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The Fertility-Sterility Dialectics in *The Waste Land* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Desolate *vs.* Resplendent Landscapes)

ABSTRACT

The present study embarks on a parallel approach to T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* and C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, exploring the fertility-sterility dialectics both texts are predicated on. *The Waste Land* is a text that serves as both a syndrome of and a verdict upon the manner in which contemporaneity devours antiquity, debunking the ceremonials of yore and implacably mocking their present-day irrelevance. In *The Chronicles of Narnia,* C. S. Lewis's project is the very opposite of Eliot's *The Waste Land*: the paradisiacal world, shattered and deadened by Jadis the Witch, is to be regenerated and its vegetal vibrancy is to be restored through multiple strategies, including the communion of people-animals-mythical creatures, a children's "crusade" and, above all, the Christic-Dionysian energy – solar and belligerent alike – of Aslan, the Lion King.

KEYWORDS
T. S. Eliot; *The Waste Land*; C. S. Lewis; *The Chronicles of Narnia*; Fertility-Sterility Dialectics; Crisis; Antiquity; Modernity; Vegetal Christianity; *Askesis*.

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The Waste Land, T. S. Eliot's (1888-1965) masterpiece, was published in 1922 (unsurprisingly, the poem was the outcome of intensive labour spanning several years); the final version of the poem relied on several empathic readings, including Ezra Pound's crucial, influential editing suggestions, which proved beneficial for sanitizing the text. C. S Lewis's (1898-1963) *chef-d'oeuvre*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, was written between 1949-1954 and published between 1950-1956. Both authors were marked by a sense of the early twentieth-century collective crisis that had wide-ranging repercussions at the geographical, socio-political and historical level for people around the globe; intensified by the two world wars and the changes these conflagrations had spurred, this crisis was metaphorically and symbolically enacted and reconfigured in the works under examination here (World War I in Eliot's poem, World War II in the series of fantasy novels Lewis produced). Moreover, both authors experienced a rediscovery of Christianity, after a period of identitarian crisis they acknowledged and confessed to in their correspondence and essays; both were solitary "pilgrims," wandering on their own and eventually finding a sense of identity and community. For over twenty years (after Eliot's publication of the poems *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*), the

two authors harshly regarded themselves as intellectual and spiritual enemies, positioned on opposite sides of the barricades (at the group level, in terms of their cultural ideologies or the trends they upheld). As a poet who had embraced a traditionalist stance, which has largely been overshadowed by his renown as the author of fantasy texts, Lewis looked down on Eliot the modernist poet, claiming that the latter had destroyed poetry written in the English language (it is well known that Lewis's aversion to modernism was vehement and aggressive). At stake, therefore, was a rivalry (poetic and pertaining to the literary directions followed by the two writers), polemically triggered by Lewis, who launched an anti-Eliot campaign, parodying the latter's poems; the lampooning was all the more aggressive since Eliot enjoyed a well-consolidated and famous position as a modernist author. The reconciliation between the two authors took place later, initially in 1944 (after Eliot had published *Four Quartets*) and especially in 1945, when the two former opponents met in person, through their mutual friend, Charles Williams. Lewis gave up the hostilities, and the two acknowledged each other as self-avowed, stalwart advocates of impetuous Christianity (from 1959 to 1962, both were members of the Commission to Revise the Psalter).[1] During the last stage of their lives, the two authors (and thinkers) close both in human and in spiritual terms, their former enmity having subsided also because, perhaps, C. S. Lewis had meanwhile also become famous.

What primarily unites the two works (so different otherwise, not only in terms of their genres) is the archetypal relationship and the fertility-sterility dialectic that defines both Eliot's work and *The Chronicles of Narnia.*[2] The entire argumentative and ritualistic approach in *The Waste Land* reveals how sterility invades and colonizes fecundity, annihilating it (through an excessive immersion into the urban space) and inducing a destructive mood of alienation and separation; by contrast, in *The Chronicles of Narnia,* there occurs a reinstallation of fertility under the energetic Dionysian and Christic aegis of Aslan, the Lion King (despite the bellicose, annihilating outbursts of Jadis the Witch, who is the agent of barrenness and destruction, as well as the archetypal enemy of the solar king). Both *The Waste Land* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are texts that rely on multicultural calendar and agrarian ceremonies, which are either invalidated and obstructed or reconfigured and revitalised, for redemptive purposes, at both the cosmic and human levels. Moreover, as regards the topography, London is a key point that appears motivationally both in *The Waste Land* and in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, being associated with the same demystifying and debunking purpose.

