THE GOOD GUYS AND THE BAD GUYS:
TEACHABLE MOMENTS IN THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA

Though I enjoy, now and then, visiting the local Cineplex with my wife and two children, I really much prefer to screen films in the privacy of our family room. Liberated from the “tyranny of silence” that must (understandably) prevail in a crowded theater, we are left free to intersperse our viewing with an on-going dialogue about the film. As the only teacher in the family (and an English one at that!) I invariably do most of the talking: now guiding the children through the twists and turns of the plot, now highlighting the strengths and flaws of the main characters, now elaborating on the theme or moral of the film. Usually, the kids are eager to join in the dialogue and will often assuage me with a barrage of questions. Their questions range from the simple to the complex, the sublime to the ridiculous, but no matter the movie and no matter the mood they are in, there is one question that they always, always ask: “Who are the good guys, and who are the bad guys?”

Now if I were a good modern relativist, I would tell them that words like “good” and “bad” are not fixed terms with a universal, timeless meaning but labels that shift from age to age and culture to culture. If I were a good postmodern multiculturalist, I might add that these labels are not “innocent,” but are imposed by powerful, dominant races, classes, and genders, on other races, classes, and genders that they perceive as weaker, less rational, or less civilized. But (thankfully for my children) I am neither. Though I am (as a Christian) well aware that there is no one who liveth and sinneth not and that all men share a propensity for evil, and though I know too that one man’s terrorist is often another man’s freedom fighter, I am also (as a Christian) convinced that eternal, cross-cultural standards exist by which we can judge certain groups, actions, and motivations as upholding those standards (good) or violating them (bad). True, as fallen creatures living in a fallen world, we must both accept the existence of ambiguity and refrain from judging the hearts of others, but that moral certainty is an absolute impossibility; second, I would argue that we are, by nature, ethical animals, endowed not only with the ability to discern right behavior from wrong, but with an innate sense that we ought to embrace the former and shun the latter. (The existence of psychopaths and sociopaths no more invalidates this truth than the existence of paralytics invalidates the fact that our legs were made for walking.) Every child who asks his father to identify for him the good guys and the bad guys is participating, in his own small way, in this in-bred, hard-wired ethical imperative.

If this be so (and I am convinced that it is), then it lies incumbent on all people who interact with the young to so foster and guide them that they will grow to be responsible moral agents, able to distinguish that which is good from that which is evil, that which is virtuous from that which is vicious, that which should (and must) be encouraged if the individual and society are to prosper from that which must be avoided if we and our world are to resist plunging into darkness. If we do not do this (either because we are lazy and apathetic or because we have internalized a modernist/postmodernist agenda), then we abdicate, in part, our roles as parents and educators, as shapers of the hearts, minds, and souls of the young. More than that, we court disaster for ourselves and our nation.

But our task does not end here. It is not enough merely to identify which are the good guys and which the bad. We must teach our children as well why the good guys are good and the bad guys are bad. More than that, we must help them to understand the true nature of goodness and evil. It’s easy enough for English-speaking children to see that the words “good” and “God” and the words “evil” and “Devil” are (accidentally, if serendipitously) closely allied in our language. It is more difficult to define for them either the divine qualities that shine through true goodness and make it live or the satanic nature that empowers evil with its own perverse anti-life.

Still, we must try.

Many theories have been put forward to explain the phenomenal success of The Lord of the Rings (both Tolkien’s three-part novel and the trilogy of films by Peter Jackson). Though no single reason can suffice to account fully for this phenomenon, I would suggest that a key element in the success of Tolkien’s epic fantasy is that, in the face of the apparent triumph of relativism, the novels/films present their readers/viewers with a world in which moral certainty is both philosophically possible and practically necessary. Whether between armies and their leaders or within the tempted and tormented souls of the central characters, the battle between good and evil wages with a fury that is as powerful in its dramatic intensity as it is challenging in its ethical clarity. By the end of the novels/films, we feel that we have not only peered deeply into the nature of pure goodness (Sam) and pure evil (Sauron), but that we understand how and why it is that the characters who are pulled in both directions (Saruman, Aragorn, Frodo, Gollum, etc.) follow the paths they do into the darkness or the light.

Yes, The Lord of the Rings has proven a godsend for parents who would open their children’s eyes to the precise nature of goodness and evil, virtue and vice. And yet, for all its effectiveness at laying bare the exact qualities that distinguish the good guys from the bad guys, it must (I believe) finally fall short of second place to another series of fantasy novels that explores its moral and ethical terrain with even greater precision and insight. I speak, of course, of the seven novels that make up The Chronicles of Narnia, novels written by a man who was not only a life-long friend of Tolkien and a fellow Oxford don, but who shared Tolkien’s faith in a Christian worldview. Like Tolkien, C. S. Lewis affirmed the real existence of God and his angels, both the good ones who chose to remain in God’s presence, and the evil ones (or devils) who rebelled against God’s authority and thereby fell into a state of corruption. He believed as well that man, though created in the image of God and declared by him to be good, has, like the devils, fallen into a state of sin. However, whereas the devils are eternally and irremediably corrupt, a true and titanic struggle between good and evil, the way of God and the way of Satan, rages in the human breast. Alone we cannot win the battle, but God in
Christ has provided for us a way of redemption by which we can be freed from the corruption within and participate in the glorious goodness of God. The struggle defines us, in part, as human beings, and is one of the things that distinguishes us from the lower animals. We are the only earthly creatures who possess the knowledge of good and of evil, the only creatures with the capacity both to strive after (and to recognize) goodness and to succumb to the corrupting and finally dehumanizing influence of evil. In the Chronicles, we meet characters who avail themselves of both capacities, who choose paths that draw them either toward that goodness which is most fully embodied in the person of Aslan, the Lion King of Narnia, or toward the evil that dwells in (and possesses) the perverse soul of Jadis, the White Witch.

In The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the first written and first published of the Chronicles, Lewis sets in motion the moral and ethical trajectory along which all the later novels will travel. He also initiates the second, Christian meaning that underlies all of the Chronicles by replaying, on a different world that runs in accordance with a different time scheme, the redemption story of the Bible. The novel begins when the four Pevensie children (Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy) enter into the magical world of Narnia (a land of talking animals, living trees, and mythic beasts) through the back of an old wardrobe. Once there, they discover that Narnia has been ruled for a hundred years by the usurping White Witch, who has made it “always winter and never Christmas.” When they learn that they have, unwittingly, caused the arrest of Mr. Tumnus, a friendly Narnian faun, they set out to find a way to rescue him. They are taken in by Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who inform them that though the Witch’s power is too great for them to fight alone, the lion Aslan (son of the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea) has returned to Narnia and is now “on the move.” During dinner with the Beavers, the children learn that their brother Edmund (who, during an earlier visit to Narnia, had been tempted by the Witch’s Turkish Delight) has stolen away into the night to betray them to Jadis. Peter, Susan, and Lucy are taken to meet Aslan, who helps them rescue Edmund from the clutches of the Witch and who seems poised to crush her power completely. But there is a complication. According to the Deep Magic of Narnia, the blood of every traitor belongs to the Witch. In order to save Edmund from the Witch, Aslan agrees to offer his own life in the place of the treacherous Edmund. Aslan meekly surrenders himself to the Witch, who shaves, humiliates, and then kills him on the sacrificial Stone Table. The children along with all Narnia now seem doomed, but on the dawn of the next day, the Table cracks and Aslan is restored to life. Susan and Lucy witness both Aslan’s death and resurrection. When they ask him how it is that he is now alive again, he tells them that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, she did not know the Deepe Magic: that if an innocent victim were to die in the stead of a traitor, the Stone Table would crack, and death would begin to work backwards! With Susan and Lucy on his back, Aslan races toward the Witch’s castle, in the courtyard of which lie the statues of animals that she has turned to stone with her wand. Aslan breathes on each of the statues, restoring them to life, and then calls his “born-again” army into battle with the Witch. Jadis and her army are defeated, and the children rule Narnia as Kings and Queens for many years, until a White Stag leads them back to the Wardrobe, from which they emerge as children again.

