Narnian (An)aesthetics

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In Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you’re taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays. (Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, p. 36).

In this essay I am going to talk about two things, both of which are implied in the quotation from *The Horse and His Boy* by C. S. Lewis: storytelling as a craft and what we value in narratives, specifically in fairy tales. I am going to pose the question whether Lewis follows the aesthetic precept above, or whether his Narnian writing deviates from the traditional norms of storytelling in such a way that readers could be put off by it. Has the writing too much of the “English essay” in it and too little of the “grand Calormene manner”? In other words, are the stories aesthetically pleasing or not?

The etymology of aesthetics as “things perceptible by the senses” is rather illuminating, I find. Stories are aesthetic when they are heard, when they are read, when they are relished, and when they are in touch with your being. In fact, the idea of sensual perception in connection with the experience of fiction is expressed in a whole range of words and phrases and metaphors. Conversely, one could say that stories are *anaesthetic*, - that is, “insensible” - when they fail to communicate to the senses. There can be various reasons for this, such as historical and cultural changes in perception and taste. After all, in the long run most texts fail to please aesthetically. It is with such works of fiction as with the creatures sunk down to the underworld of *The Silver Chair*: “few return to the sunlit lands.” Ultimately, of course, each reader/listener is the arbiter. It is a matter of individual taste and choice whether a story is perceived as aesthetic or not. I will not argue that. Some like eel stew; some like Turkish Delight. All the critic can hope to achieve is explain and point at tendencies, trends and
patterns. I will try to have it both ways when it comes to the Narnia books and the question whether or not they eventually will qualify as sunken, anaesthetic fictions. I “bracket my case,” as can be seen already in the title of this essay.

I am of course partly playing the devil’s - or rather, the White Witch’s - advocate, here, trying to see textual discontinuities and oddities. Playing, because, with the possible exception of the Carnegie be-medalled The Last Battle, I have eagerly visited the land of Narnia ever since I was a child, in particular the vistas of The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. Even, had I not originally been positive to the Narnia books, Lewis’s popularity as a storyteller would seem to make him rather proof against any kind of aesthetic criticism. Narnia is not threatened; people want to hear the stories. So, why bother to criticize instead of enjoying the stories and their simple message?

Well, there are at least three reasons. First of all, Lewis’s use of the fairy tale is so complex, and provokes such varying responses as to warrant an investigation in itself, if, for no other reason, simply out of curiosity. Secondly, if a tale is not enjoyable aesthetically the “simple message” of the story (its ethics) is, of course, lost too. Shallow familiarity may breed contempt, while deeper knowledge promotes goodwill; thus a better understanding of the aesthetic practices involved might bring about increased enjoyment in the story (and the message). A third reason is that the Narnia books, in my opinion, play an interesting and pivotal role in the evolution of children’ adventure stories, fairy tales, and Christian fantasy. They are - and please excuse the paraphrase (inspired by Aslan’s speech in The Last Battle) – “a Chapter of the Great Story, which no one has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter part is better than the one before: the history of literature.”

The aesthetics of the Narnia books is a major problem, and one treated rather negligently in criticism. A great majority of the critical texts on the Narnia books deal with its Christian elements - allegory, imagery, symbolism, allusions and so on. A closer look discloses that these critical texts - whether they are positive or negative to the found parallelisms - are more directly concerned with ethics than aesthetics. This does not mean that the Narnia books have not been discussed in aesthetic terms before. Already before the publication of The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe Lewis’s friend, J. R.R. Tolkien, allegedly voiced his dissatisfaction with Lewis’s mixture of styles and discourses (albeit indirectly). Later critics have complained that the “characters fail to live ... because they fail to act” and that the setting is insubstantial (Quinn 116). It has also been argued that Lewis’s writing is “deficient as fictive art” and that it is “over-intrusively narrated and under-
focalized,” that is, does not provide a central character with which to identify with (Stephens 244).

Students too, in my experience, tend to be interested in the aesthetics of Narnia, or, rather, the apparent lack of it. A common student response to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is, for example, that the allegory destroys the reading. My approach here will be complementary to those sketched above. I propose to single out a few very general aesthetic criteria - I shall call them recognition and novelty- and see how these concepts apply to the Narnia books. Recognition and novelty are two main sources of aesthetic pleasure. Reviewing a known pattern; identifying words and phrases, plots and places, mastering the generic, linguistic and social conventions of a text is often satisfying. Not least has this been shown in child audiences (Tabbert 7-9).