The Waste Land

Critics have methodically analysed the poem *The Waste Land* as a canonical text of 20th-century modern poetry, filtered through the lenses of the two books that influenced T. S. Eliot's mise-en-scene (and mise-en-abyme) of the fertility-barrenness relationship (the thematic nucleus of this essay): these are *The Golden Bough* by James Frazer and *From Ritual to Romance* by Jessie Weston. From the former, Eliot adopted the initiation structure of the myth surrounding a pagan deity's death and resurrection, combining various faiths and fertility ceremonies. The latter provided Eliot with the legend of the Grail, understood as an attempt to Christianise the myth of a god's death and resurrection. Jessie Weston in particular provided Eliot with the symbolic key of the poem *The Waste Land:* the legend of the

Grail centres on the geography of a barren, devitalized kingdom, hinging on the fatal ailment of a Fisher-King who could, nonetheless, be saved by a knight (Parsifal).[3] Eliot broke off with the strictly rational and ideational patterns of the two myth-analytic books on the history of religions; irrespective of how great an impact these books exerted on his masterpiece, *The Waste Land* exceeds the frameworks provided by Frazer's and Weston's studies, which offered the poet with a supporting platform, with relevant literary ramifications. Past that, however, Eliot built the body of a heterogeneous and spectacular, freestanding poem, for which both of the aforementioned studies served as auxiliary instruments. Eliot's method of inserting mythological (pagan) references in his poem was not mimetic; on the contrary, he proved to be a skilful "bricoleur," whose erudite background was instrumental to his managing the apparatus of quotations and references. *The Waste Land* is a discontinuous poem, configured as a series of collated and juxtaposed riddles. The discontinuous logic and the puzzle technique of the text are ascribed an initiatory purpose; in its abysmal dimension, the poem speak about the revelation of the self and delivers a lesson (an anatomy) of hollowness. From a socio-political vantage point, *The Waste Land* is a (prophetic and satirical) text about the world's crisis in the aftermath of World War I and about the disenchantment experienced by the post-war generation. The reality of post-war London makes up only one layer of the text; the second is the mythical level, while the third parallel layer is the scholarly one (the collage of quotations).[4] The end of the poem is sceptical and radical: the waste land has not been saved and rebirth is impossible, but contemptible and reprehensible quotidian life can be surpassed, as it were, through contemplation and through a problematization of the crisis. This is exactly what Eliot's masterpiece does: it problematizes the fertility-sterility relationship and ascribes mythical-symbolical nuances to it. This problematization is meant to show that the waste land was once alive and fertile (in this sense, the translation of the poem's title into Romanian by the poet Mircea Ivănescu is accurate – *Tărâmul pustiit*, meaning "devastated" land, rather than *Tărâmul pustiu*, "deserted" land, or *Ţara pustie,* "deserted" country – as the translator sensed the fact that this once fertile kingdom, area or space is barren now),[5] its degradation having been triggered by the modern crisis and the demythicized reality, with an immediate impact on human mentality. *The Waste Land* is a text (poem) of spiritual mourning for a world that has been lost and cannot be regained. The fertility-barrenness dialectic turns T. S. Eliot's poem into a text that is interspersed with niches and has a layered architectural body. The ideational and imagistic layers interfere and gradually disclose a sense of cosmic and microcosmic imbalance, which renders the human realm as alienated by modernity. Each of the five parts of the poem allows for – ostensibly mutilated – overlaps and alternations between the themes of fertility and sterility.

The first part, "The Burial of the Dead," is marked by the conjuring of the seasonal cycles, where aggressive spring announces the impending reiteration of fertility rites. This ceremony related to a god's death and resurrection is not, however, enacted, even though vegetal regeneration ought to be natural and coherent. "Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire" are stirred, just like the dull roots are revived by the rain, but regeneration fails, because human (urban) decay also triggers, by contamination, the decay of the vegetation. Ancient fertility ceremonies are rendered ineffective by degeneration and the aggressiveness of the industrial city. In

modern civilisation, the human coherence of yore is blurred and atomized. The roots will no longer bear fruit, because reality is dominated by "stony rubbish" and by "broken images." The roots will not bear fruit, because the reality is invaded by debris ("stony rubbish") and shattered faces ("broken images"). The water of life is assaulted by desert stones ("And the dry stone no sound of water"), and the only palpable reality is the revelation of death, announced by a new Ecclesiastes ("I will show you fear in a handful of dust"). The appearance of the hyacinth girl, a priestess or a nymph, the remnant of an ancient fertility ritual, should revivify the world but, again, regeneration fails and degeneration reigns supreme ("I was neither/ Living nor dead, and I knew nothing"). The Tarot cards Madame Sosostris (a parody of the Cumaean Sibyl and of Pythia) deals –the Phoenician Sailor, the Wheel of Fortune, the Hanged Man or symbolical-religious figures, such as the Lady of the Rocks and the Fisher-King (the man with three staves) or actual mercantile characters from quotidian reality (the one-eyed merchant) – are all related to the fertility-sterility dialectic.

I would like to focus, albeit briefly, on the character of the Lady of the Rocks, Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, because its pictorial imaginary encloses references to both fertility (the presence of the Virgin, of the Child Jesus, of the angel and of the infant John the Baptist) and sterility (the landscape is aggressive, stony, arid, deadened). Leonardo da Vinci's painting retrieves the precise fecundity-barrenness dialectic on which Eliot's poem relies. The dark colours of the landscape that surrounds the sacred characters is counterbalanced, in the background, by the green of the nourishing water that will someday baptise Jesus, who, in turn, will baptise mankind. In fact, it is not in vain that Christ's presence is invoked in the poem (in its subsequent sections); however, his presence lacks redeeming features (redemption is indefinitely delayed), as if the son of God were himself in mourning for the spiritual crisis of the modern world.