Christian parents who read the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe with their children will no doubt wish to begin their family discussion by explaining how Lewis’s novel retells the Gospel message. Beware, however, that you do not reduce it to only an allegory of the Christian story. Emphasize that the characters who act and interact in the novel are “real” characters whose lives have their own integrity and meaning within the frame of the story. Let the drama of the tale (and the luminous “person” of Aslan) exert its full impact on your children before you begin to “unpack” its underlying Christian message. You might explain to them that (to paraphrase a comment from Lewis himself) Aslan is not simply an allegory (or representation) of Christ, but that Aslan is what the Son of God (the Second Person of the Trinity) might have been like had he been incarnated on a magical world of talking animals, living trees, and mythic beasts. If you keep this in mind, though, I think it is “safe” to suggest some simple parallels between the novel and the Gospel.

Edmund, like Adam, has committed an act of disobedient treachery against those who have loved and should love. (As traitor, he also resembles Judas, but I think the link to Adam is finally more fruitful.) As a result of his sinful choice, he is cut off from the fellowship of both his family and of Aslan, and becomes the pawn of the White Witch. Just so, we, like Edmund, are separated from God by sin, and our lives are forfeit to Satan (who, like Jadis, is also the ruler of our fallen world). The situation is one which we (like Edmund) cannot remedy on our own. Our salvation from death (and redemption from the just claim of Satan) can only come by God (the Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea) sending his Son (Aslan) to invade our “enemy-occupied” world (Aslan is “on the move”) and to take our punishment upon himself by willingly offering up his life on the Cross (the Stone Table). But the story does not end there. Christ (like Aslan) rises again from the dead and thus sets in motion not only our own salvation but that of the whole world.

If the children are still with you, you might try moving on to more sophisticated theological concepts. It is no coincidence that Aslan is killed on a Stone Table which then cracks in two when he rises again. On the simplest level, the cracked Table recalls the stone that rolled away from the tomb at the Resurrection of Christ. On a deeper level, it recalls the Veil in the Temple which miraculously tore in two from top to bottom when Christ was crucified. Historically, the Veil separated the people from the Holy of Holies, that most sacred of places which once had held the Ark of the Covenant and into which the High Priest alone could enter, and on only one day of the year (the Day of Atonement). Since the death of Christ, we no longer need the Veil or the Temple or the High Priest; through the Blood of Christ shed on the Cross, we are all granted direct access to the Holy God. On a yet deeper level, the Stone Table recalls the Tablets of the Law on which God wrote the Ten Commandments. In the Old Testament (before the coming of Christ), the Covenant between God and his people (the Jews) was mediated by the Law of Moses, a law which included the intractable rule that the punishment for sin is death (the Deep Magic). But when Christ died and rose again (the Deeper Magic), the legalistic and condemning force of the old law/covenant was broken and grace took
its place: a grace which cements the New Covenant (or Testament) between God and the Church. Finally, if you wish to ratchet it up one more notch, you might discuss how the scene in which Aslan breathes on the statues and restores them to life offers a powerful picture of what it means to have New Life in Christ. Christ (like Aslan) did not simply come back from the dead in the sense of being resuscitated (as Lazarus was); he went through death and came out on the other side. In the New Testament, this is made clear by the fact that Christ now wears a Resurrection Body that can “walk through walls” and appear and disappear at will. In Lewis’s novel, this is captured in a single powerful detail. Before Aslan is killed, his hair and mane are shaved off. When he resurrects and appears to Susan and Lucy (as Jesus did to the Marys), his mane is not only restored, but is more rich and golden than before. It is suggested (though not clearly stated) in the novel that before his death/resurrection, Aslan did not have the power to breathe on statues and restore them to life. But now that he has himself conquered death and risen anew, he has the power to share that life with anyone he wishes. Just so, the risen Christ has the power to grant us, here and now, a new and more vital life, and, in the age to come, a Resurrection Body like unto his own.

So far so good. If your children get this much out of the novel, they are doing quite well. But I would strongly urge you not to end your discussion here. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe offers the opportunity not only to identify for your children the ultimate good guy (Aslan, Christ) and bad guy (the White Witch, Satan), but, as I suggested earlier, to delve more deeply into the full and true nature of good and evil. Though one can start such a discussion by focusing first on evil and then moving on to good, I would suggest starting with goodness instead. In our culture (and, alas, in our churches), we too often promote a negative view of goodness; we think of it merely as the absence of evil, of a simple restraint from the temptations of the flesh. The truth, of course, is completely the opposite. It is evil that is the negative thing, the falling away, the perversion of a primal and positive goodness. As Lewis teaches us in his non-fiction, there is no such thing as perfect evil: if evil were ever to succeed in becoming only evil, it would cease to exist. The hole in a shirt is nothing without the shirt; just so, evil (which Augustine defines as the privation of good) can only exist inasmuch as it preys on and defiles and corrupts something good that God made. If your children are old enough, here is the time to explain to them that sex is not a bad thing that we must utterly resist in the name of a negative purity, but that sexuality/intimacy is a gift of God that we must be careful not to misuse or defile.