Furthermore, recognition takes place on the level of personal experience. What one believes (however subjectively) is a text’s truth value can therefore be gratifying in itself: Truth is Beauty - whether it is found in mimetic (realistic fiction), empiric (scientific), moral (didactic), spiritual (fantastic) discourse. Needless to say, perhaps, these “true” discourses are often played out against each other in different reading communities. In storytelling it is often more important to stick to a discursive pattern than to convey a “literal” truth. A good example of this is provided by Aravis in *The Horse and His Boy*, when she relates her elopement.

But before I had done so, this mare spoke with the voice of the daughters of men and said, “O my mistress, do not by any means destroy yourself, for if you live you may yet have good fortune, but all the dead are dead alike.”

“I didn’t say it half so well as that,” muttered the mare.

“Hush, Ma’am,” said Bree, who was thoroughly enjoying the story.

“She’s telling it in the grand Calormene manner and no story-teller in a Tisroc’s court could do it better. Pray go on, Tarkheena.” (38)

Bree recognises and appreciates Aravis’s storytelling because she is true to the discursive form, in this case a rather cliched and ornate style complete with memorable sayings such as “all the dead are dead alike.” But Hwin is disturbed by the lack of truthfulness, or perhaps one should say, the low level of realism. Now, the question is whether Bree would recognise and enjoy his own story as Lewis put it down. And in order to make a
qualified guess we need to bring in a frame of reference; in my opinion that would have to be the fairy tale. Nesbit’s brand of children’s adventure stories offers a complementary approach.

I have argued elsewhere (*Alice in the Oral-Literary Continuum*) that an often missed characteristic of literary fairy tales is their oral qualities, or rather, the rendering of oral traits into writing. In the Narnia books the cliches are few and “the grand Calormene manner” is lacking. Not even the opening or closing formulas remain. In *The Magician’s Nephew* the conventional “long time ago” or “once upon a time” is rendered as: “This is a story about something that happened long ago when your grandfather was a child.” The conclusion of *The Last Battle* alludes closer to the happily-ever-after-formula: “And for most of us this is the end of all the stories, and we can truly say that they lived happily ever after” (184). On the other hand, the style of writing is in other respects within the oral literary conventions. One would expect a lot of dialogue, preferably witty and colourful, of which there is in abundance (and I shall come back to it). And when there are descriptive passages they should lean towards fantasy and the poetic rather than towards establishing realistic credibility. The fairy tale does not set store by “thick descriptions; they are sketchy and suggestive. In that sense, all fairy tales are shadowlands. When Quinn asks for "minute descriptions" in the style of Robinson Crusoe he is not asking for a fairy tale. (Besides, these “minute descriptions” are often lacking in children’s versions.)

In traditional fairy tales the narrator is usually not present until the very end, after the happily ever after, as a way of rounding off the story and breaking the spell of make-believe. The storytelling persona in the early novel and in the literary fairy tale (Alice in Wonderland is a case in point) becomes institutionalised, partly I am sure, to make up for the absence a “real” live storyteller. Personally, and for that reason, I am not entirely averse to it, but as I have pointed out it is not customary in traditional (that is, oral) fairy tales. Fairy tales usually employ one character with which to identify- either a young boy or girl (child or adolescent). Sometimes we find a pair of two brothers or sisters, or a brother and sister where both parties are equally sympathetic to the audience, as in “Snow White and Rose Red” and “Hansel and Gretel.” Sometimes, too, a brother or a sister can fulfil the role of “sibling-in-distress” and hence impel the hero’s action (“The Two Brothers,” “Fairy Tales Without a Moral,” “Childe Rowland”). The rule, however, is sibling rivalry (often made more acceptable as step-sibling rivalry) - brothers and sisters as competitors, indeed antagonists. We find examples of this in tales like “Mother Holle.”

Although the four Pevensie children in *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe* is a collective protagonist unheard of in fairy tales, Lewis more often than not avoids the generic
pitfalls by letting us follow one child at a time in his or ventures - Lucy first, then Edmund. In numbers, the first Narnia book could be said to offer a compromise between the children’s adventure story as Edith Nesbit conceived it and the traditional fairy tale. Interestingly, in the following books, the group of children is reduced to two or three.