In the last part of "The Burial of the Dead," dedicated to a topos that is specific of modern poetry – the industrial, tentacled, corrupt city (Paris, London) – the reminiscences of the former fertility ritual relating to a god's death and resurrection are present, as such, and they are duly recounted, but they remain suspended, unfulfilled, marred by the fatally preordained risk of failure ("That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?/ Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?"). This dysfunctional relationship and the modern desolation of life, in which resurrection is no longer possible, are brought to the reader's awareness.

In the second part, "A Game of Chess," the fertility-barrenness dialectic is no longer explored at the vegetal, but at the human level, through several pairs of individuals. Historical female figures, such as Cleopatra and Dido, or emblematic literary characters, such as Imogen (from *Cymbeline*), all of them paradigmatic for their passionate love, are described amid a royal, opulent and voluptuous atmosphere that sets them in contrast with the modern couples, ruled by the impossibility to communicate, by alienation, by the absurd. The title of the second part is itself ambivalent: on the one hand, it could signify the (final) game of chess between Ferdinand and Miranda (the Shakespearian heavenly couple through whom Prospero wishes to initiate a new genesis of the human kind in *The Tempest*); on the other hand, this could be an artificial couple, socially manufactured and trained, from the play of another Elizabethan playwright, Thomas Middleton. The symptom of the malformation attached to the notion of a

couple is announced by the nightingale's (warped) song, which contemporary (dirty) ears cannot perceive adequately. Degeneration has also contaminated nuptials: "I think we are in the rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones." Distinctively, the contemporary couple Albert and Lil (a deformed, toothless, prematurely aged woman, consumed by abortions) overthrows the legendary nuptials of former times or the fertility ceremonies symbolized by the hyacinth girl. Lil's case is typical of the fertility-sterility dialectic in modernity: she is a mightily fertile woman who is forced to mutilate (halt) her fertility because of poverty and because passion is absent in the tamed couple, devoid of rituals and nuptials. Lil embodies the two extremes of Eliot's poem, barrenness being here the direct cause of a corporeal "harakiri." The amorous royalty of antiquity is counteracted by the squalor of contemporaneity, where life resembles an announcement in a bar, anticipating, as it were, the famous lines from Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*. "A Game of Chess" ends with Ophelia's empty, meaningless words in *Hamlet,* when, at the height of her madness, she announces the destabilisation of the modern world. From Cleopatra's voluptuous floating to mad Ophelia's predictable drowning, T. S. Eliot depicts a series of aquatic instances and (failed or tormented) nuptials to mark the border where fertility is invalidated. The symbolic enumeration of (historical, social, human, literary) couples and the prevalence (at the textual level) of the fallen couples compared to the valid ones (in terms of passion or fecundity) are intended, by the writer, as a domino type of demonstration, meant to enhance the antithesis inherent in the central theme: fertility/sterility.

In the third part, "The Fire Sermon," the wretched twentieth-century London is described as an industrial city where the former nymphs of "Sweet Thames" and the idyllic landscape in which they were naturally integrated have long disappeared. The nymphs have fled, the landscape is now brutal, and the vegetal deities' song is infected by the noise of the tentacled metropolis ("The sound of horns and motors"). T. S. Eliot's quasi-apocalyptical vision is dominated by the symbol of the rat ("A rat crept softly through the vegetation/ Dragging its slimy belly on the bank /.../ White bodies naked on the low damp ground/ And bones cast in a little grow dry garret,/ Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year"). The destruction of the landscape and its invasion by the dirty and violent industrial town are again emphasized by another fallen couple: Sweeney (a pervert) and Mrs. Porter (a prostitute). Any possible fecundity ceremonials are deliberately lacking, and this is again marked by the nightingale's warped song (ravished Philomela), resounding in the urban, barren space.

The third fallen couple marks the absence of any fertility ritual: the intercourse between a typist and a clerk, a parody of the modern couple for whom fertile passion gives way to derisory sexuality.[6] The clerk is neither a nymph, nor a queen; she is no passionate lover, but a mere common being, for whom intercourse is sheer routine and tedium. Seldom does the memory (invocation) of former opulence avow that there used to be a golden age of London, a fertile, non-desolate land: "Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold." Once upon a time, the Thames was a paradisiacal river (that nuptially cradled Queen Elizabeth and Lord Leicester and was a home to the nymphs), but the modern world has turned it into a hellhole and soiled it, so much so that the three nymphs of yore have turned into miserable, failed creatures (a suicide, a woman who has had an abortion and an estranged woman). The key individual of this part is, however, androgynous Tiresias, who is both man and woman and who,

thanks to his double, hybrid nature, contains the fertility-sterility dialectic within himself. He is the *raisonneur* of the vegetal and magic-religious culture of antiquity, as well as a witness of the invalidated present (at an ontic-gnoseological-mystical level).

