

Dragoș MÎRȘANU*

***The Lion's World:
A Journey into the Heart of Narnia***

(Rowan Williams, *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia*,
New York, Oxford University Press, 2013)

The fiftieth anniversary of the death of the writer, literary critic and Christian polemicist C. S. Lewis (most widely known as the author of *Mere Christianity* and/or of the *Chronicles of Narnia*) has presented an occasion for new publications celebrating his life and revisiting his works. Alongside new biographies such as the one written by the historical theologian and Christian polemicist Alister McGrath (*C.S. Lewis – A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2013), a short and rather surprising work has made its way on the shelves of the booksellers.

The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia is an intimate and evocative discussion of the key messages and themes running through the Narnia stories by the eminent theologian Rowan Williams. That a professional theologian would take pains to consider Lewis seriously is almost a first, and certainly reflects a fresh approach. Confessing now to have been “repeatedly humbled and reconverted by Lewis,” Williams finds himself a long way away from the time he was first being educated as a theologian, when Lewis was being read enthusiastically by “unsophisticated” people but considered to be a “slightly embarrassing phenomenon” by the elite (X-XI).

As it had been already recognized before Williams, for instance by one of Lewis biographers, George Sayer, the Narnia stories undoubtedly have a theological content (e.g., the stories of the creation, the temptation, the fall, and of death, atonement, hell and heaven); however, while written with an inherent theological depth, they nonetheless do not represent a materialization or depiction of a supposedly worked-out theological scheme: “The author almost certainly did not want his readers to notice the resemblance of the Narnian theology with the Christian story. His idea, as he once explained to me, was to make it easier for children to accept Christianity when they met it later in life. He hoped that they would be vaguely reminded of the somewhat similar stories that they had read and enjoyed years before. « I am aiming at a sort of pre-baptism of the child's

* Independent researcher; e-mail: dragos.mirsanu@gmail.com

imagination. »“ (G. Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C.S. Lewis*, 2nd. ed., Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994, 318-9).

In more or less the same vein, Williams suggests that Lewis's fundamental aim is to help us sense what the experience of God is “like,” without resorting to the usual religious talk: “I want to capture something of what Lewis is trying to do in communicating... the character, the *feel*, of a real experience of surrender in the face of absolute incarnate love. (...) Whether for the jaded believer or the contented unbeliever, the surprise of this joy is worth tasting“ (7).

For Williams, Lewis is particularly inspired when he achieves a rather unusual definition, or a redefinition, of “transcendence.“ Instead of being a matter of distance (e.g., beyond our understanding), we should see it in terms of difference, of strangeness. In Lewis, thus, “transcendence is the wildness of joy“ and is expressed in terms of rebellion, as “the truth of God becomes a revolution against what we have made of ourselves“ (139). The rightful king of Narnia, Aslan the Lion, who promises in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* a (subversive) “meaning“ makes his first appearance as a rebel against the established order, not as its possible guarantor; thus, against the “ordered state of sin,“ (55) stands an “unpredictable world of grace“ (52). Choosing to make his “divine“ presence an animal Lewis ran the risk of trivializing but at the same time gave himself significant opportunities and certainly gained the attention of the intended readership. Not being a Tame Lion is an important feature of Aslan, who, while being “good“ is meant to be also “unsafe.“ In *Silver Chair*, the witch-queen in the “Underland“ tries to promote the idea that the world above is a myth and a dream, while the Lion is a fantasy produced by thinking of a bigger cat. The refusal to turn one's back to Aslan even if Aslan is a fiction allows Rowan Williams to link it to Dostoevsky's famous assertion that, faced with the choice between Christ and the truth, he would choose Christ. (60-1; cf. his own *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press and London: Continuum, 2008, Ch. 1: “Christ against the Truth?“, 15-62).

As we have enslaved ourselves, the invitation to rebel is actually an invitation to “a revolution against what we have fairly consistently thought we wanted and who we fairly consistently thought we were“ (140). We shall be able to sustain this revolution by means of self-examination but, more so, by being “engaged in conversation with a highly dangerous stranger,“ that we may come to trust following each our own path. “If you are thirsty, you may drink,“ says the Lion; there is but one stream, however “there is no approaching him without an overwhelming sense of risk“ (63): “the challenge is whether we can believe that, often in spite of appearances, it is a well-spring of joy.“ (70). Aslan cannot make the experience of meeting him

easy for people settling for half-truths (75) and, while we need to declare to God our willingness to be cured, only his claws “can strip away the entire clothing of falsehood with which we have surrounded ourselves” (86), unmasking our uncomfortably real self, as seen by the eye of God. To see yourself as a reflection of how Aslan sees you does not mean you would necessarily accept this as a being true: such denial means falling into the temptations of unreality (102-7).

Finally, being “surprised by joy” speaks of the joy of truth itself that “happens when we are not analysing ourselves,” but as an answer to our longing, to an insatiable thirst (108). For Lewis, being stripped of our private version of reality and leaving behind a self-centred perspective offers the possibility to sense hitherto inaccessible dimensions to the world. Lewis reminds Williams of Maximus the Confessor’s theology of the *logoi*, when he portrays the encountering of “the connectedness of all that is around us to its inexhaustible root or ground in the divine - the connectedness of the various mountain spurs to the central massif of Aslan’s country” (141-2; cf. 119-120). Williams’ exploration of theological themes is rounded up with a discussion of hell and heaven, death and the end of all things (with the possible influence of, among others, Plato and Augustine).

It is also worth mentioning that Williams does not refrain from engaging the critics of Lewis’ Narnia stories (Ch. 2). Showing first the inspiration he drew from older children’s literature, Williams mildly defends Lewis up to a point from accusations of racism and cultural prejudice (“the West and the rest”), sexism and misogyny (“a preference for the extremes of the spectrum where female characters are concerned – witch-queens and nannies”), and violence (inhabiting “quite uncritically the conventions of chivalric adventure”). For Williams, however, “what is interesting is not how Lewis reflects the views of an era but how he qualifies them in obedience to the demands of a narrative or a spiritual imperative or both” (46).

To sum up, I applaud Williams’ interpretation of the theological ideas in the Narnia stories as a convincing recommendation for Lewis as not just the “mere” trilemma apologist, but also as an imaginative theologian, for children and adults alike.