It should also be pointed out that many of the most memorable and important scenes in the Narnia books are acted out by lone children: Lucy in the woods praying to the trees in *Prince Caspian*, or Jill on Aslan’s Mountain in *The Silver Chair*, or Eustace transformed into a dragon in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The Horse and His Boy is in this, and many other respects, the most fairy-tale like of the Narnia books, with Shasta/Cor as the obvious protagonist. In this book, moreover, we see a combination of familiar themes: the sundering at birth by the royal twins, the return quest of the long lost brother, the revelation of Shasta’s identity as prince Cor, the reward in terms of kingship and marriage to Aravis.

As to characterisation, Lewis actually employs the fairy tale conventions to a greater extent than perhaps is usually acknowledged. Edmund is both the malevolent brother and the brother who must be saved; he is also something of a protagonist since he reforms and almost dies in the process. There is of course also sibling rivalry, between Edmund and the rest, especially between him and Lucy and, underlying that, between him and Peter. And his act of treason marks him as evil. In a traditional fairy tale he would not have been pardoned, but hung, drawn and quartered. Above all, Edmund would have been either good, bad or worth saving. In Lewis, he is all of that. In this context it is worth repeating that Lewis did not conceive of the Narnia books as fairy tales only. According to Chad Walsh Lewis said of *The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe* that he had begun a story “in the tradition of E. Nesbit” (quoted in Hooper 402). He also alludes to the Bastable children in *The Magicians Nephew*. A good reason why Lewis may have wanted to blend the fairy tale with a dose of Nesbit is that a group of children provides an element which is absent in the fairy tale: the wish-fulfilment fantasy of togetherness, of belonging to a closely knit group, of never having to be lonely and vulnerable. Another reason could have been that by partly employing the conventions of the children’s adventure story Lewis makes use of a form that knew would be recognised by children. Finally, the more or less contemporary and realistic setting of children’s adventure stories contributes to the possibility of recognition.

In fairy tales we expect to find heroes and helpers. A hero may take upon himself or herself to undertake a quest. On his or her road of trials help is offered. Without it the hero would presumably fail, but the source of action and initiative is in the hero. This is usually not the case in the Narnia books. By a strange inversion of the convention, it is rather the children
who are the helpers, whereas Aslan, as the initiator of action, by this definition is the real hero. Initiative, is not their strong point. This view comes across loud and clear in the following:

For all their activities and the high social status they achieve in Narnia, Lewis’s children are basically followers: sent by adults, led by bird and beast and Aslan. They are quite different from the the self-reliant children we meet in Dahl’s fairytales, whose triumphs result largely from their own initiative and inventiveness, even though magic may lend them a helping hand. Lewis’s children triumph because they follow a good leader, and they convey an essentially conformist message. (Knowles 261)

Indeed, the function of the human children in Narnia is to serve as Aslan’s emissaries, helpers from another world, angels from England, or as Pope Gregory put it, “Non Angli sed Angeli.” They do not always do very much, and in some of the books such as The Voyage of the Dawn Treader it is hard to see their purpose in the plot. Their presence seems to be called for primarily in order to encourage the Narnians. They know that Aslan is never far behind these un-Narnian creatures. But as I have already said, this is an inversion of character functions. Again, a case could be made for Shasta, who may only be “the horse’s boy,” but who at least seizes the opportunity and who shows more independent spirit than the other children. Shasta, moreover, is the only protagonist who rises socially as well spiritually, by inheriting the crown of Archenland as King Cor and marrying Aravis. One can speculate if this has to do with the fact that he is a native Narnian and not an otherworldly, earthly child.

Allowing for Shasta, Aslan is generally the hero. But is not he rather unheroic in fairy tale terms? Is he wild and vulnerable enough? What is his lack, how are his actions motivated? After the first book and Aslan’s shattering self-sacrifice, the reader knows that he is going to pull off anything. As with superman there is a problem: he is invincible, and in Aslan’s case even cryptonite will not work. As a consequence his actions become too predictable, just as if they were already written, and to preserve any suspense he has to act as a puppet master from the margins via the children. He is in fact a tame lion; he does his Lord’s bidding. And the Emperor on the side of the narrative sea is, I suspect, Lewis himself.

