

## Week 6: The Lord and the Lion: *C. S. Lewis on Aslan and the Christian Life*



“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”

“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.

“Not because you are?”

“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, Chapter X: “The Return of the Lion”

Elevenes with C. S. Lewis

**The Lord and the Lion:**  
***C. S. Lewis on Aslan and the Christian Life***

Week 6

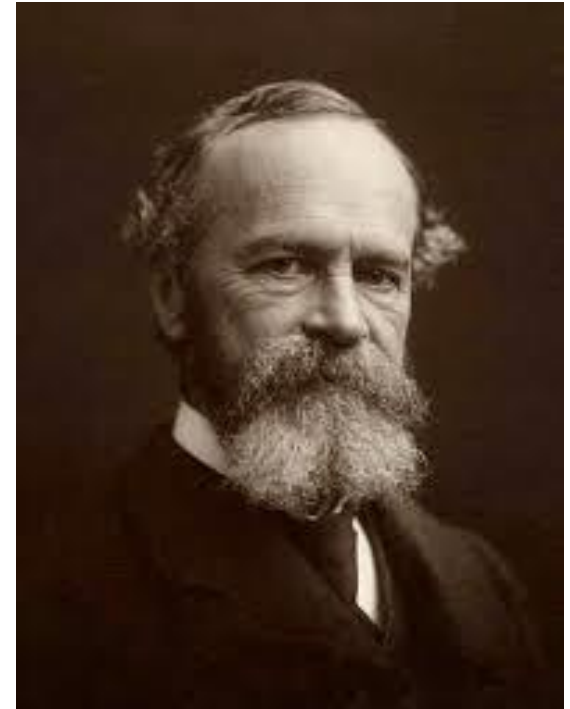
October 29, 2017

# Plan for the day

- Introduction regarding heroes
  - Secular scholarship including positive psychology
- Partial explanations of Lewis' vision of Aslan
- Lewis on why Aslan is not a metaphor and Narnia is not an allegory
- Freud's view of religion as an example of a standard atheist objection and how one might counter this objection
- *The Silver Chair* as a reworking of Socrates' Allegory of the Cave
- The Christian life: C. S. Lewis on virtue
- "Farewell to Shadow-Lands" in *The Last Battle*

