

C.S. Lewis and *The Wind in the Willows*

I want to begin this talk with WITW famous opening scene, in which the Mole suddenly abandons the cosiness of his underground home to embark on a series of adventures, as it's a useful way into understanding the importance of the book both for C.S. Lewis, but also for J.R.R. Tolkien, since it may have inspired the opening of the *Hobbit* in which Bilbo leaves his snug hobbit hole to go an unexpected journey. For Lewis, this opening, with spring moving in the air and creating in the mole a 'spirit of divine discontent and longing' comes close to capturing the emotion that he referred to as Joy, the search for which was central to his spiritual journey, as described in his biographical *Surprised by Joy*.

While Mole's longing speaks to this spiritual side of Lewis's personality, there are other aspects of Lewis's character in the book's three other central figures. Rat is an aspiring poet; when Mole finds him brooding miserably he tactfully slips him a pencil and a few sheets of paper:

"It's quite a long time since you did any poetry," he remarked. "You might have a try at it this evening, instead of—well, brooding over things so much. I've an idea that you'll feel a lot better when you've got something jotted down—if it's only just the rhymes."

Lewis, of course, began his writing career as a poet, and saw writing as a highly effective way of dealing with life's problems:

'Whenever you are fed up with life, start writing: ink is the great cure for all human ills, as I have found out long ago'. (May 30; 1916)

Mr Toad reflects the gregarious and hospitable side of Lewis's personality, his love of dining, drinking and talking. But, alongside this sociability among members of his tightly-knit circle, Lewis shared Mr Badger's dislike of Society and exchanging small talk at large, formal gatherings. As a teenager he revelled in the lack of company and the few social demands placed upon him as a student at the Kirkpatrick household. Writing to his friend, Arthur Greeves, in 1914, he notes that 'the people whose society I prefer to my own are very few and far between'. As Rat says in answer to his suggestion of inviting Badger to supper: 'He wouldn't come...Badger hates Society, and invitations, and dinner, and all that sort of thing'.

Lewis noted the same reluctance to be sociable in his older brother Warnie, even likening him to Mr Badger in this way:

'It wd. be perfectly splendid if you cd. sometimes get Big Brother to lunch with you in mid week. It wd. do him a world of good and give him a lot of pleasure if – here's the snag – if you can only get him to do it. He's as evasive as Mr. Badger'. (III, 589)

We even find Lewis ventriloquising Mr Badger, and the reasons he offers in favour of subterranean living: 'No builders, no tradesmen, no remarks passed on you by fellows looking over your wall, and, above all, no *weather*'. Writing to his brother Warnie, who was at that time serving overseas, Lewis touches on the subject of the climate: 'I suppose I'm not allowed to write to you about the weather in England – beyond saying that I endorse Mr Badger's view and am more thoroughly sick of all weather and all news every day' (II, 347).

It was not so much the different facets reflected by the individual characters in *The Wind in the Willows* that influenced Lewis, but rather the way the book offers us a vision of a union between these four very different and most unlikely friends. In a lecture given in Feb

1945 to a group of Christians wanting to build bridges between Eastern and Western branches of the church, published as 'Membership', Lewis used the trio of Rat, Mole and Badger as symbols of the ability of extremely different persons to live in harmonious union. In the *Four Loves*, Lewis drew upon the bond between all four animals as evidence of the first love, 'Affection'. This he categorises as the 'least discriminating of loves', suggesting that – where there are some people who are incapable of love or friendship – all can become an object of Affection: 'the ugly, the stupid, even the exasperating.' He emphasizes that those bound by Affection often have remarkably little in common, since it can cross barriers of 'age, sex, class, and education'. The bond between Mole, Rat, Badger and Toad 'suggests the amazing heterogeneity possible between those who are bound by Affection'.

Despite having been a voracious reader as a child, Lewis did not read *The Wind in the Willows* when it first appeared in 1908, when he would have been 9 years old. This is all the more surprising when we recall his fondness at that age for the Beatrix Potter stories of Peter Rabbit and friends, and that he was at that time compiling his history of Boxen, a world populated by dressed animals of the kind that appear in *WITW*. Lewis first read Grahame's story in his twenties, although he claims that his enjoyment of it was no less because he was older (*On 3 Ways of Writing for Children*). He continued to go back to the story throughout his life, particularly when he was laid up in bed with an illness. Minor illnesses were a source of some delight to Lewis, since they allowed him to sit in bed all day reading. Responding to Ruth Pitter, who had written to tell Lewis that she always read his books when laid up with the flu, Lewis wrote:

'I'm greatly flattered to be read in flu' since for my own flu' I always go back to *The Wind in the Willows* while the temperature is really high, and progress to Scott or Wm Morris (laced with Trollope) as I get sane'. (II, 881)

Having encountered the book at this later stage in his life, Lewis was influenced by it both as a critic and as a writer of children's books. In his essay "On Stories", Lewis argues that, where most people have claimed that the key attraction in a story is excitement, his interest is in the atmosphere (what Michael Ward has helpfully christened the quality of 'Donegality'), to the extent that Lewis claims to be more familiar with fictional locations than the real places in which he lived. 'As a social historian', he writes, 'I am sounder on Toad Hall and the Wild Wood or the cave-dwelling Selenites or Hrothgar's court, or Vortigern's than on London, Oxford and Belfast'. Here he brings together two of the principal locations of *Wind in the Willows* (Toad Hall and the Wild Wood), alongside that of H.G. Wells's sci-fi story *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), and the courts of legendary kings of Arthurian romance and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*.

Particularly interesting for understanding the animals that populate his own books are Lewis's comments on Grahame's decision to cast his characters in animal form and the specific animals that he chose. Lewis suggests that the selection of a toad was driven by the resemblance of the toad's face to that of some humans – 'a rather apoplectic face with a fatuous grin on it'. Although what appears to be a permanent grin on the toad's face is nothing of the kind, its resemblance to the fixed grin of a particular kind of vain and self-satisfied individual neatly encapsulates Mr Toad's arrogant and conceited personality in a light-hearted and comic form that allows his friends and readers to treat him with patience and forgiveness.

Similar ideas are expressed in a somewhat more defensive tone in a poem published in 1953 under the title 'Impenitence'. The poem begins with Lewis defending his passion for the 'man-like beasts of the earthy stories – Badger or Moly'. While he is not 'so craz'd' as to

think these are realistic depictions of the animals, Lewis draws attention to the elements of certain animal's appearance or behaviour – the cool primness of cats, a mouse's twinkling adroitness – that calls out to be used as a symbol: 'Masks for Man, cartoons, parodies by Nature/ Formed to reveal us'. Dismissing those Fusty kill-joys who critique such uses, Lewis ends with the exclamation: Here's a Health to Toad Hall, here's to the Beaver doing Sums with the Butcher'. Like many of Lewis's poems, it was first published in *Punch*; it was only when I looked up the original version that I discovered that it was illustrated with these lovely renditions of the animals being referred to by the *Punch* illustrator E.H. Shepard, who was also responsible for illustrating the *Wind in the Willows* in 1931 (best known, of course, for his illustrations of the Winnie-the-Pooh books).

Lewis notes that the animal disguises in *WITW* do not go very deep, since Mr Toad is described as combing the dry leaves 'out of his hair', and lives in a manor house with all the comforts of a country squire. This fact prompts him to raise the question of realism in relation to the animals' lifestyles:

'In Mr. Badger's kitchen "plates on the dresser grinned at pots on the shelf". Who kept them clean? Where were they bought? How were they delivered in the Wild Wood?'

Mole's snug underground home has tables 'marked with rings that hinted at beer mugs'. But where did he get the beer?

These observations are interesting because they shed light on the use of animals in the Narnian stories. Here we meet Mr and Mrs Beaver, whose home is furnished in a way that raises similar questions: where did they get their kettle, frying pan and barrel of beer? Questions of provenance are most striking in relation to the food that Mrs Beaver cooks for the children; since there it has been winter for a hundred years, we might ask where she got her potatoes from. And what about the marmalade: did she buy it, if so where, and if it's home made, where did she get the oranges? The trout is of course explained, since Mr Beaver catches it with Peter, although he carries it home in a pail, showing a similar blend of the animal and the human as found in *WITW*. When Otter comes across Rat and Mole having a lavish picnic he looks jealously at the contents of their hamper. 'Greedy beggars', he says, 'why didn't you ask me'. Moments later, otter spots an errant May-fly on the surface of the water and, with a sudden splash, it is seen no more. And neither was the otter. So while otter was clearly partial to a ham sandwich, he could also make do with a mayfly.

A.A. Milne, author of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories, summarised this slipperiness regarding Grahame's depiction of the animals in the Introduction to his stage play adaptation of the book, *Toad of Toad Hall*:

'In reading the book, it is necessary to think of Mole, for instance, sometimes as an actual mole, sometimes as such a mole in human clothes, sometimes as a mole grown to human size, sometimes as walking on two legs, sometimes on four. He is a mole, he isn't a mole. What is he? I don't know. And, not being a matter of fact person, I don't mind. At least I do know, and still I don't mind'.

