:

But that was not the real Narnia. That had a beginning and an end. It was only a shadow or a copy of the real Narnia which has always been here and always will be here: just as our own world, England and all, is only a shadow or copy of something in Aslan's real world ... And of course it is different: as different as a real thing is from a shadow or as waking life is from a dream ... "It's all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what *do* they teach them at these schools?"

When Lewis was writing his examinations in Greats in 1923, the examiner on philosophy remarked to Lewis's tutor:

One of your young men seems to think Plato is always wrong ... man called Lewis, seems an able fellow anyway.

But as A.N. Wilson well remarks in his biography of Lewis (85):

Among all the popular writers of the 20th century in English, Lewis is conspicuous for the number of times he appears to believe that Plato is right.