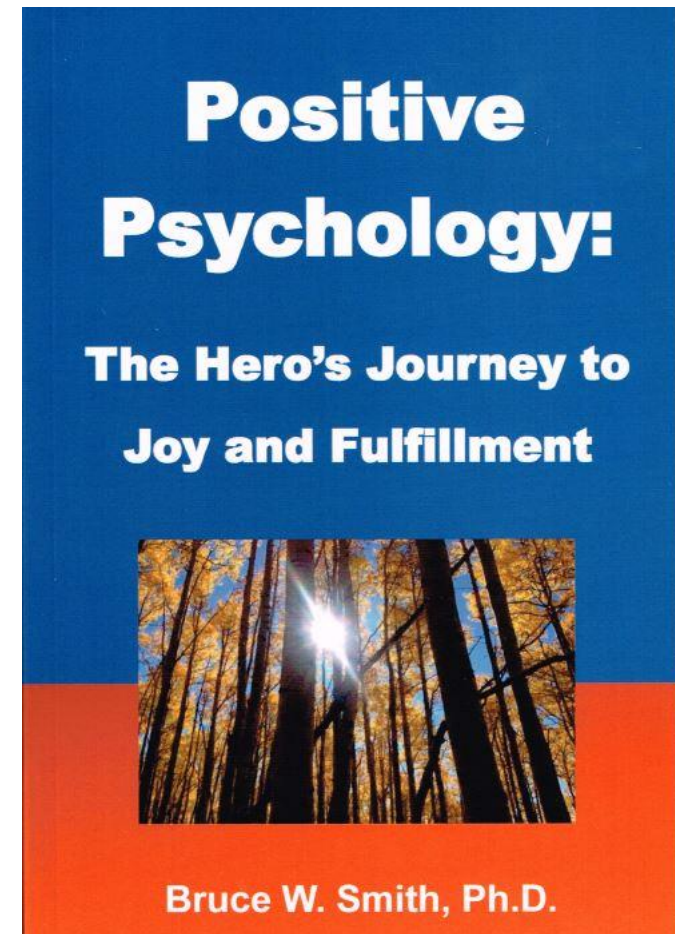
# Heroes in secular scholarship

- Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) details the similar themes and stages running through many of the greatest myths and stories, e.g. Osiris, Prometheus, Odysseus.
  - Influenced, e.g., George Lucas in developing Star Wars.
- Heroes as an important idea in early psychology
  - William James' *Principles of Psychology*:  
"We measure ourselves by many standards. Our strength and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck, are things which warm our heart and make us feel ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such things is the sense of the amount of effort which we can put forth... If the 'searching of our heart and reins' be the purpose of this human drama, then what is sought seems to be what effort we can make. He who can make none is but a shadow; he who can make much is a **hero**."



# Heroes in secular scholarship (cont.)

- Heroes in contemporary positive psychology
  - The most popular class at UNM, Positive Psychology taught by Bruce Smith, is built around the idea of the hero's journey



# Aslan, the hero of the Chronicles of Narnia and Lewis' greatest literary creation

- Lewis began writing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* with no clear plan for how the plot would develop.
- “ At first I had very little idea how the story would go. But then suddenly **Aslan came bounding** into it. I think I had been having a good many **dreams** about lions at that time. Apart from that, I don't know where the Lion came from or why He came. But once He was there He pulled the whole story together, and soon He pulled the six other Narnian stories in after Him.” (Lewis, “It all began with a picture” in *Of Other Worlds*, p. 42)

In addition to Lewis' dreams, some ideas of how Aslan came bounding in to Lewis' imagination might be suggested:

- The New Testament calls Christ “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David” (Rev. 5:5).
- Charles Williams (Lewis' close friend) had written a novel *The Place of the Lion* (1931), which Lewis thought was “a great book,” about Platonic archetypes coming to earth in the form of animals.
- The emblem on the door of the rectory where his grandfather lived, which Lewis had visited regularly as a child, was a lion:

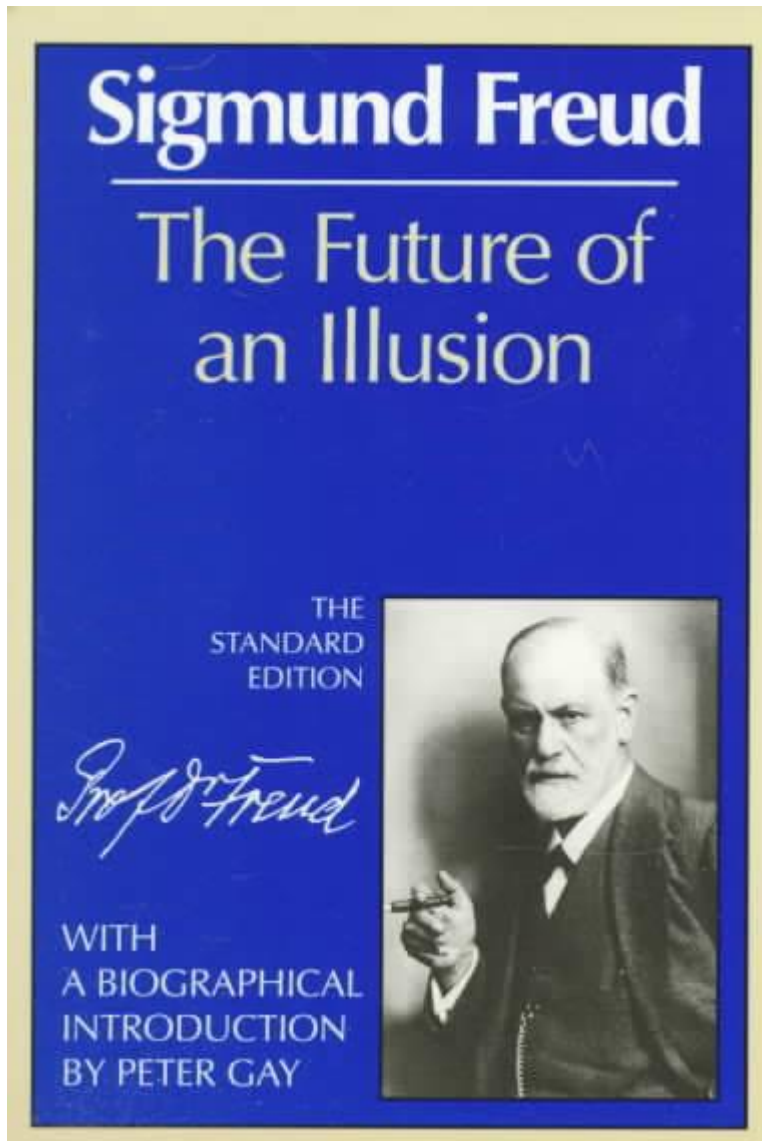


# Aslan

- Not a metaphor, nor part of an allegory, but a living creature at the heart of Lewis' literary creation.
- Lewis doesn't tell us what Christ is like, he shows us.
- Aslan is perhaps best framed as a "supposal":
  - "Let us suppose that there is a land like Narnia, and that the Son of God, as he became a man in our world, became a lion there, and then imagine what would happen." (C. S. Lewis letter to 5<sup>th</sup> grade class in Maryland, 1954).



# The Problem of Projection: What if God is just a human invention?



- Freud argues that God is simply a projection of the father figure that people desired.
- A fulfillment of the “oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind” (Ch. 6, p. 38)
- God is an imagined father whom we invent to allay our fears.
  - “We shall tell ourselves that it would be very nice if there were a God who created the world and was a benevolent Providence, and if there were a moral order and an afterlife; but it is a very striking fact that all this is exactly as we are bound to wish it to be.” (Ch. 6, p. 42)
  - Religion promotes “infantilism” but people should not “remain children forever” (Ch. 9, p. 63)

# How should one counter the wish-fulfillment objection to belief in God?

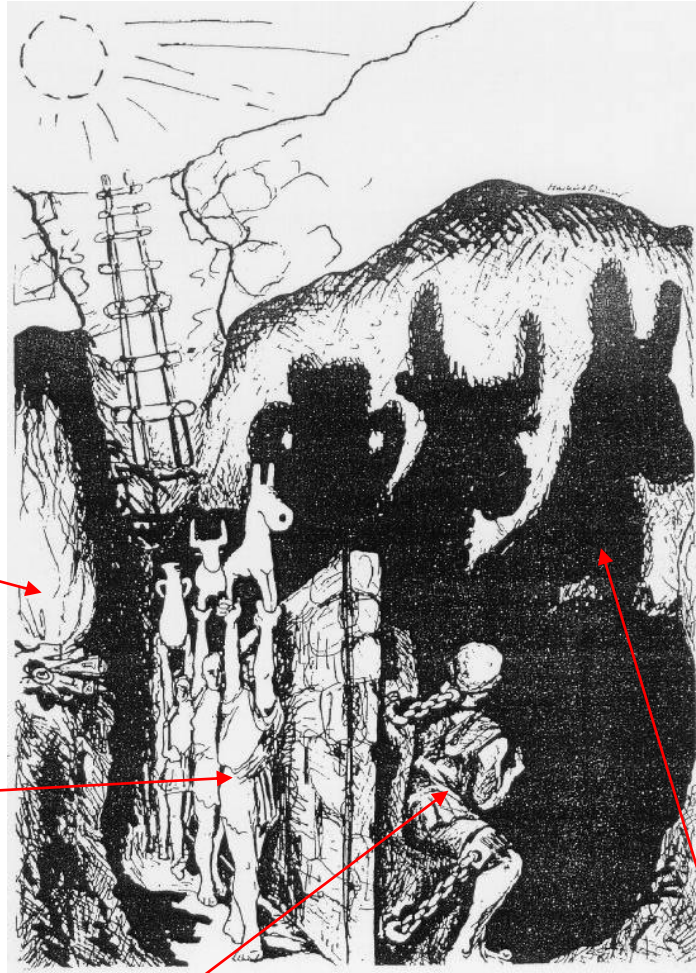
- One could say that we are responding to the “God-shaped vacuum” in our hearts.