The fourth, demonstratively concise part of the poem, "Death by Water," discusses the twofold function of water, which is both destructive and cleansing, and resumes, in a coded, sibylline manner, the legend of the dead and resurrected god on which *The Waste Land* relies.

The last part of the poem, "What the Thunder Said," focuses (in a deliberately philosophical-religious manner) on the thorough description of the waste land (Europe after World War I, the world's state after Christ's death, the sterility brought about by the Fisher King's illness). Infertility is linked with the absence of water and the dominance of stone, the thunder itself is dry and the human king is animalized, changed into a beast ("red sullen faces sneer and snarl"). Everything is soiled (sweaty), petrified, a punishment caused by the major sin of disbelief and by the abandonment of ideals. The only hope is (could be) Christ's resurrection (the dead and reborn god). This sequence recounts about the fallen Jerusalem after the crucifixion of Jesus, the wailing of mourning Madonna, the void (sterility) engendered by the killing of God, various spaces of ancient civilisation and of twentieth-century urban culture that have become impure, but that used to be spiritual models for Europe (Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London); perhaps, in an unforeseeable future, they could regain their former ideational lustre.

Parsifal's quest for the Grail is projected as a *descensus ad inferos*: Eliot structures this *catabasis* in a quasi-gothic manner, using a sombre backdrop ("empty cisterns," "exhausted wells," "tumbled graves") that generates a malformed, terrifying human kind ("And bats with baby faces in the violet light/ Whistled, and beat their wings/ And crawled head downward down a blackened wall"). The image of the bats with baby faces is intentionally frightening – a reference to the image of aborted foetuses, a demonstrative sequence for the infertility crisis of modernity. Parsifal cannot retrieve the Grail and Peter denies Jesus. Christ's resurrection (here, Christ is not only a Christian god, but also the general symbol of human regeneration and of spiritual recovery; he is the dead and resuscitated god who could link Antiquity and Modernity) is perceived only minimally, marginally and irrelevantly. The Ganges, a mythical regenerating river, is dry and awaits the rain that could replenish its waters and stir once again its elemental energies (because of dryness, its jungle is dwarfed).

Eliot's masterpiece fundamentally relies on funereal rather than regenerating images. Nevertheless, renewal, revitalization is not forbidden or excluded; instead, it is sceptically suspended and abolished, because it depends on a general, collective ascesis of the modern world; if this is impossible, the solution that remains lies with the individual. The hyacinth garden (from the beginning of the poem) is displaced by a culture of stone and of dryness (in the last part of the poem), which the sundry array of waters and fluids (divested of mythological features) the poet symbolically enumerates cannot revivify.[7] The Lady of the Rocks is the key-image of the fertility-sterility dialectic (fertility is not forbidden but, for now, it is unrealistic and unfeasible); the Madonna is paradigmatically contrasted with Lil (even though the latter is also related to her, because she, too is a Madonna, albeit a sorrowful one); Lil is the modern woman, a paradoxically fecund a-bortee. The Upanishadic commandments at the end of *The Waste Land* (*Datta*,

Dayadhvam and *Damyata*), as well as the hypnotic mantra incantation *Shantih shantih shantih* represent a movement towards the abandonment of temptations and the choice of contemplation and knowledge, beyond the fertility-sterility dialectic. The retrieval of spirituality works only in isolated cases and although it could not effect a universal regeneration, it marks a junction point at the end of *The Waste Land* that problematizes the two extreme instances of mankind: fecundity versus sterility, or (ancient) depth versus (modern) decay – a schismatic matrix for which T. S. Eliot cannot find a retrieval formula. This is, however, a paradoxical (Upanishadic) end, on a serious note, because the poem does not conclude with a degraded image extracted from reality – as readers or hermeneutists might expect – but with a spiritual exhortation (of vast amplitude), which signals that the only paradigm that could allow an escape from derisory, contingent reality resides in the disciplined and intensive cultivation of spirituality.

The Chronicles of Narnia

Unlike T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis chooses an opposite course, of retrieving the modern world through myth; the recuperating warriors (this is an initiatory belligerent approach) are Aslan the Lion King (in the double function of Jehovah and Christ) and several (charismatic) children from London, whose meeting brings forth beneficial results. I will deal only with *The Magician's Nephew*, even though it is the sixth book in *The Chronicles*, because at the level of inner chronology, it describes the origin and the structure of Narnia.[8] In what follows, I will also make brief references to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

The London in *The Magician's Nephew* is seen by the children Polly and Digory as a "hole" dominated by a cold and wet summer. In the attic of the house, Polly and Digory make a symbolic "cave" from where, helped by magic rings, they are transported to another world. The London space is intentionally depicted as an infernal space; hence, the gradual transition to the paradisiacal topos of Narnia serves a pedagogical purpose. C. S. Lewis's topographic focus has a soteriological target that becomes obvious particularly with the arrival of Aslan, as king and priest of the perfect world that is Narnia.