For Milne, this uncertainty is part of the book's charm and not something to be criticised. Indeed, he saw the book as beyond criticism; instead the book is a test of the reader's character rather than the other way around. As he goes on to say:

‘When you sit down to it, don't be so ridiculous as to suppose that you are sitting in judgment on my taste, or on the art of Kenneth Grahame. You are merely sitting in judgment on yourself. You may be worthy: I don't know, But it is you who are on trial’.

The focus on the home in *WITW* as a place of comfort and security is especially apparent in Mr Badger's series of underground chambers, in which Mole and Rat seek sanctuary from the snow-covered Wild Wood, where they find themselves lost in the dark. Lewis made particular reference to this in *Spenser's Images of Life*:

‘Similarly, we can say that we go back to *The Wind in the Willows* for a sense of the sinister mounting unfriendliness of the Wild Wood, and of its sheer contrast with the homeliness of Badger's House’. (p. 116)

Lewis creates a similar contrast in our first glimpse of Narnia, where Lucy emerges from the wardrobe into the midst of a snowy wood. Just as the fur coats give way to fir trees, so is the wood of the wardrobe exchanged for the wood of Narnia. There are of course many menacing woods in literature that could have fed into Lewis's portrayal, but of particular importance is the Wild Wood in *WITW*, in which Mole's initial excitement at entering a world that had been explicitly forbidden him by the Water Rat, quickly turns to fear and panic. As the dusk advances and the light starts to fade, Mole begins seeing faces everywhere he looks. But when he turns to confront the evil looking faces and hard eyes that peer at him as he passes, they quickly disappear. Quite suddenly he feels as if every hole he encounters possesses a face, ‘all fixing on him glances of malice and hatred: all hard-eyed and evil and sharp’.

Mole and Rat escape the perils of the Wild Wood by stumbling upon the home of Mr Badger, which offers an oasis of security and comfort from the dangerous outside world. Badger's underground cave has a floor of well-worn red brick with a log fire. Seating consisted of a couple of ‘high-backed settles, facing each other on either side of the fire’, offering ‘sitting accommodations for the sociably disposed’. Lewis explicitly draws upon this scene when describing Tumnus's house in *LWW*. Here Lucy finds refuge from another dangerous snowy wood, where one must be wary even of the trees which might be spies for the White Witch, in a ‘dry, clean cave of reddish stone with a carpet on the floor and two little chairs (“one for me and one for a friend”).’ The centrepiece of both rooms is a table with a dresser. Badger welcomes Rat and Mole with the promise of a ‘first-rate fire, and supper and everything’. Tumnus similarly offers Lucy ‘a roaring fire – and toast – and sardines – and cake’. One detail not paralleled in Tumnus's cave is the hams, bundles of dried herbs, nets of onions, and baskets of eggs that hang from the ceiling of badger's dwelling; in *LWW* these turn up in the beavers' home, where there are ‘hams and strings of onions hanging from the roof’. The beavers' house differs from Tumnus's cave in that ‘There were no books or pictures and instead of beds there were bunks, like on board ship, built into the wall’. For the detail of the bunks built into the wall, we can compare Mole End, as described by an enthusiastic Rat:

"What a capital little house this is!" he called out cheerily. "So compact! So well planned! Everything here and everything in its place! We'll make a jolly night of it. The first thing we want is a good fire; I'll see to that—I always know where to find things. So this is the parlour? Splendid! Your own idea, those little sleeping-bunks in the wall? Capital!"

Despite *WITW* being published in 1908, it looks back to a pastoral idyll that Grahame felt was being destroyed by the advent of the motorcar: whose dangers are highlighted by Toad's

terrorising of the countryside and his various roadside smashes. In *LWW*, this drive to modernisation and industrialisation at the expense of the countryside is symbolised by Edmund, who – having been corrupted by the White Witch’s promises of his regal status, makes plans for his reign that involve the construction of ‘decent roads’, assembling a fleet of private motorcars, and installing a railway system.

Kenneth Grahame’s concerns for the way that day-tripping city-dwellers were disrupting the solitude and peace of the countryside are captured in his essay ‘The Rural Pan’, published in *Pagan Papers* in 1894. As the iron horse, bringing with it commercialism, ‘studs the hills with stucco and garrotes the streams with the girder’, Grahame fears for the future of the rural Pan: where will this kindly god, this ‘well-wisher to man’ turn when the every last common, spinney and sheep-down has been invaded? Lewis’s poem ‘Pan’s Purge’ (1947) takes up a similar theme, recounting a dream in which Pan is crushed by man’s determination to cover the earth with bungalows and fun-fairs. But, in Lewis’s vision, Pan has his revenge, since reports of his demise turn out to be baseless rumour. The god returns to destroy mankind and restore the earth to a pre-industrial age in which ‘flowered turf’ swallows up ‘towered cities’, and where ‘untainted rivers run’.