There are few characters in literature who embody positive goodness more powerfully than Aslan. In his presence, the children feel at once a sense of joy and fear, an ecstasy mingled with terror, an intuition of both the actively sublime and the passively beautiful. Aslan is neither a pretty object to be placed on a shelf, nor a tame pet to be tamed, tamed, and unpredictable. The first time the children hear his name, they are taken out of themselves (the literal meaning of the word ecstasy): when they meet him in person, their legs tremble beneath them. Yes, they are told by the Beavers, he is good and just and loving, but he is by no means safe. He is to be trusted and loved, but not to be trifled with. One might as well try to pet a lion or dance with a tornado. After Aslan rises from the dead and shows himself to the girls, he warns them that they must put their fingers in their ears, for he feels a roar welling up inside of him. Susan and Lucy do as they are told; then, Lewis describes, “Aslan stood up and when he opened his mouth to roar his face became so terrible that [the girls] did not dare to look at it. And they saw all the trees in front of him bend before the blast of his roaring as grass bends in a meadow before the wind” (Chapter XV). The newly risen Aslan is like a hurricane unleashed, a force that both tears away the death imposed on Narnia by the White Witch and ushers in renewal and redemption. In its wake, Spring returns to Narnia. But Aslan’s power does not only manifest itself in his triumph over death, winter, and the Witch. When Aslan surrenders himself to Jadis at the Stone Table, he does so not out of weakness (he is no guilt-ridden doormat) but out of a position of compassionate strength. The kinetic energy released at his resurrection is there throughout the novel in potential form, like a caged spring ready to snap. For example, we are told that Aslan learns of the treachery of Edmund, he knows what he must do. The tragic knowledge of his own coming sacrifice weighs heavily on Aslan, but he carries it through to the end, as only one who knows his purpose and embraces it can do. When, after the first shock of Aslan’s humiliation passes, and Lucy can bear to look up at him again, she realizes, to her surprise, that “the shorn face of Aslan [now looks] to her braver, and more beautiful, and more patient than ever” (Chapter XIV). Lewis felt that the children (and adults) of his day had lost what he liked to call (after Rudolph Otto) a sense of the numinous: a sense of awe or dread that mingles terror with beauty and that makes one feel small and insignificant (but not repulsive or suicidal) in the face of a transcendent force. It is the dulling of this sense in Lewis’s day (and our own) that accounts for what many modern writers have called the loss of the sacred. Lewis was truly concerned (as we should all be) that modern children could no longer conceive of something being both wonderful and terrible, fun and serious at the same time. Aslan is that very something, and it was Lewis’s hope that if children learned to feel a sense of the numinous in the presence of Aslan they could later transfer that feeling to its proper object: the Triune God of the Bible. I can attest to the power of the Chronicles to do just that every time my family takes a long driving trip and listens to the excellent radio play versions of the chronicles produced by Focus on the Family. As we listen, the children (or my wife and I) might start talking or drifting into other thoughts, but when Aslan bounds on to the scene, the interior of the car grows still, and a strange awe resonates in the air. A faint (but real) echo of that ecstatic dread that Isaiah and John felt when they stood before the Throne Room of God falls upon us and draws us out of our mundane concerns.

Those characters in the novel who hearken to the numinous presence of Aslan and allow it to transform them find that they are capable of acts of great courage and mercy. Even the treacherous Edmund, changed from within by the awesome love of Aslan, shows himself willing to sacrifice his own life for his friends and for
Narnia in the final battle with the Witch. Too often our modern icons of goodness are too weak, passive, and restrained to appeal to the young. Through Aslan, they can learn (and experience) a richer, divine goodness that shatters all boundaries and that has the power to restore, renew, and revive.

When set over against the pulsating goodness of Aslan, the evil of the White Witch and her minions seems, finally, a paltry, petty, lifeless thing. In the Screwtape Letters, the senior devil Screwtape explains to his nephew Wormwood (a young, naïve tempter) that the ultimate difference between God and Satan is that the latter wants cattle that he can use for food, while the former wants servants that he can turn into sons. In the triangle that forms between Aslan, Edmund, and the White Witch, we see this truth played out. Jadis tempts Edmund to betray his siblings by promising him that he will reign with her as a Prince and that he will eat all the Turkish Delight that he wants. In reality, the Witch transforms Edmund into a slave whom she insults, abuses, and feeds on stale bread and water. Edmund thinks that the Witch will make him wiser, stronger, and better than his siblings; instead, she reduces him to a thing of little value and no purpose. Under her evil influence, he comes to hate not only his siblings and Aslan but himself. Worse yet, his gluttonous desire for the Witch’s Turkish Delight has the effect of ruining for him all other types of joy. As Lewis so simply but profoundly puts it: “there’s nothing that spoils the taste of good ordinary food half so much as the memory of bad magic food” (Chapter IX).

It is a sad fact of humanity that most of us (whatever the age or culture in which we were raised) grow up believing a terrible lie: namely, that whereas Satan wants to set us free to be truly ourselves, Christ wants to crush our personality and make us all the same. Allied to this is an equally false belief that Christ is a cosmic killjoy, a joyless Puritan who hates all forms of merriment, revelry, and indulgence. In a memorable, yet easily overlooked scene in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Lewis gives the lie to this satanic propaganda, showing that it is, in fact, the Devil (and not Christ) who is the real killjoy.

Even before his resurrection, Aslan, simply by his presence in Narnia, causes the long winter of the Witch to begin to thaw. In tandem with this breaking of the Witch’s icy grip, Aslan’s appearance also brings into Narnia the jolly figure of Father Christmas. While on her way to overtake Peter, Susan, and Lucy before they can reach Aslan, the Witch comes upon a party of talking animals who are partaking of a feast provided for them by Father Christmas. When she spies them, the Witch is not pleased that they are drinking wine and stuffing themselves with food. Indeed, her response to them is identical to what most Christians think (wrongly) is God’s default reaction to our earthly pleasures: “‘What is the meaning of all this gluttony, this waste, this self-indulgence. Where did you get all these things?’” (Chapter XI). If the Witch had her way, Narnia would not be a land of gluttony and díspomania, but a cold, dead world inhabited by automatons whose joy and life and potential for growth have been swallowed up by her devouring envy and pride. And for those who refuse to be so emptied of their vitality, the Witch simply turns them into stone statues: which is exactly what she does to the “party animals” she meets on the road.

Though most evangelical Christians point to John 3:16 as their favorite verse, mine has always come from a later Chapter in John: from his beautiful discourse of the Good Shepherd (10:1-18). In verse 10 of this passage, Christ describes, in the most precise way, what the difference is between his own goodness and the evil of Satan (the thief): “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” In its depiction not only of Aslan and the White Witch but of those characters who fall under their sway, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe offers a veritable dramatization of this key verse. And, by so doing, it offers as well one of the classic responses to that perennial question: “Who are the good guys, and who are the bad guys?”

Those who have read only The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and who have recognized its allegorical link to the gospel story often wonder how (and perhaps why) Lewis managed to retell that story six more times in the remaining Chronicles. The answer, of course, is that he did not. Rather than revisit the Easter accounts of the four Gospels, Lewis follows the cue of the other books of the Bible, and of the weighty tradition of Christian (and pre-Christian) literature. That is to say, he explores in the other Chronicles the choices that lie before those who live in a moral universe in which good has triumphed but in which evil still remains.

As most (though, alas, not all) lovers of the Chronicles of Narnia are well aware, the seven novels are (unfortunately) published today in an order that differs from their original order of publication: an ordering that follows the internal chronology of Narnian history. Thus, The Magician’s Nephew (originally published 6th), because it deals with the creation of Narnia, is placed first in the new ordering. Likewise, The Horse and His Boy (originally published 5th) is placed between The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and Prince Caspian because it takes place during the reign of High King Peter (thus overlapping with the last chapter of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe). There are many reasons to prefer the original ordering, but the one that concerns us here was first noted (I believe) by Paul Ford in the Introduction to his Companion to Narnia. Ford reasons (rightly, I think) that if the Chronicles are to be seen as reworking in the genre of fantasy the sacred history of the Bible, then it makes the most sense to begin with the salvation story that lies at the crux of that history. Just so (I would add) did the church Fathers who decided on the arrangement of the New Testament (originally published 7th) in the light of the death and resurrection of Christ; in the same way, it is best to read the seven Chronicles (including The Magician’s Nephew) with an eye to Aslan’s victory over death, treachery, and the White Witch.