The road to Narnia is structured by the author into several vegetal layers (skies) that ultimately outline an apogee and a form of ecstasy: Narnia will be/is Paradise regained, an edenic space that is, however, appropriate only for those who can love, understand and perfect it. That is why this paradise consists of stages (skies), just like the inferno is made of circles. From time to time, the circles of the inferno (Jadis) and the heavens of paradise (Aslan) intersect, oppose and wage war against each other for supremacy over this or that topos and for the influence that can be gained from this supremacy.

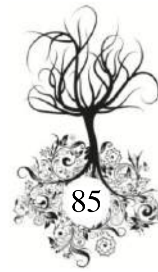
The first place reached by Polly and Digory is a bright and warm forest, a border between worlds. This is a green space, nourished by water, which suggests its eternal, self-standing quality. The second place they reach is a deserted, ruined, gloomy town, dominated by cold, black skies, funereal silence, and lack of vegetation. The City of Charn is a shadow-space, sinister, empty, marked by a "withered sun," although it once was a supreme, royal space, a city of life. Here, the sun is huge, red and cold, as compared with the sun of mankind, which, at least in principle, is yellow, small and hot. Charn is a dead city, under Jadis's rule; just like the witch once destroyed Charn, she also intends to destroy London, harassing its inhabitants and threatening them

with extinction. In fact, Jadis is skilled at annihilating cities; in addition to Charn, she boasts about having also destroyed the fortresses of Felinda, Sorlois and Bramandin!

To prevent the destruction of London, Polly and Digory (with Uncle Andrew and a cab-driver mistakenly transported to the other world) reach a desolate land, dominated by Nothing. This place is made of cold darkness; to counteract it, the cab-driver begins to sing a fertility folk song, a song about harvesting. The area ruled by Nothing is deliberately (hyperbolically) lugubrious, because marks the passage to Aslan's territory. The Lion King's land is announced by a magic, glorious song that summons sunrise into being. It is not just any regular type of sun, but a young, new sun that protects and eagerly fertilises the territory. The colours or the colouring of this territory occurs like ecstasy, signalled by the lion's voice; by singing, he vivifies the zone. Aslan sings to the sun itself, to install it as the supreme energy and to regenerate Narnia. Between the cab-driver's song about harvests and Aslan's song (which restores the stars once the new sun is validated in the sky) the link is one of vassalage and demiurgy. The cab-driver's (subsequently, he will become the first King of Narnia) human song of fertility announces the lion's demiurgic song. Aslan launches a new genesis, cancelling Nothing.

Here, Lewis enacts a demonstrative *epiphany*, with both a religious (spiritual) and a therapeutic purpose (against the pathology Jadis represents): Aslan builds and reveals (this verb is essential, because Narnia is described as a revelation) a sacred, mythical space ruled by vegetal gods (the entire Greek-Latin Antiquity is enclosed here) and by Christianity; it is a syncretic space. The land of Narnia gradually and spectacularly becomes greener (the author insists on the detailed, avalanche-like description of the flora), and the lion reinvests Nature with power, resuscitating it; his song triggers a new gestation and the frantic exaltation of life. Aslan sings *liturgically* (not just cosmically), conducting, in effect, a hyperbolical ceremony of revitalisation that counteracts Jadis's influence. The witch's physical-spiritual poison is annihilated by way of a mythical demonstration. The Lion King's orphic voice brings colour to and modifies the landscape gradually, via a cosmic fertilisation incantation. The vegetation undergoes alchemic growth and becomes *cornucopia*. Aslan is Noah, after the end of the flood and the catastrophe, and the animals re-establish paradise. At an epiphanic level, Lewis's message is compact: the lion is a manifestation of the divinity and an embodiment of the Son, but also of the Father. This epiphany spectacularly hybridises several key-scenes from the Old Testament (Genesis, Noah) and from the Christian Gospels (the magi's worship, Jesus's baptism, the feeding of the multitude, Jesus's Ascension – the crucifixion will be described only in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*).[9] Aslan gives Narnia to Narnia itself (and to its future inhabitants), establishing it as *omphalos*.

The ultimate revelation shows Aslan as the world's sun and centre; he fashions and shapes the fauna and the flora through his song. The great lion's animating incantation marks a Dionysian transformation of the world, which re-establishes the paradigm of paradise (the lion's invocation summons the appearance, from the woods, of vegetal entities: fauns, satyrs, dwarfs, naiads, water deities, etc.). The completion of this topos is also obtained through the fact that the animals take the human beings arrived in Narnia for animals or even for trees (uncle Andrew), which means that this is the first generation of paradise, when man has not been created yet. However, going back to



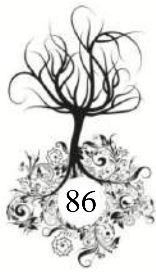
the creation effected by Aslan: walking trees, talking animals are assumed miracles of the Christic Lion, and his reign is threefold – emotional (Aslan will also be a king of the heart), mental and spiritual. Narnia is created by Aslan, but later (after the first step of the creation) it will grow (arborescently) on its own:

> Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters (the chapter entitled "The Founding of Narnia").