Grahame returned to the image of Pan as a benevolent helper in *WITW*, in the chapter ‘The Piper at the Gates of Dawn’. In this chapter Rat and Mole set out late at night in search of Portly, the son of their friend the otter, who has gone missing. Drawn down a backwater to a secluded island by the sound of haunting music, the pair find Portly slumbering contentedly under the beneficent eye of Pan, whose sweet piping had led them to this secluded spot. Coming into the presence of the god has a powerful physical and emotional effect on the two animals:

‘Then suddenly the Mole felt a great Awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy— but it was an awe that smote and held him and, without seeing, he knew it could only mean that some august Presence was very, very near. With difficulty he turned to look for his friend and saw him at his side cowed, stricken, and trembling violently’.

This passage was a personal favourite of Grahame, although it baffled many of his critics – including Tolkien who thought it quite out of place in a children’s story. Lewis, by contrast, found it deeply moving and cited it in *The Problem of Pain* (1940) for the way that it evokes the quality of the numinous: a spiritual experience that excites a kind of awe that is similar to, but distinct from, fear (pp. 6-7).

This episode also supplied Lewis with a highly charged and emotional language for describing the visceral reaction that the Pevensie children experience upon first hearing Aslan’s name in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. While both Rat and Mole are struck with awe by the presence of the deity, they experience very different reactions. Instead of experiencing ‘panic’ – a deliberate play on the word ‘pan’ from which ‘panic’ derives - Mole finds inner peace and contentment. Rat, by contrast, experiences an overwhelming sense of terror and dread, leaving him shaking with fear. We see a similar range of responses in the children to the name of Aslan. The first mention of Aslan’s name in *LWW* is in a hushed whisper, in which Mr Beaver tells the children that: ‘They say Aslan is on the move— perhaps has already landed’. Although the children know nothing of this figure – no more than the reader who has heard the name for the first time here – the words evoke a series of different, yet highly charged responses:

‘Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realise that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer’.

Grahame’s Pan is both majestic and kindly: the rippling arm muscles and the broad chest are intimidating, but the half-smile on the bearded mouth and the gentle protection offered to the baby otter testify to his kindly nature. Lewis also drew on this evocation of a god who is both frightening yet trustworthy in the characterisation of Aslan. When they discover that Aslan is a lion rather than a human, Susan admits that the idea of meeting a lion scares her. Mrs Beaver reassures her that this reaction is entirely appropriate:

‘If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly.’

‘Then he isn't safe?’ said Lucy.

‘Safe?’ said Mr Beaver; ‘don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.’

This exchange echoes a similar exchange between Rat and Mole about their response to their close encounter with Pan and the mixture of fear and love that the god evokes in them:

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet— and yet— O, Mole, I am afraid!'

It is apparent from these close similarities that Lewis had the *WITW* episode in his mind when writing this passage in *LWW*. But there is a clear and important difference between the two, which I suggest lies at the heart of Lewis’s use of this passage in *LWW*. In *WITW*, the god whose presence inspires the two animals to bow their heads in worship is a pagan god; in *LWW* Aslan represents the Christian deity.

Of course Pan is not entirely replaced in *LWW*. He appears as Tumnus the faun, who is subject to the authority of Aslan just as all the other inhabitants of Narnia. In his characterisation of Tumnus, Lewis draws upon conflicting literary traditions in order to evoke an uncertainty over his trustworthiness: ‘You can’t always believe what Fauns say’, as Edmund notes. On the surface, Tumnus appears to be the kindly helper of Grahame’s Pan, whose beautiful piping leads Mole and Rat to the young otter they are seeking. But Tumnus’s piping is a means of bewitching the helpless and trusting Lucy, to buy him time to report her to the White Witch. In his role as self-confessed ‘kidnapper’, Tumnus is located within a more sinister literary tradition in which Pan figures as a tempter and abductor of children.

Lewis is often criticised for the way he brought together elements drawn various different mythologies and literary traditions in the Chronicles of Narnia and for the various inconsistencies these appear to create. But I suggest that this was a deliberate policy, which he inherited from *WITW* and which he used to achieve particular effects and to present a vision of the Christian faith which encompasses, fulfills and transcends pagan myths like that of the Greek god Pan.