It is against this backdrop that we shall now explore, Chronicle by Chronicle, the choices made by those characters who act out their parts (for good or for ill) in the shadow of the Risen Lion. Indeed, as my focus will be on those choices, I shall say relatively little about Aslan in the paragraphs that follow. Though Aslan
stands at the moral center of all the tales, to ask a child (or adult) to live up to his Pure Goodness would be far too daunting. For that reason, I shall concern myself with the more “human” examples of good and evil that provide the Chronicles with much of their interest, conflict, and moral power.

Compared to the White Witch, the bad guy of Prince Caspian (Uncle Miraz) is a more standard villain, recognizable from both fiction and history. He is the power-hungry usurper who (like Claudius in Hamlet) kills his own brother in order to steal his throne. He even proves willing (as have many tyrants throughout history) to kill his young, innocent nephew (Caspian) as a way of securing his own dynastic line. Miraz is one in a long line of Telmarine Kings (some, like Caspian’s father, good, but most of them bad) who have seized control of Narnia and driven the talking beasts underground. In many ways, they have transformed the once innocent and carefree Narnia into a police state ruled by fear and suspicion. Again, the situation is a familiar one, but Lewis adds to it a subtle twist that brings out more fully the precise nature of Miraz’s evil. You see, it is not enough for Miraz that he and his heirs have expelled the talking beasts (and with them, their messianic hope in Aslan). Miraz’s true goal is to obliterate even the memory of Aslan and the talking beasts by converting those sacred memories into lies and superstitions. If he has his way, the history of Narnia will be so rewritten as to leave out both the sacrifice and resurrection of Aslan and the ancient faith and deeds of his followers. He is, to use the language of our own world, a secular humanist with a vengeance! When the young Caspian asks him about the “old stories” of Aslan and the Four Kings and Queens, Miraz ridicules the boy and attempts to strangle his yearning for the old days. Despite, however, the concerted attempts of the evil Miraz to “de-mythologize” his nephew’s beliefs, the good Caspian keeps alive his yearnings for the real Narnia of old and risks everything to bring it back. Caspian is innocent without being naïve, idealistic without being impotent; he does not seek after some utopian pie-in-the-sky, but a revival of the true spirit of Narnia. He is an excellent role model for children who must face a modern world rife with cynicism and nay-saying, and his struggle with Miraz offers an ideal opportunity for the discerning parent to expose for his child one of the key attributes of evil in our world. Miraz is a villain, the parent must teach his child, not because his beliefs differ from those of Caspian, but because he desires to crush all belief to achieve his ends. He is like the thief in John 10 (see above) who comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. His revisionist campaign seeks not to bring the light of knowledge but to snuff it out.

The Miraz/Caspian conflict offers the perfect teachable moment for instruction in the nature of good and evil, but it is not the only conflict that offers itself for such a purpose. There is a second, less obvious conflict that also has much to say about good and evil and how those opposing states are related to the central issue of belief. While fleeing from Miraz, Caspian falls into the company of a talking badger named Trufflehunter, a red dwarf named Trumpkin, and a black dwarf named Nikabrik. At first, Trumpkin and Nikabrik seem to be very similar types; neither of them believes (in contrast to the pious Trufflehunter) in Aslan or the ancient tales of the Four Kings and Queens and neither of them is much disposed to trust the Telmarine Caspian. As the story progresses, however, we learn that the unbelief of Trumpkin and Nikabrik is qualitatively different. Nikabrik’s unbelief is based on pride, despair, and a refusal to embrace joy; Trumpkin’s, on the other hand, is based more on caution, ignorance, and a generous dose of stubbornness. Trumpkin can’t believe because he has never encountered the presence of Aslan and because he fears that if Caspian and his army place all their faith in old stories, they will be destroyed by the forces of Miraz. Nikabrik won’t believe because he has grown cold and dead on the inside and because he is motivated by revenge and hatred rather than by love for Narnia and her talking beasts. The true distinction between their characters becomes evident after Caspian blows a magic horn that promises to bring help, and where he turns it, drawing Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy back into Narnia) and asks for a volunteer to travel quickly to Cair Paravel to see if the help has arrived. Nikabrik categorically refuses the task because he feels he must remain behind to watch out for the partisan interests of himself and his fellow dwarves. Trumpkin, on the other hand, immediately accepts Caspian’s commission, not because he believes in the magic of the horn (in matter of fact, he does not) but because he feels he must remain behind to watch out for the partisan interests of himself and his fellow dwarves. Trumpkin’s heart is both open and noble, and when, eventually, he comes face to face with Aslan, he believes and proves faithful. Nikabrik’s heart is closed and defensive, and he is eventually destroyed in the midst of an evil attempt to bring back (by black magic) the White Witch to help him fight Miraz. It is as wonderful to watch Trumpkin slowly emerge into the light, as it is frightening to watch Nikabrik slowly fall into darkness. Children (and their parents) need to understand the vital lesson that it is not where we begin but where we end that counts. There are some (to paraphrase the moral of one of Jesus’ parables) who initially say yes to God but then do not say what he says when the time of decision comes; there are others who run from God and refuse his call but who turn and do his will in the end. Nikabrik (like the jaded prostitutes and worldly-wise tax collectors who accepted Jesus) is a member of the first group; Trumpkin (like the self-righteous Pharisees who rejected him) is a member of the second. Belief is not just a matter of the head, but of the heart and the hand. There are only two kinds of people in the world . . .

Both Caspian and Trumpkin are memorable characters on account of the courage and nobility of their hearts. But both are eclipsed by another Narnian whose chivalric goodness and valor is equal to that of good King Arthur himself. I speak, of course, of Reepicheep the mouse, who first appears in Prince Caspian as one of the soldiers in Caspian’s army, but who takes on an even more central role in The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. The setting is three years after Caspian’s defeat of Miraz and his ascent to the throne of Narnia. With the help of Trumpkin, Caspian has set all to rights in his kingdom and now sails to the far Eastern sea in search of seven lost Narnian lords who had been sent on wild goose chases by Miraz in hopes that they would never return. Though he and his crew have undertaken the journey to carry out this royal mission (and perhaps have a little adventure along the way!), Reepicheep sails for a very different reason. He hopes that
by sailing east to the end of the world, he will arrive at Aslan’s Country and thus achieve his heart’s desire. That is to say, Lewis’s great warrior mouse is also a great mystic; like Sir Galahad (or Lancelot before his fall), Reepicheep possesses in full the two chivalric virtues of courage and purity.

Needless to say, such characters are few and far between in our modern world. Children in our day are too often presented with heroes who are either brave and strong or meek and humble. We have lost the old Christian sense that a hero can be both manly and religious, vigorous and virtuous, pugnacious and pious. How many young boys today have a father that they can imagine standing up undaunted before an oppressor in one moment and kneeling humbly and meekly before Christ in the next? Reepicheep’s passionate yearning for Aslan does not make him weak, nor does his gentlemanly conduct make him soft. On the contrary, his conduct provides him with a strong and secure sense of self, even as his yearning gives his life direction and purpose. Reepicheep knows who he is and where he is going in a way that is unfortunately quite rare in our modern society. Indeed, in Chapter 14, as he prepares to leave the island of Ramandu for the unknown dangers of the last and easternmost sea, he proclaims what is my single favorite speech in all the Chronicles: “My own plans are made. While I can, I sail east in the Dawn Treader. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan’s country, or shot over the edge of the world in some vast cataract, I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise and Peepiceek will be head of the talking mice in Narnia.”