A fairy tale character should, on the one hand, be flat and undeveloped, sharply delineated as either bad or good (angelic, perhaps). On the other hand, there is almost always a
symbolic maturation when the hero conquers his or her adversaries and marries. Psychologically and morally, these characters do not seem to evolve, although socially they do. In Lewis it is the other way round. The primary world children develop spiritually but not socially. Ultimately they come back home to school and parents. In *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* Lewis rather overdoes it by portraying the Pevensies as bookish Lords and Ladies immediately before throwing them back into their shorts and frocks.

Another way of going to extremes is to punish the only primary world character that wants to marry and grow up. Susan is interested in growing up socially in both this world and that world. We learn of her ill-advised infatuation with Rabadash in *The Horse and His Boy*, and in *The Last Battle* she is universally condemned and ostracised for being “a jolly sight to keen on being grown-up” (135). Real growing up, we can infer from Lady Polly is spiritual not social. And “no longer a friend of Narnia,” Susan is excluded from Aslan’s paradise.

It is not only the characters that act in strange ways; plot and setting are affected too. Lewis actually hints at his unorthodox reversals of the fairy tale code in a telltale note jotted down after the completion of *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Under the heading “Plots” Lewis writes: “INVERTED. Ordinary fairy tale. K[ing], Q[ueen] and court into which erupts child from our world” (quoted in Hooper 403). Presumably he made this note when drafting ideas for what was to become *Prince Caspian* and *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* but it applies more or less to the entire series. Narnia is not a realistically depicted world in which supernatural things happen. It is a magic world - separated from ours - in which ordinary/realistic characters “erupt.”

There are other plot oddities. Things happen in fairy tales and most sorts of narratives because something is lacking - money, a mate, a room of one’s own – or because of an act of villainy: someone steals your money, kills your mate, occupies your room. In several of the Narnian books the real villainy, such as bewitching arid be-snowing Narnia, or lack, such as the absence of an heir in *The Silver Chair* is not apparent until well into the story. The plot does not thicken until this happens.

However, underlying the evident plot machinery, we have more discrete movers and motivators. There is a parallel agenda: Digory’s mother is dying, Jill is persecuted in school, Shasta has to get a life, Edmund and Eustace and are spiritually wanting - something which applies to a lesser degree to all of the children. Conversely, the prize to be earned must be related to the lack, and its potential must be realised on home ground. It is satisfying therefore that Digory finds a cure for his mother, and that Jill and Eustace are allowed to vanquish their bullies in Experiment school. These are typical examples of the triumphant return cherished in
many fairy tales. It is all the more difficult to account for those books where no evident gain has been achieved in the process. Arguably, most of the characters have become better persons, but Lewis does not stress this point, presumably because it: is faith in Aslan (or rather Aslan’s faith in you) and not one’s actions that counts. Anyway, in a fairy tale, you are not better, you are better off, at the end of the day. The happy end has to do with this. As I have already pointed out, the conventional happy end is one in which there is marriage and power. The Horse and His Boy is the only Narnian tale with such a traditional outcome. Temporarily, the four Pevensie children in The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe are kings and queens, but they do not marry, and they return to childhood. In the other books, the children are per definition royal and in a very real sense Aslan’s anointed. But in any case the traditional pattern is not exhibited. Possibly one can argue that the return home can be regarded as satisfying and “happy,” especially in young children’s stories. And the circular plot - there and back again - is also found in girl’s fairy tales.

Seen as a whole, the Narnian tale ends well-in theory. But the deus ex machina, the eucatastrophe, the miraculous turn of events - words, all of which denote the typically happy end of fairy tales - is difficult to reconcile with the idea of the death of the protagonists, albeit happy and painless. We find the same idea in The Water Babies in The Princess and Curdie as well as in The Last Battle; Lewis was not alone. But it does not make it better. In my opinion, it clashes wildly with the traditional fairy tale. The fairy tale is concerned with the here and now (although in terms of once and far away), whereas The Last Battle provides an eschatology and is concerned with what lies beyond.

As to setting, the problem is not so much of multiple worlds as the circumscribed feeling of Narnia itself. The fairy tale location should be somewhere outside time and space, in the illud tempus. But, as Michael Murrin puts it, “Narnia has names and is a place, while folk fairy can dispense with both. Narnia has a sketchy history, while ‘Snow White’ assumes almost none” (245). Indeed, the Narnian books are set in time; they are “chronicles” - the Narnian chronicles – and hence they depict a history. Moreover, Narnia has a geography. Places are named and oriented. The illusion of place is further reinforced by maps. Wonderful as these are in their own way they provide a spatial framework which fences in the fantasy. A cramped feeling, spatially and temporally, is produced which is never present in traditional fairy tales.