C. S. Lewis develops the paradisiacal paradigm even after the completion of Narnia's dazzling genesis, thanks to some acute theological instinct on the part of the writer. Aslan plants a cosmic tree to protect the territory from Jadis's wrongdoings, and the one he has fetch the seed of the sweet tree (from a heavenly garden – allegedly the first garden and matrix of the world!) is Digory. The charismatic boy will pick only one apple of life to plant in Narnia, as a shield against any potential anti-paradisiacal violence (at the hands of Jadis and her cliques). But Aslan also grants Digory the right to pick an additional apple to cure his sick mother: the stasis of the future ill Lion King (in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe)* is announced by this scene, as is his healing. Digory's mother will be cured and the core of the cosmic apple will be buried in the garden: later, a huge tree will grow out of it and, after being felled down by a storm, it will be used to make a (magic) wardrobe.

The Lion's (self-)revelation at the end amounts to a mystical exaltation and, again, an epiphany that is perceived by Polly and Digory (the charismatic, neophyte children): "the [Lion's] face seemed to be a sea of tossing gold in which they were floating, and such a sweetness and power rolled about them and over them and entered them that they felt they had never really been happy or wise or good, or even alive and awake, before" (the chapter entitled "The End of This Story and the Beginning of All the Others"). Aslan is (or has become) sacred substance, *numinous*.

Harold Bloom has criticised Lewis's theologizing of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, considering it purposeless.[10] The writer has been blamed for his literary (or even human) dogmatism; Bloom dislikes Lewis's theorising, believing it was unpalatable because of its didacticism.[11] Bloom chastises Lewis for his obvious (literary) theologization, failing to recall that this aspect does not function independently, but through an umbilical link with vegetal myths and their related rites. Aslan is a Christic lion, but he is also a king-magus or a priest who validates Eden as a myth and a fertility rite. The case of Aslan (and of the religious frenzy spread by the Lion King) is a case of syncretism; this is why eluding these sensitive overtones (in an aesthetically valid literary work) would mean giving in to reductionism. *The Chronicles of Narnia* display a syncretic demonstration and it would be wrong to deem this a structural flaw. There is, indeed, excess in Lewis's theological passion (and in his human creed), but this excess is part of a demonstration that alchemically transforms religions, cultures, myths and ceremonies, which is far from being a flaw. Many analysts agree that his fantasy instinct (or calling) and his preference for pagan mythology (which also hold true in J. R. R. Tolkien's case) were present and active with C. S. Lewis before the conversion to Christianity,[12] and this is obvious in *The Chronicles of Narnia,* which are, above all, magic-vegetal books and only secondly Christian books (even if the writer's theology is obstinate and missionary). If I were to propose a formula for Lewis's syncretism, it would have to be *vegetal*



Christianity, which takes the reader and the hermeneutist back to the beginnings of the validation and installation of Christianity, when this faith worked in parallel with other (pagan) religions, at times intersecting or even undergoing partial contamination with them. This is the essential merit of the Narnian Chronicles which, by their special theology, recuperate vegetal (Greek-Roman) Antiquity, on which a Medieval-Celtic imprint is grafted, and display it in a revelatory manner. Of course, *vegetal Christianity* relies on the myth-poetic vision relating to the renewal of Nature and mankind that is present in the works of both Lewis and Tolkien.[13]

It is not only in *The Magician's Nephew*, but also in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* that many scenes support this notion of *vegetal Christianity* I am describeing in my analysis. The slow-paced opposetion between winter-cold-death-paralysis (Jadis) and spring-summer-sun-green (Aslan and Narnia) has been sufficiently approached and dissected, so there is no need for me to insist on it. In Narnia, for Lucy, the first initiator is Tumnus the Faun, and his cave is a nest full of books; the faun is, in fact, an excellent Dionysian story-teller, who tells stories about nymphs, deer, Silenus and Bacchus and who plays the pan-flute. Therefore, the first initiation of the Pevensie girl (an essential character in terms of the faith that exists in Narnia and Aslan's most loyal apprentice) is vegetal rather than Christian. When the faithful Narnians talk about Aslan as "spring" (his name being equated with life itself), he is described as king and master of the forest and only later as divine substitute (the king of crusaders – in an implied Christian sense). Aslan is the absolute patron saint of vegetation, an ancient divine entity or perhaps a deity dating back to before antiquity.