We hear a lot today in the media about kids seeking after their dreams, but most of it either appeals (at best) to artificial, cloying sentiment or (at worst) to the child’s nascent sense of cupidity. Reepicheep’s commitment to achieving his dream has nothing to do with being a pop star or making it rich or getting one over on the snobby kids at school (in fact, Lewis himself strongly disliked children’s stories that promised such prizes). What Lewis’s chivalrous mouse is after is something far less tangible, something more spiritual than physical. His Holy Grail is not a pot of treasure or a kingdom to rule, but the fulfillment of the very purpose for which he was created. What awaits him at the end of his journey is not celebration but consummation.

If Reepicheep is (at least as I see it) the central hero of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, then who is the chief villain? Oddly, though the novel does boast a particularly seedy bad guy in the person of the corrupt and craven Governor Gumpas, the book finally lacks a White Witch or Miraz to serve as its focal point of evil. Indeed, the real evil in the novel is not so much personal as it is allegorical. As in any good quest romance (and Reepicheep’s presence on board forces us to read it in that context), the hero must face not a single antagonist but a series of trials that will test his valor and his purity. Accordingly, Lewis places Reepicheep (and his fellow sailors) in a number of situations that challenge them to overcome such deadly sins as pride, envy, avarice, and sloth (that is why The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, for all its narrative thrust, is the most episodic of the Chronicles). In some cases, the crew overcome these challenges by their own resources of strength and virtue, but in most, they escape only because of the miraculous intervention of Aslan, who appears now as a bird to guide them out of danger, now as an imposing presence to shock two of them out of their greed, now as a face in a magic b

Indeed, I cannot read through The Voyage of the Dawn Treader without a verse from I Corinthians popping into my head several times: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (10:13). Along with The Horse and His Boy, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader presents its audience (especially its child audience) with a picture of the world that is not far removed from that of The Divine Comedy, Pilgrim’s Progress, or Canterbury Tales. In an age when children (and their parents) are continually commanded to live in the now (not in the eschatological now of the Kingdom, but in the selfish, ephemeral now of immediate gratification), it is heartening to be reminded that we are all pilgrims and sojourners in the land. We must be reminded (vis-à-vis the verse quoted above) that what we most need is daily grace to overcome the trials and temptations set before us on the road.

But how are we to keep on track as we travel that road? To find an answer to that question, we must read on to the next of the Chronicles, The Silver Chair, a novel that seems at first to be patterned after one of those very school stories that Lewis hated so much, but which quickly metamorphoses into something far more rich and strange. This time, two children (Eustace and Jill) are called into Narnia by Aslan to help rescue Rilian, the kidnapped son of King Caspian. To help them fulfill their mission, Aslan teaches Jill four Signs that will direct her and Eustace to the missing prince. He then instructs her to repeat the Signs to herself day and night, taking great care never to forget or overlook them. Broadly speaking, the Signs upon which Jill is instructed to meditate are an allegory for the Bible (Joshua 1:8), or, to be more specific, for those biblical principles and admonitions that Jewish and Christian parents are exhorted to raise their children up in (Proverbs 22:6). The remembering or forgetting of these principles does not, in itself, make us good or evil people; however if we practice the former, we will find ourselves more fit to resist evil and embrace good, while if we succumb to the latter, we will find ourselves an easy prey to all manner of temptation and deception.

Indeed, the choices that Jill and Eustace must make during the course of the novel are inscribed between two poles of good and evil that exert an equally strong pull on the children. These two poles are themselves embodied in two of Lewis’s most original creations: the Emerald Witch and Puddleglum. At first glance, the Witch may seem to be merely a stock “bad guy,” but, as he did with Miraz, Lewis invests her with an additional sinister quality that delves the nature of evil itself. For the last ten years, the Emerald Witch has
been holding Tirian’s body and mind captive in her underground lair. Through her black arts, she has enchanted Rilian into forgetting his true identity and into believing that she is his benefactor. She has further enchanted a race of gnomes into building tunnels for her that will connect her cave with Narnia. When the tunnels are ready, she plans to mount a sneak attack from below on the unsuspecting Narnians and set up Rilian as a puppet King with herself as the true Monarch and Queen. When Eustace and Jill arrive in Narnia, the Emerald Witch is but weeks away from making her attack. Just in time, the children reach the underground cave and rescue Tirian, but, before they can return to the surface, the Witch catches them in the act.

At this point, the reader expects that the Witch will use her powers to kill or at least imprison Tirian and his rescuers, but instead she throws some magic dust in the fire and attempts to enchant them. Slowly, seductively, she convinces our protagonists of a “truth” that they all know is absurd: namely, that neither Narnia nor Aslan exists. There is no outside world with a sun to shine on it (as the children freely try to convince her); all that exists is her underground cave. That thing which they call the sun is just a dream they made up from staring too long at a torch; all their foolish talk about golden lions is the result of a wish-fulfillment spurred on by a yellow cat they once spied in the Witch’s chambers. That evil and lies go hand in hand is a fact that few need to be taught (Jesus himself told us that Satan is the Father of Lies); accordingly, Lewis digs further beneath this correlation to uncover the real essence of the satanic lie. The falsehoods of the Witch are more than deceptive; they are nihilistic. For the weak, buffoonish Miraz, it is enough to dismiss the stories of Aslan as old legends with little historical validity; for the far more clever and malevolent Witch, Aslan (and Narnia with him) is to be reduced to nothing but a weak childish fantasy. The Witch does not seek merely to pervert the truth or alter reality; she wishes to devour them whole. Her final goal is to absorb into herself the personality of the Narnians, as she has already absorbed that of Tirian and the gnomes. Indeed, in a grotesque irony, the Witch arranges for the children (who, having forgotten the Signs, have lost their protection from her lies) to be devoured (literally) by a race of cannibalistic giants. (Let us not forget that Lewis, in Screwtape Letters, depicts the devils as feasting on the souls of the damned.) It is no coincidence that the Witch, with her underground cave and army of enchanted diggers, strongly resembles a queen ant running a hive. Her evil, totalitarian vision of the perfect state is one in which all citizens are reduced to mindless drones.