By contrast, it seems that freedom and boundlessness is found outside the fiction of Lewis (and of Tolkien). The fairy realm is not of this world, not even fictionally, as can be seen by concluding words of The Last Battle where Narnia is seen as, “the cover and the title
now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before” (184). A possible exception to the rule that Lewis’s land and timescapes are finite could be the wood between the worlds in *The Magician’s Nephew*. According to Murrin this is an epitomized fairy tale setting (248), outside ordinary time and space. Of course, compared to a realistic novel, these unfairy-tale like traits seem rather insignificant. In such a perspective Narnia is very much a fairy tale. Its landscapes are the primeval landscapes of fairy tales, with deserts, meadows, moors, marshes, mountains, caves, archipelagos and forests. Murrin writes “The image of the wood shows what any fairy tale looks like from such a distance. The wood is beyond normal society...and while the wood changes with the seasons, it ignores historical time (247). Socially and politically, Narnia is peculiarly stable too. Changes are brought about by humans (or witches) coming from the outside. Narnian society is vaguely feudal and does not seem to change a lot. And no agrarian or industrial revolution takes place during its history. Sewing machines and printed books are simply there.

Surprisingly perhaps, these so called anachronisms are in my opinion salutary for the Narnian universe; they make it bigger. Anything is not accounted for. Just like in the traditional fairy tales. The feeling of being enclosed is after all less felt in that first wild and unkempt book, *The Lion The Witch and the Wardrobe* - than in the sequels. Even the title conveys this openness to new and astonishing constellations. Let me give one example: to find out how the lamppost happens to be in Narnia - which we do in *The Magician’s Nephew* - is to rationalize the magic. Although the anecdote is amusingly told, the feeling of awe provoked by the image in the first book is lost; it evaporates with the magic. The Narnian universe closes in on all sides, until, eventually, as in *The Last Battle*, we are (figuratively speaking) either walled into Aslan’s wonderful garden or swallowed by his shadow. A society mainly composed by Talking Animals is rather unusual in fairy tales - human society is the rule. There are certainly sentient beasts in fairy tales but they do not appear en masse. Either talking beasts are humans who have been magically transformed into animals, or they have a very special function - as a helper or antagonist (like in Red Riding Hood).

In the related genre of the beast fable, on the other hand, there are rarely any humans at all. However, the animal form seems more of a guise. Really, these animals are caricatured humans or embodied vices and virtues. Interestingly, the beast fable has been seen as a suitable vehicle for conveying clear moral messages. In its use of an animal society the Narnia books conveys both the fairy tale’s sense of magic and the beast fable’s moral purport. Again, in *The Horse and His Boy*, the use of Bree and Hwin as animal helpers (or co-protagonists) to
Shasta and Aravis is more in line with what one would expect of a fairy tale. The horse’s faculty of speech causes wonder in the boy and it is not until the last chapters of the book that Talking Animals are the rule rather than an exception.

An interesting example of a fairy tale metamorphosis is the one that Eustace undergoes in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The episode is strongly reminiscent of “The Serpent Prince” (A 411) in which a queen gives birth to a son shaped like a snake. Not only is it gruesome to look at, its temper is also truly obnoxious. On its wedding nights (and there are several) he regularly kills his brides. This sorry state of affairs persists until he is matched with a clever girl who challenges him to strip his skins one after the other as she strips off her garments. She has wisely put on seven layers of clothes, so, eventually there is not much left of the serpent. She then proceeds to flog the prince and bathe him in milk, until, lo, he steps forth as the man he really is.