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?”

“This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*).

- One could argue that atheism could also be a wish-fulfillment, e.g. not to be interfered with.
  - As an atheist, Lewis said “What mattered most of all was my deep-seated hatred of authority. No word in my vocabulary expressed deeper hatred than the word *Interference*. But Christianity placed at the center what then seemed to me a transcendental Interferer.” (*Surprised by Joy*, p. 172)
- But these argument engage the reason, not the imagination.

# Lewis' approach: Bring reason and imagination together, as seen in *The Silver Chair*—a reworking of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"



- Imagine humans chained in a cave who can only look straight ahead where they see shadows
- To them the truth would be nothing but shadows
- If one were released and compelled to look at the fire, or dragged up into the sun, he would at first be blinded
- But once he perceives reality he would rather endure anything than to think as those in the cave

Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII

Prisoners chained in place

The shadows they think are all of reality

# The interpretation of the Allegory of the Cave

- “The prison-house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun”
- “The journey upwards” is the ascent of the soul
- The sun is “the universal author of all things beautiful and right, the lord of light, and the immediate source of reason and truth”
- Reaching the upper realm involves a “conversion” that “more than anything else contains a divine element”

Quotes from Plato's *Republic*, Book VII, parts 517-518



# *The Silver Chair:* Eustace, Jill, and Puddleglum on a mission to rescue a Narnian prince held in an underground cavern

Eustace and Jilly meet the Marshwiggle Puddleglum

Eventually they locate the Prince who is a captive of the Queen of Underland



# The Queen of Underland begins to cast her evil enchantment to cause them to lose their memory of the “Overworld”



- The queen’s conclusion “Your sun is a dream; and there is nothing in that dream that was not copied from the lamp.”

1<sup>st</sup>, addresses Puddleglum and the Prince re Narnia:

- “There is no land called Narnia.”
- When Puddleglum says he has lived there, she asks “Where is that country?” to which he can only reply “It’s up there—I don’t know exactly where.”
- When told there is a sun in the Overworld, the queen asks what it is like and the prince says it’s like the lamp hanging from the ceiling.
- To which the queen laughingly asks “what does the sun hang from?”



A contemporary example of such an enchantment:  
December 18, 2016 Saturday Night Live skit with  
professor of theology at Yale and a cardinal from the  
“Council of Miraculous Phenomena”



- The implicit point: claimed encounters with Santa Claus are fallacious and comparable to claims of supernatural interventions made by religious figures.
- This skit has had over 4.3 million views on YouTube.

The Queen of Underland then uses her evil enchantment to try to make them lose their belief in Aslan.



2<sup>nd</sup>, addresses Jill and Eustace's claim that a lion named Aslan exists:

- "What is a *lion*?"
- Eustace asks "Have you seen a cat?" to which he queen replies "You've seen cats and now you want a bigger and better cat, and it's to be called a lion."
- The queen asserts "You can put nothing into your make-believe [world] without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world."

- The queen's conclusion "Even you children are too old for such play. Put away your childish tricks."
- "There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan."



# Fighting off the enchantment

Puddleglum stamps out the fire and asserts:

- “There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic.” *Agree?*
- “Suppose we *have* only dreamed or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones.”
- “I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia.”