It is most fortunate, then, for Eustace, Jill, and Rilian that they have in their company a creature who absolutely cannot be pressed down to fit a generic mold. I refer, of course, to Puddleglum, a Narnian Marshwiggle whom Lewis once declared was (along with Reepicheep) his favorite character from the Chronicles. Though he is arguably the real hero of The Silver Chair (just as Sam is arguably the hero of The Lord of the Rings), Puddleglum is more stubborn than Trumnkpin and has a streak of pessimism a mile wide and two miles long. He is certainly not your typical follower of Aslan—more like the grouchy guy who sits in the back of the church and grumbles about the pews being too hard than the diplomatic pastor or the charismatic worship leader. And yet, when the moment of decision comes, he is the one who shows the firmest faith in Aslan (and the Signs) and the greatest willingness to resist the seductive lies of the Witch. He even bravely stamps his foot into the Witch’s fire to help clear his head and free the others from the effects of the magic dust. Puddleglum is the perfect embodiment of that old adage that says that you can’t judge a book by its cover; that goodness and truth often come in strange and unexpected forms. More than that, he is an object lesson for American children who are taught from the moment they can watch the television that if they want to be good and successful little Americans, they must conform themselves and their dreams to a fixed image—that is to say, they must strive to be “just like everybody else.” Puddleglum alone offers incontestable proof that the Chronicles were written not by an American, but by a citizen of a nation that loves and respects its eccentrics; that does not consider egalitarianism some high and holy calling, but delights in idiosyncrasy, quixotic behavior, and inefficiency.

Democracy, as far as it goes, is a good thing, but when it begins to run roughshod over personal quirks, when it tries to mold its citizens into a collective mass, it becomes a danger to humanity itself. The trouble with liberalism in America is not that it allows too much variety, but that it allows too little. It would be a very good and healthy thing if every American parent introduced his child to Puddleglum, and then used that introduction to drive home one simple rule of thumb: the impulse that would make everyone the same is more often an evil than a good one. The good God who created our universe revels in difference and variety; the enemies of that good God despise all those things which make us unique individuals. There are many religious folk out there who wrongly believe that the satanic ideal for mankind is a Friday night dancehall in New Orleans. It is not so. The devil, that inveterate hater of our humanity, would like nothing more than to convert our world into a single, giant ant hill.

Having provided this dual vision of free humanity vs. mindless conformity in The Silver Chair, Lewis goes on in the fifth Chronicle, The Horse and His Boy, to follow a group of pilgrims as they seek to move from the latter vision to the former. As before, Lewis provides us with a male and a female protagonist, but this time, neither the boy nor the girl is from our world. The boy, Shasta, is a prince of Archenland (a good kingdom that lies to the south of Narnia) who was kidnapped while still a baby and who has been raised by a cruel stepfather in the harsh, heathen land of Calormen (which lies south of Archenland). The girl, Aravis, is a spoiled, but free-spirited princess of Calormen who is pledged by her unloving father to marry the Grand Vizier, a grotesque, toadyng, much older man whom she despises. At the outset of the novel, both Shasta and Aravis (with the help of their talking Narnian horses) decide to escape from Calormen and flee north to Narnia. Though the boy is poor and powerless and the girl is rich and well-connected, they yearn alike for a kind of freedom that does not exist in Calormen: a freedom both of body and of spirit. They sense within themselves that they were born for something better, for a world that does not run (as Calormen runs) on
treachery, greed, oppression, and slavery.

Like Reepicheep in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Shasta and Aravis are pilgrims on an allegorical journey—or, to be more precise, an archetypal one. An archetype is a person or an object or an event that has universal, cross-cultural significance, a recurring image that surfaces again and again in the myths and legends of diverse groups (water, fire, the quest, and the wise old master are all archetypes). Indeed, of all the characters in the Chronicles of Narnia, Shasta is the most richly archetypal (Prince Caspian is a close second). He is the foundling, the noble (often royal) son who is raised as a peasant, but whose true “blue blood” eventually leads him back to his noble origins; he goes by a hundred names: Percival, Perseus, Hercules, Tarzan, Oliver Twist, Romulus, Cyrus, Moses, Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter. And, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. He is a type, finally, of what we all are: sons and daughters of the king who have been expelled from the Garden that was meant to be our home and who are impelled by an inner longing to trudge on, with weary step and slow, to regain that which we have lost. The good which remains within us yearns to be transplanted back into that good soil, for we know that we will never truly be whole until we have returned to our primal place of origin. And that sacred place belongs not just to those who were (like Shasta) actually born there (allegorically and archetypally speaking, Narnia and Archenland are the same place), but to those (like Aravis) whose Narnian birthright is written not in their genes but in their soul.

If you would instill in your children the virtue of pressing on, if you would inspire in them the desire to seek out their purpose no matter the obstacles, then encourage them to identify with Shasta and Aravis. Let them know that those who truly seek with all of their heart that which is proper for them to know will always find. Assure them that such seekers will receive divine aid in ways that they could not possibly have imagined or planned for. As in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Aslan intercedes several times to aid his weary travelers. But this time around, the fact that it *is* Aslan who is helping them is not made clear to them (or to the reader!). Indeed, neither Shasta nor Aravis possess any real knowledge of Aslan, much less that it is he who is protecting and guiding them. Just so, late converts to Christianity can generally identify (with the help of hindsight) numerous occasions in their pre-Christian walk when the Holy Spirit intervened directly (but “invisibly”) in their lives. In that sense, *The Horse and His Boy* is much like the biblical book of Esther, a strange, archetypal book in which God, though he is behind all that happens, is never mentioned by name. God cares, Esther assures us, even for those Jews who have become absorbed into a non-Jewish culture; just so, Aslan watches over all of those who truly desire to do his will, whether they live in Narnia, Archenland, or Calormen.

*As The Horse and His Boy shares with The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* its central metaphor of quest/pilgrimage, so does it share as well the narrative device of sending its protagonists through a series of trials. This time, however, Lewis makes it even more clear to his readers that the obstacles the pilgrims must face are as much internal as external. The character flaws in Shasta and Aravis are quickly made evident: the former is selfish, untrusting, and dishonest; the latter is vain, self-centered, and arrogant. They fight often and only learn slowly to trust and respect one another. They both have a host of inner demons and lingering fears that they must overcome if they are to complete their journey. To make it worse, they (and all of Narnia) must protect themselves from an antagonist whose selfishness and vanity are almost boundless: Prince Rabadash of Calormen. Rabadash, more than a simple villain, embodies the archetype of the doppelganger or ghostly double; he is the evil twin of Shasta/Aravis, an object lesson of what they might become apart from their yearnings for Narnia and the grace of Aslan. In the manner almost of a parable or a fable, Lewis allows Shasta/Aravis and Rabadash to complete the physical and moral trajectories of their opposing journeys in such a way as to illustrate boldly that we reap what we sow. At the end of the former journey, Shasta and Aravis find freedom, truth, acceptance, and purpose; at the end of the latter, Rabadash not only forfeits his pride and egomania, but his very status as a human being. Thus, while Shasta is restored to his true identity as Prince (and later King) of Archenland, the unrepentant Rabadash is transformed by Aslan into that to which he truly is: a donkey. As in *Pinocchio* (another great children’s novel filled with teachable moments on the nature of good and evil), we either become consumed by cupidity and make (literally) an ass of ourselves, or we seek the selfless road of charity and bec

Of all the Chronicles, *The Magician’s Nephew* presents us with the fullest study of the origins, motives, and justifications of evil, a study which, were it presented in philosophical terms, would be above the heads of even teen readers, but which, embodied as it is in the personalities and actions of the tale’s two villains, becomes remarkably accessible. *The Magician’s Nephew* begins in the early 1900’s when two children, Digory and Polly, stumble upon the hidden room of Digory’s Uncle Andrew. Andrew is a magician who has in his possession a set of yellow and green rings with the power to transport those who touch them to another world. Andrew desires the (forbidden) knowledge promised by these other worlds but is too afraid to risk the journey. Unwilling to deny himself the knowledge he seeks, Andrew, without feeling a shred of guilt, manipulates Polly into grabbing one of the rings; whereupon, she vanishes. When Digory rebukes his uncle for behaving dishonestly and for putting Polly into danger, Andrew patiently explains that magicians like himself are above such schoolboy rules of morality and that they are free to use whatever means necessary to further their research. Then, in their same breath, Andrew turns upon Digory and shames him into taking a ring himself and following Polly into the unknown.