Similarly, the obnoxious “Dragon-Eustace” is helped to reform his character while regaining his outer form. His helper is not a mate but Aslan. Eustace peels off three layers of serpent skin, Aslan then “undresses” him: “The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I’ve ever felt” (96). Eventually, Eustace is “as smooth and soft as a peeled switch” and “very tender underneath.” Aslan then throws Eustace into the water, and when he emerges he has “turned into a boy again.” Regained humanity through a kind of catharsis is the theme of both Lewis’s episode and the Serpent Prince. A major difference, however, is that the one who helps the protagonist out of his plight is a human woman in the traditional story and a superhuman animal in Lewis. Moreover, in the Serpent Prince, it is a man who steps forth to embrace his bride; in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* Eustace, although an improved specimen, is still a boy, who now embraces Aslan’s cause. There is a strong presence of magic in Narnia Chronicles. In a sense, it is all magic, and the main source of it is Aslan. Magic is ubiquitous, yet the children do not make use of it. Actually, they are themselves Aslan’s best examples of magic. This, too, is different from what one expects from a fairy tale. Even when they stumble across (or into) a magic object such as the wardrobe in the first book, they are unable to use it at will. Actually, unless you are Aslan, magic could be hazardous for your health, and a criminal offence, as in the case of the White Witch. The unsanctioned use of magic is evil.

Up to this point I have tried to follow the trail of recognition. Can I recognize the Narnia books as fairy tales, and if not, does this lessen my aesthetic appreciation of them? A complementary approach would be to turn the question 180 degrees. If recognition is pleasing, it
follows, that a story that frustrates your language competence, goes beyond your horizon of expectations, and provides an alien world-view, will not touch you in the same way as one where you are figuratively led by the hand by the author (or his faun).

As I have already inferred, Tolkien’s distaste of the Narnia books is based on aesthetic principles. Tolkien “disliked it intensely,” according to Lewis (quoted in Carpenter 223), who had read the first chapters of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* to him. More to the point, Tolkien told Roger Lancelyn Green, who was reading Lewis’s manuscripts for the Narnia books, “It really won’t do, you know! I mean to say: Nymphs and their Ways, The Love-Life of a Faun. Doesn’t he know what he’s talking about?” (Quoted in Hooper 402). Eventually, Tolkien’s indignation gave way to resignation: “It is sad that ‘Narnia’ and all that part of C. S. L.’s work should remain outside the range of my sympathy” (letter quoted in Carpenter 228).

The interesting thing here, I think, is that the story ultimately leaves him cold (“outside the range of my sympathy”) and that the example he provides - the titles of Mr Tumnus’s books - suggests that his insensibility to it has to do with the mixing of genres. Talking about fauns and nymphs in words that suggest cheap romance evidently ruins the fairy tale for him, ruins the illusion of sub-creation. Already positing two fictional worlds like Lewis does causes problem for a purist like Tolkien. Tolkien liked his fairy tale shaken, not stirred.

Tolkien’s Middle Earth - whether seen as a primary world, as he intended it or as an “implied secondary world” (see Nikolajeva) - largely, but not entirely, avoids the problem of “real world” admixtures and impurities. Lewis, on the other hand not only exploits the machinery of a primary and secondary world but does so freely, and especially so in *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. He includes into that secondary world a motley crew of legendary characters such as Santa Claus, Fauns, and primary world things, such as lanterns, and sewing machines. I too think there is problem with genre, as is evident from my preceding discussion, but as I see it is not the division into primary and secondary worlds that threatens the fairy tale, nor the blend of heterogeneous elements. Primary and secondary worlds (even impure ones) are as I see it compatible with the fairy tale genre (see for example “Childe Rowland”). And cars and electric torches have featured on the repertoire of traditional oral storytellers in our own time. No, the problem is the allegory - allegory that rears its head and eats the fairy tale. But, *nota bene*, not specifically Christian allegory, but allegory in its root meaning of “speaking otherwise,” that is of being forced to read on two levels, or seeing two (or more) discourses at work simultaneously, whether you like it or not. This is of
course a question of taste. For Tolkien a book-title like *Nymphs and their Ways* is “speaking otherwise,” for many others it is not.

Another main source of aesthetic pleasure (or beauty) is the one to be found in novelty - in linguistic innovation, the mixture of genres, and the positing of exciting new ideas. It is beauty, not as realism, but “as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of … a sewing machine and an umbrella!” This quote from Lautréamont, made famous by André Breton, rings a bell. In Narnian terms it could perhaps be rephrased in the following way: “beautiful as the chance meeting on a stone-table of a she-beaver with a sewing machine and a faun with an umbrella.”