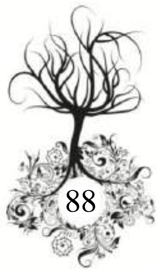
The second initiator in Narnia is Father Christmas; although here Lewis targets a direction of obvious Christianization in his story, things become syncretic and mixed again. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* Father Christmas is tall and happy (not at all stumpy) and his gift to the Pevensie kids is not toys, but all sorts of real and magic arms to defend Narnia (shields, swords, bows, ivory horns, daggers and healing potions). Father Christmas represents temporarily beneficial winter (as opposed to Jadis's eternally malefic winter); along with Aslan (spring-summer), Father Christmas stands for the calendar of seasons, ascribing to the Pevensie children the purported role of crusaders of vegetal, agrarian defence. This is why, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lewis describes in detail the road to Aslan as if it were the path of vegetal resurrection, heading for the apogee of summer. Wildlife is described with ostentatious care; the thaw is a ritualistic killing of winter, to reach the heart of summer, i.e. the season that favours harvests. In his epitomic warrior stance (an obvious symbol of Richard the Lionheart), Aslan is surrounded by tree-women, fountain-women and other mythological creatures (centaurs, unicorns, besides regular wild creatures, all of which are his vassals and squires). Jadis, too, is surrounded by sorcerous or mythological entities (vampires, spectres, ogres or minotaurs). Therefore, before being a Christian battle, the war between Jadis and Aslan is a vegetal one; furthermore, this is a war between *magic* and *witchcraft* (only the latter displays malefic signs). In fact, this is why Aslan is reborn in Christ-like manner, but also as a vegetal symbol of summer against the winter (nature) Jadis represents. The creatures changed into stone are vivified by Aslan in a twofold key: vegetal (in accordance with agrarian rites) and Christian (in accordance with the resuscitation miracles performed by Jesus); in fact, once they are released, the former statues dance frenetically (in a quasi-

Dionysian manner). The crowning of the Pevensie children in Cair Paravel Castle is the ultimate gesture of vegetal regeneration and of the reestablishment of the calendar rites. Thus, this is the ceremonial performance of an entire *vegetal* (or vegetalized) *Christianity*, which puts an alchemic and syncretic seal on C. S. Lewis's vision,[14] releasing him from the rigid dogmatism Harold Bloom associates him with.

The Fisher King's Malady and the Lion King's Splendour

Fascinated and traumatized, at the same time, by the sheer magnitude of the spiritual crisis that holds the twentieth century in its grip, T. S. Eliot details and elaborates upon the sterility of the modern world (the new Babylon). His mythical method of alternating and drawing parallelisms between modernity and antiquity, between contemporary Christian civilization (at risk of being supplanted by atheism or downright heresy) and religious paganism is – as the modernist writer explains in his analysis on the novel *Ulysses*, 1923 – an ingenious strategy for manipulating the extremes so as to thrust this crisis to the fore. In *The Waste Land,* the land is purposely depicted as marked by destruction and decay. The writer's approach is (simultaneously) progresssive and regressive: the (ancient) vegetal, Dionysian world is recalled only through concentrated or fragmentary flashes (reminiscences), while the noxious industrial contemporary world is described carefully, in a narrative strewn with various leitmotifs. It should be noted that the new world is not Apollonian either, because the Apollonian aspects are another defining element of rejected antiquity within the contemporary crisis. The recalled or invoked fertility rituals are halted and obstructed – their full development is not allowed. By contrast, modern daily life and reality are painted with ample, obviously stifling strokes. Modern urban existence has destroyed vegetation, and contemporary man, in a crisis, has forgotten (having been lobotomised, even if only at a symbolic level) the old fecundity ceremonies, because there is no (collective) faith in regeneration and revivification. In the Grail legend, a backdrop borrowed demonstratively by Eliot (from James Frazer's and Jessie Weston's studies), the Fisher King is ill and so is his kingdom, because the king's malady and his kingdom's emptiness share an umbilical cord. *The Waste Land* is a text that serves as both a syndrome of and a verdict upon the manner in which contemporaneity devours antiquity, debunking the ceremonials of yore and implacably mocking their present-day irrelevance. The pathology of modern society (which contains, in fact, several types of crisis) does not lend itself to the ritualistic mechanisms of ancient civilisation, envisaged as obsolete and inadequate, maladjusted in and to contemporary pragmatism. Although radical at the ideational level, Eliot's masterpiece has sufficient facets and overtones that prevent it from conveying a rigid and dismal message.

In *The Chronicles of Narnia,* C. S. Lewis's project is the very opposite of E-liot's *The Waste Land*: the paradisiacal world, shattered and deadened by Jadis the Witch, is to be regenerated and its vegetal vibrancy is to be restored through multiple strategies, including the communion of people-animals-mythical creatures, a children's "crusade" and, above all, the Christic-Dionysian energy – solar and belligerent alike – of Aslan, the Lion King. The volume *The Magician's Nephew* contains all the story lines relating to the fertility-sterility dialectic that dominates *The Chronicles of Narnia.* C. S. Lewis's demonstration is as thorough and trenchant as that in *The Waste Land*, but