As it turns out, the ring takes him, not to another world, but to a way station, a magical wood dotted with pools, each of which is a doorway to a different world. Polly and Digory jump into one of the pools and end up in a dead world called Charn. After some exploring, they come upon a great hall filled with statues. Near the statue of a beautiful but cruel-looking woman, they find a bell with an inscription that tempts them to ring the bell. Impulsively, his heart filled with an Andrew-like desire for forbidden knowledge, Digory rings it. Immediately, the statue comes to life, and they learn, to their horror, that she (Queen Jadis) was
responsible for the destruction of Charn. After much occult research and personal sacrifice, she had discovered the secret of the “Deplorable Word,” a spell with which she had used to destroy everyone in Charn except herself. When Polly rebukes Jadis for killing innocent people in her quest for power, Jadis responds (undaunted and without a tinge of remorse) that the people of Charn belonged to her to do with as she pleased and that, after all, it was her sister’s pride that had forced her to speak the word. Realizing that Jadis is an evil woman not to be trusted, Polly and Digory try to escape, first to the wood, then back to the earth, but both times Jadis grabs hold of them and is pulled in with them. Back in London, Jadis makes Andrew her apprentice-slave and sets out to take over the city. In desperation, Polly and Digory use their rings to spirit her away, but, by accident, also drag in Andrew, a cabbie (Frank), and his horse (Strawberry). The rings, however, end up carrying them not back to Charn but to a new world about to be born.

That world, of course, is Narnia, and as the six travelers watch in wonder, Aslan sings Narnia into being. Digory, Polly, Frank, and Strawberry are captivated by the song, but Jadis and Andrew, whose hearts are insensitive to love and joy, hate the sound. So deep is their hatred, in fact, that Jadis takes a piece of a lamppost she had ripped off in London for a weapon and throws it at Aslan’s forehead. It bounces off harmlessly and falls in the ground, where, miraculously, it grows into a lamppost. As the others marvel at the fertility of Narnia’s new soil, Andrew thinks only of the weapons he could grow; he would turn Paradise into a munitions factory! That which inspires awe and praise in the others, inspires only fear, greed, and loathing in the twisted souls of Andrew and Jadis.

Much more happens in the novel (indeed, The Magician’s Nephew is, to my mind at least, the most tightly and effectively plotted of all the Chronicles), but, for the purposes of this essay, we may stop here. I do not mince words when I say that if parents could successfully convey to their children the exact nature of the evil that impels Andrew and Jadis, they would have gone a long way toward shielding their progeny from a kind of madness and deception that has destroyed individuals and whole societies throughout recorded history.

This particular form of self-delusion is first described (and exposed) in Plato’s Republic, that great dialogue which attempts the vital task of defining justice. One of the characters in the dialogue, whose views Plato most strongly criticizes, is a man named Thrasymachus. According to him, justice is nothing more than the will of the stronger: might makes right. The victors not only reap the spoils and write the history books; they determine what is or is not just. Two millennia later, at the dawn of the Renaissance, Machiavelli would echo Thrasymachus’ definition in his own anti-Platonic meditation on justice and the state: The Prince. Rejecting what he saw as the idealistic and impractical position taken by Plato, Machiavelli argued that in our world, expediency always wins out: the ends justify the means. The wise ruler is one who can appear to be virtuous while practicing every form of deceit necessary to achieve his ends.

Another four hundred years would go by before Thrasymachus and Machiavelli would find an even more radical disciple who would question the very status of virtue and vice, a philosopher who would urge his ideal leader, his man of the future, to move himself beyond all bourgeois notions of good and evil. That philosopher was Nietzsche, and he dubbed his messianic leader the Overman. Morality, culture, and the state had all grown petty and corrupt for Nietzsche; modern religion was but a sham, a slave ethic used by the weak to keep the powerful in check. What was needed was not a revival of the Platonic or (worse yet) Christian notion of justice; what was needed was a strong leader with a Satanic Will to Power who was unafraid to tear down old institutions and ideologies. Fast forward one more century and we come to the logically illogical end of Thrasymachus’ argument that might makes right. In the work of the postmodern historian and theorist Michel Foucault, we learn that society and humanity are defined not by virtues like justice, honor, or love, but by structures of power. In fact, it is those structures (and those structures alone) that produce and define our notions of justice, honor, and love: no one can think outside of the structure. For Foucault, might literally makes right; the Platonic or Christian notion of justice is just one of many possible ideologies determined by the reigning regime of power.

Try to explain the last two paragraphs to your ten-year old and you won’t get very far. But introduce him to Andrew and Jadis, and he will not only see the seed of Thrasymachus in action but see the bitter fruit that grows from such seeds. Indeed, Digory himself sees almost immediately through the self-serving hypocrisy of Andrew (and, behind him, Thrasymachus and his heirs). Andrew, like all of his ilk, considers himself superior to standard rules of morality (beyond good and evil); yet, he simultaneously expects Digory to heed the call of honor and rescue Polly. As for Jadis, Polly sees just as clearly through her façade. If Jadis is so convinced that her actions are above the reproach of middle class morality, if she is so assured of the purity of her Will to Power, then why does she feel the need to justify her actions by blaming her sister for the destruction of Charn? Jadis and Andrew stand accused by their own words, but they are so thoroughly narcissistic that they cannot see it. Their Faustian lust for knowledge and power is so boundless, so unquenchable, that they are willing to surrender in exchange their own capacity for true happiness and joy.

Those who champion the ideals of Nietzsche generally consider themselves to be pragmatic, clear-thinking people whose eyes have been opened to the delusions of those trapped in a “limited” Judeo-Christian mindset. And yet, ironically, such people often end up (like Andrew and Jadis) blind to the greater realities that lie all around them. Like the Pharisees who witnessed Jesus’ miracles with their own eyes yet were unable to recognize his glory, so Andrew and Jadis are utterly blind to the beauty and wonder of Narnia. In the presence of a fellow Israelite cured of leprosy, the Pharisees can only see the legal infraction (Jesus healed on the Sabbath); in the presence of the unbounded fertility of Narnia, Uncle Andrew sees only the potential to create weapons of mass destruction.