Recognition and novelty seem strange bedfellows, yet there is always a degree of recognition at play in the most sophisticated aesthetic practices. An extreme instance, which can serve as an example, is when Alice recognizes the inverted and at first entirely incomprehensible “Jabberwocky” as “language.” Conversely, each aesthetic object - however imitative - is per definition unique and thus in possession of a degree of novelty. Recognition or novelty - pride of place changes over time and in different genres according to the flux of taste. Fairy tales and children’s literature as a whole leans towards recognition: priority is given to a limited number of possible characters who act out well-established plot patterns in places the reader has been to many times before. Innovation is carried out mainly on the stylistic level, in the handling of language: “The surface may be brightened by wit,” as one critic puts it (Tabbert). An obvious example is, again, *Alice in Wonderland*; but, I would argue, that this is also a quality inherent in Lewis’s writing. Indeed, Lewis’s dialogues may be less subversive than Carroll’s (according to Knowles), but their oral qualities are nevertheless strongly felt. Andrew Sachs’s recording of the Narnian chronicles is an ear-opener in this respect. Note, for example, the animal-onomatopoetic speech qualities in the chapter “A parliament of owls” in *The Silver Chair* and that of the faithful dogs in *The Last Battle*. Here is a quote from the latter: “For though they were Talking Dogs they were just as doggy as they could be: and they all stood up and put their front paws on the shoulders of all the humans and licked their faces, all saying at once: Welcome! Welcome! We’ll help, we’ll help, help, help. Show us how to help, show us how, how. How-how-how?” (116).

The traditional western fairy tale is a secular genre conceived in a Christian environment. It belongs in a society where the stories of the Bible and hymns and prayers were generally well known even among the illiterate through church going, and, more importantly, had existential and transcendental meaning. Almost all other literary expressions, such as the folk legend, that existed alongside the fairy tale were also explicitly Christian in
content. Even in the culture of the élite the centerpieces were Christian epics like *Divina Commedia*, *The Faerie Queene*, and *Paradise Lost*. In a way, it is therefore surprising to find that in this company the fairy tale alone is not a vehicle for religious faith. The fairy tale can certainly be moralistic but is not confessional or doctrinal and its relation to the numinous, the fantastic and the spiritual is suggested rather than spelt out. The fairy tale causes wonder not faith. The underlying reason is that secularization, from the Enlightenment and onwards, subjected the religious narrative to a process of devolution where, in the end, Holy Writ has been transubstantiated into Holy Ghost. No longer does Christian doctrine explicitly inform the most challenging and prestigious literary forms available. And if, historically, the Bible was the one and only source of religious teaching- literally and figuratively the book of books - later, Christian doctrine was also promulgated through great epic works. Already this is a step down the ladder, however. From the 19th C and onwards, religious narratives no longer hold the centre stage - and we find them in less prestigious positions such as children’s literature. Ultimately, religion in mainstream literature seems to all but disappear (see Manlove *Christian Fantasy*), although, of course, the Bible in its ghostlike form still is present in secular genres. Paradoxically, one of the oldest secular forms of literature, the fairy tale, may at the same time be one of best genres to impart what has been called “secularized religion” (Zipes) or “sacralized worldliness.” The reason why the fairy tale would be suited for this job is that by being a secular, collectively composed narrative conceived within a Christian context its sacralizing aspects will remain invisible to its audience, and can therefore affect the unconscious mind to an extent which would be difficult to achieve in later, more self-conscious kinds of writing.

According to Jack Zipes, this is why J. R. R. Tolkien used a secular genre like the fairy tale for his works of fantasy. Zipes claims that Tolkien’s works are “devoid of Christian doctrine” and that “he was aware ... that the essence of Christianity could only be conveyed to human beings in secularized form” (146). I believe that Lewis too understood that “the essence” needed a secular form. Hence, the use of science fiction and fantasy, and, more specifically, the fairy tale. Hence, too, the insistence that he was not writing allegorically. In contrast, the Narnia books are religious fairy tales conceived in a secularised society. They provide a good but unusual example of a new and short-lived kind of vehicle for religious expression, the fairy tale. Among others, Colin Manlove and Jack Zipes have commented on the fact that fantasy assumes the role of religious narrative in contemporary society. However, for the contemporary reader the suspension of disbelief is much easier to accomplish in the more indirect treatment of the mythical and the religious to be found in the Tolkienian brand
of fantasy (which he himself labelled fairy tale), than (in the other respects) more fairy-tale like Narnia books.

Works Cited
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