*Is it wise to argue that one would be better off to live “as if” the Christian narrative were true, even if it were actually false?*

# Commentary: Lewis rebuts the projection theory by telling a story

- Lewis' readers know there is a sun, but could imagine someone who lived in a cave all their life who thinks the underground is the only reality.
- Lewis' point: Freud and others have cast a spell over Western culture trying to convince us that belief in a transcendent realm is delusional.
  - Just who is deluded?
- Note: the two stages of Lewis' account of the interaction with the queen parallel the two stages of his conversion.
  - Lewis first came to believe in the existence of a transcendent realm, and secondly came to believe in the divinity of Jesus.

# Aslan—as a lens through which we can see Christ more clearly

- Aslan embodies the three elements that are present in all developed religions:
  - Awe or a dread of the “numinous”
    - 1<sup>st</sup> mention of Aslan’s name, “each one of the children felt something jump in his inside” (*Lion, Witch & Wardrobe*, Ch. 7)
    - Mr. Beaver “He’s wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion.” (*LWW*, Ch. 17)
  - Morality or a sense of right and wrong
  - The linking of the numinous with the moral law
- He can be very stern...
  - For example, consider Jill’s encounter with Aslan in *The Silver Chair* after she caused Eustace to fall off a cliff
    - Jill: “Do you eat girls?”
    - Aslan: “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms”
    - Jill: “I daren’t come and drink”
    - Aslan: “Then you will die of thirst.”
    - Jilly: “Oh dear! I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”
    - Aslan: “There is no other stream.”

# Aslan—as a lens through which we can see Christ more clearly (cont.)

- ... but Aslan is also compassionate and forgiving.
  - For example, consider the interchange between Digory and Aslan near the end of *The Magician's Nephew*:
    - Digory: “But please, please—won’t you—can’t you give me something that will cure Mother?”
    - “Up till then he had been looking at the lion’s great front feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion’s eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory’s own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself.
    - Aslan: “My son, my son. I know. Grief is great.”
- Although Aslan *is* a Christ figure, the Narnia stories might be more effective in breaking down barriers for non-believers if they are initially read without that knowledge.
  - “It is often precisely because many readers do *not* know who Aslan is that the Narnian stories have been so successful in getting into the bloodstream of the secular world.” (Walter Hooper, *Past Watchful Dragons*, p. 102-103).

# Aslan—as a lens through which we can see Christ more clearly (cont.)

- Aslan can be comprehended and understood only in part; he is a person, not something that is limited to “neat little doctrinal formulas” (McGrath, *Lunch with C. S. Lewis*, p. 94)
  - In Aslan’s actions, like the accounts of Jesus’ actions in the Gospels, we perhaps see what he is like more clearly than can be captured in a doctrinal statement. As Lewis put it, “The ‘doctrines’ we get *out of* the true myth are of course *less* true: they are translations into our *concepts* and *ideas* of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.” (C. S. Lewis letter to Arthur Greeves, Oct. 18, 1931)
  - What true Christianity is about, in Lewis’ view, is an encounter with the living God, not a particular theory about, say, how the atonement works (cf. McGrath, *The Intellectual World of C. S. Lewis*, p. 68).
  - “Indeed, if we found we could fully understand it, that very fact would show it was not what it professes to be—the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning.” (*Mere Christianity*, Book II: “What Christians Believe”, Ch. 4: The Perfect Penitent)

## C. S. Lewis on virtue: How do we become good people?

- “Christian behavior” was the theme of one of Lewis’ four series of “Broadcast Talks” in WWII, and a continuing concern.
- The Chronicles of Narnia are more than just good stories, they help build character by providing examples from which we can learn; some model good behavior, some bad.
- One first step in pursuing virtue: self-knowledge

In his teens and twenties, Lewis was not a very virtuous character, and although he had some recognition of that fact, it became more painfully obvious to him upon his conversion.