“There is a way,” Proverbs warns us, “which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death” (14:12). The way of Thrasymachus, of Machiavelli, of Nietzsche, of Foucault (like the way of Andrew and Jadis) may seem at first to be enlightened, fashionable, and “brave,” but it leads in the end to death.
Thematically speaking, *The Magician’s Nephew* is a complex book, and, as such, it prepares the way for an even more complex book: *The Last Battle*. (The dual complexity of these two books offers yet another reason why they should be read in their proper order, as the final two Chronicles of the series.) Here, in the most apocalyptic of the tales, Lewis presents us with a trio of Nietzsche-like villains whose cumulative treachery ushers in the end of Narnia. It all begins when a Machiavellian ape named Shift convinces his “friend” (a naïve donkey appropriately named Puzzle) to dress up in a lion skin and pretend to be Aslan. The dialogue that Lewis writes for Shift and Puzzle is simple but remarkably effective; even a child can see through the loathsome tricks Shift uses to bend Puzzle to his will while simultaneously understanding how Puzzle could be so easily fooled. Shift used a combination of guilt and false piety to achieve his ends. Although his motives are purely selfish and self-aggrandizing, he pretends that his real goal is to help Puzzle and the rest of Narnia reach their full potential. With a broad, rhetorical flourish, he casts himself in the role of noble sufferer, of one who has (to paraphrase Andrew and Jadis) a high and lonely destiny to fulfil. Like Andrew and Jadis (or, for that matter, like Satan), he mounts a great lie, and then comes to believe it himself. While spouting promises of modern efficiency and collective prosperity for Narnia (all in the name of the false Aslan he has erected), he scourges the land for profit and sells the talking beasts into slavery in Calormen. He even dons human clothing and deudes his followers (and perhaps himself) into believing that he is not, in fact, an ape, but a very old and wrinkled man.

Into this moral and spiritual vacuum, a second, more effective Overman (Rishda Tarkaan) soon enters and supplants the petty visions of empire dreamed up by Shift (who is even more buttonish than Uncle Miraz). A combination of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and every other 20th century totalitarian despot, Rishda is a Calormen general whose avaricious Will to Power surpasses even that of Rababadsh. With the help of his “propaganda minister” (a talking cat named Ginger), he extends and complicates Shift’s deceptions by claiming that Aslan and the idolatrous, vulture-headed god of Calormen (Tash) are actually the same god. In the name of this new god (Tashlan), Rishda destroys what is left of Narnian freedom and poisons what little faith, hope, and charity remain. In fact, so thoroughly does he corrupt the wellsprings of Narnia’s religion that when Puzzle is exposed as a false Aslan, the Narnians do not return to worshipping the real Aslan but give in to utter apathy and despair. As in *The Magician’s Nephew*, Lewis’s warning here draws on concepts from philosophy, sociology, and political science that would normally be beyond the comprehension of child readers. And yet, once again, Lewis makes the academic and arcane both accessible and urgent. The Bible tells us that Satan often disguises himself as an Angel of Light; similarly, evil in our world often cloaks itself in fine-sounding words like tolerance, egalitarianism, and patriotism. Rather than reason abstractly, *The Last Battle* demonstrates how swiftly relativism can lead to nihilism, the free market to dehumanization, and promises of utopia into the harsh realities of dystopia.

Of course, a number of “good guys” rise up to defend Narnia from the evil of Shift, Rishda, and Ginger: Tirian (the last King of Narnia), Jewel (a noble unicorn), Roonwit (a wise centaur), Poggin the dwarf (who refuses to cave in to the cynicism and “ethnocentrism” of his fell wing dwarfs), and Eustace and Jill (who have been called back into Narnia by the righteous prayers of Tirian). Together, these heroes and their loyal followers mount a brave offensive again the “bad guys” and . . . lose! In sharp contrast to the other six Chronicles, the heroes of *The Last Battle* are all defeated by the forces of evil. Though this ending is, in some ways, forced on Lewis by the apocalyptic nature of the tale, Lewis goes out of his way to emphasize the eventual defeat of Tirian’s rebels and the destruction of Narnia. That nothing on our earth lasts forever, that all things must come to an end, was a message Lewis hoped (I believe) to impress on our death-denying age. If there is one thing that modern American parents and schools do not teach their young charges, it is the fact that all in our world will eventually die and decay. This may sound like a contradictory statement given Pope John Paul II’s perceptive observation that Western society has embraced a Culture of Death, but it is less contradictory than it is paradoxical. Our society’s simultaneous acceptance of abortion as euthanasia and its false promise that we can live forever in perfect health are but two symptoms, I would argue, of the same disease: an inability and an unwillingness to accept the natural risks that accompany life in a fallen world (the excessive amount of litigation in our country may also be traced back to this same disease). We, like Tirian, want to be in control of ourselves and our surroundings; we find it impossible to believe that hard work and commitment will not lead to success and happiness. Of course, in most cases, they do, but not always. Often times, there is no way to avoid defeat, overcome disease, and cheat death; the true hero knows this and, though he will fight bravely while there is still a chance of victory, he knows too how to accept that which cannot be avoided.

There is a rumor out there that evil is realistic, pragmatic, and savvy while goodness is idealistic, gullible, and naïve. It is not so. Evil always deceives, and, in the end, that deceit blinds even itself. It is the good whose eyes are truly opened to the real, the lasting, and the true. It is goodness which stares reality in the face and accepts—accepts, but never resigns. For the Chronicles begin and end with a death that leads to a resurrection. In the first Chronicle, that death is limited to Aslan; in the last, the heroic champions of Aslan share in their Master’s death.

In his Epistle to the Church at Philippi, Paul longs that he may know Christ, “and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (3:10-11). Tirian and his men are at their most heroic, their most “Aslan-like,” not when they are killing Calormenes, but when they willingly take onto themselves the fellowship of Aslan’s sufferings on the Stone Table. This statement alone might suggest a kind of defeatism or martyr complex in Lewis’s heroes, but then the statement is not to be taken alone. Though Lewis loved Norse mythology and was a devotee of Wagner’s Ring cycle, he understood that the dark Teutonic fascination with violent death and self immolation (the “twilight of the gods”) was not, finally, compatible
with the Christian focus on the Crucifixion. Yes, it is right that Christian (and Narnian) martyrs should long to participate in the fellowship of his (Christ’s/Aslan’s) suffering, but only so that they might share as well in his resurrection. Though the second half of The Last Battle may seem to give us Lewis at his most pessimistic and Germanic, the death and defeat through which the characters must suffer prove less a capitulation to Wagner’s Gotterdammerung than a prelude to glory and apotheosis. The concluding chapters of the novel offer a depiction of heaven that combines Plato, Revelation, and Dante in a heady, imaginative mixture that remains in the mind (of child and adult alike) long after the book has been completed and laid back on the shelf.

Yes, the Chronicles of Narnia offer us a glorious happy ending (replete with a joyous “cast party” that reunites all the characters from the previous six tales), but it is an ending that has been hard fought and even harder won. In the end, good does not simply defeat evil; good and evil become, at last, what they truly are. Evil is confined to darkness, not so much out of retributive justice as because evil never truly embraced or desired the light. Goodness, on the other hand, opens out onto eternal light and boundless space for that was what it ever yearned for while it struggled and groaned for consummation.

This is something that every true hero knows and longs for in his heart, and which no true villain can ever, ever hope to understand.

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