- “When I first came to the University, I was as nearly without a moral conscience as a boy could be. Some faint distaste for cruelty, and for meanness about money was my utmost reach—of chastity, truthfulness and self-sacrifice, I thought as a baboon thinks of classical music.” (*The Problem of Pain*, Ch. 3, p. 38)
  - Re chastity: “Those who think that if adolescents were all provided with suitable mistresses we should soon hear no more of ‘immortal longings’ are certainly wrong. I learned this mistake to be a mistake by the simple, if discreditable process of repeatedly making it.” (*Surprised by Joy*, Ch. 11, p. 169)
  - Re truthfulness: Lewis regularly lied to his father, e.g about his finances.
- Shortly after his conversion Lewis realized how serious his failings were.
  - “All my acts, desires, and thoughts were to be brought into harmony with universal Spirit. For the first time I examined myself with a seriously practical purpose. And there I found what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds. My name was legion.” (*Surprised by Joy*, Ch. 14 “Checkmate”, p. 226.
- For the mature Lewis, self-knowledge was simply “recognition of his own weaknesses and shortcomings and nothing more”

In Narnia, Aslan functions as a sort of mirror that forces people to see themselves as they really are—faults and all.

- In *The Magician's Nephew*, someone wakes the evil Queen Jadis from an enchanted sleep (Ch. 4).
  - Toward the end of the book Aslan asks Digory “How came [Jadis] to be in your world?”
  - Digory: “We met the witch.”
  - Aslan: “You *met* the witch?”
  - Digory: “She woke up. I mean, I woke her. Because I wanted to know what would happen if I struck the bell. I think I was a bit enchanted by the writing under the bell.”
  - Aslan: “Do you?”
  - Digory: “No. I see now I wasn’t. I was only pretending.”
- The gaze and questioning of Aslan compels Digory to tell the truth—both to Aslan and to himself.



# Aslan enables us to see and do that would otherwise be beyond our ability

- As a scholar of the classics and medieval literature, Lewis knew the importance of the quest for the good life.
  - Both Tolkien and Lewis show the need for people of character and virtue in a complex world.
  - Good typically doesn't triumph unless good people rise to the challenges around them.
  - In *The Lord of the Rings*, it is the lowly hobbits who are critical in securing and destroying the malignant ring.
- In Narnia, Lewis shows us how the humble and lowly can achieve greatness in one of his most beloved characters.



In Narnia, Lewis doesn't lecture on moral philosophy but shows us what virtue looks like.

- Early in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader"*, one sees the sharp contrast between the noble and courageous Reepicheep and the selfish, complaining Eustace.



Lewis shows us what virtue looks like (cont.)

- Later in *The Voyage*, Reepicheep manifests courage and passion to achieve the task to which he has been called—sailing off to Aslan's own country at the end of the world.



- Reepicheep doesn't just act bravely every now and then. He has become a brave and noble mouse.
- What he *is* determines what he *does*.

# The Christian life

- Aslan is at the heart of these stories of virtue...  
... because he is their ultimate inspiration .
- He invites others to become part of his story
  - A privilege that comes with responsibility.
  - *Relevant Scripture?*

Ephesians 5:15 “Live life then with a due sense of responsibility, not as men who do not know the meaning and purpose of life, but as those who do.”

# “Farewell to Shadow-Lands”—the final chapter of *The Last Battle*

**Aslan had cried, “Further up and further in!”**

- As the great crowd of people and animals race into the new Narnia, they realize that all of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, had been drawn into the real Narnia.
- The new Narnia was “as different as a real thing is from a shadow,” says Lord Digory, and adds under his breath “It’s all in Plato, all in Plato: bless me, what do they teach them at these schools!”
- Jewel exclaims “I have come home at last. This is my real country. I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now.”

**When they reach the top of the hill and see the golden gates, who comes out?**



“Welcome in the Lion’s name. Come further up and further in.”

## Conclusion



Aslan: “All of you are—as you used to call it in the Shadow-Lands—dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended. This is the morning.”

“All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: 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.”