the purpose and the stakes are exactly the opposite of those in Eliot's masterpiece. The myth surrounding the death and rebirth of a god (the lion Aslan, in this case) underlies the Narnian Chronicles too, but the focus here is on the last sequence, namely the resurrection of the godhead and the restoration of paradise (through a vegetal rite of Christianity).[15] The problematizing and sceptical soteriology of *The Waste Land* is reconfigured and energized in *The Chronicles of Narnia* with a view to offering an answer to the crisis of the modern world, which may rediscover and recuperate antiquity through the lenses of children and of adapted fairy tales. The deliberate dissolution of the former Dionysian and Christic (ritualistic) world, emptied of meaning and of faith, in *The Waste Land* is counteracted in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by an obstinate and beneficial Dionysian rebirth of the world, which does not exclude the Apollonian dimension – Aslan is the perfect representative of this union of contrasts, which, in fact, glorifies harmony and reinstates, at the cognitive, notional and ontic levels, a canon that was specific of the ancient world – *Kalokagathia*. The (moribund) ill Fisher-King in *The Waste Land* is counteracted by a recovered and resplendent Fisher King in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. In the context of Lewis's rewriting of the Grail myth, Aslan and Narnia (his kingdom) will mutually contaminate and catalyse each other either through death or resplendence (in the end, the latter will prevail), depending on the (religious and vegetal) battle against Jadis and her followers. Aslan is a (self)therapist and a healing "shaman": he heals the paradisiac topos poisoned by Jadis and he also heals himself, in the tradition of the kings who, having been anointed by God, were great healers. The Waste Land is opposed by the Narnian Paradise – once the latter has suffered the aforementioned ordeals.[16] In fact, with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis meets one of the challenges expounded on in his theoretical texts about fiction, namely the notion that fantasy writing should materialize a form of *askesis*, a spiritual exercise.[17] *The Waste Land* is also a spiritual exercise, albeit one undertaken to a problematizing end (as already shown). The world's regeneration under the solar sign of Aslan and the redeeming children (Polly and Digory, but most of all Lucy, Susan, Peter and Edmund) depends on an initiation we, the readers, are facing (as actors in the modern world). Through us as neophytes and through our reintegration into the vegetal space, the modern world may reincorporate antiquity and promote it as a model of knowledge, communion and life.

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Notes

[1] Here are several websites that explore the relationship of adversity and, subsequently, of friendship between T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis: http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2008/12/ts-eliot-and-cs-lewis-discord-and-concord-by-ron-dart.-html; http://hal.archives ouvertes.fr/docs/-00/87/10/82/PDF/C.S._Lewis_and_T.S._Eliot_Questions_of_Identity.pdf; http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/16854.htm.

[2] It should be noted, from the beginning, that Lawrence Rainey, one of the most thorough and fervent re-readers of Eliot's works and this poem, in particular, rejects, in any case, the validity of the core idea of this essay: the fertility-sterility relationship (or dialectic); Rainey believes this line of approach to be limitative and reductionist for the interpretation of Eliot's masterpiece (Lawrence, Rainey, *Revisiting The Waste Land*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2005, pp. 48-49.)

[3] This essay does not approach and does not comment on Eliot's and his readers' demonstrative layers of erudition in approaching *The Waste Land*; it focuses solely on the subtle references to the fecundity-barrenness relationship, as developed by the poem.

[4] An excellent analysis of the scholarly layer and, in particular, of the religious framework Eliot used in his masterpiece is offered by Liliana Pop's study – "The Use of Poetry and the Use of Religion" in The Waste Land *at 90. A Retrospective*, ed. Joe Moffett, Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi Editions, 2011, pp. 93-110. Another pertinent analysis, in the same book, is made by Justin Evans – "*The Waste Land* and Critique", pp. 147-163.

[5] This is the translation into Romanian I have chosen to use in my study, for reasons that have already been explained. *Poezie americană modernă şi contemporană*, selection, translation, notes, comments by Mircea Ivănescu, Preface by Ştefan Stoenescu, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1986. The poem *The Waste Land* appears in translation, in the anthology, at pages 155-181. For the edition in English, see T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 1990.

[6] Lawrence Rainey, *op. cit.,* pp. 53-70, thoroughly discusses this couple.

[7] In *Reading* The Waste Land. *Modernism and the Limits of Interpretation*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990, pp. 164-165, Jewel Spears Brooker and Joseph Bentley decipher a post-hermeneutic approach in the interpretation of water

symbolism in Eliot's world. The following is a rather extended quotation, but it is worth looking at this footnote, because the two writers approach the collapse of both symbols and interpretation: "The world within the poem is one in which symbols fail, one in which mythologies collapse in a heap of broken images. This literalization of ancient symbols (from water as symbol to water as H2O), this demythologizing and desacramentalizing, is a central aspect of Eliot's representation of the waste land" (p. 164). And: "The reader's experience beyond meaning includes the experience of interpretation, an experience which does not yield adequate meaning but which cannot fail to enrich subsequent experience with the text. The water pattern will not be the same when reader recenters it after giving up on external interpretations. The reading process invents and reinvents borders, and this process makes a difference. For example, water imagery is bordered at first by contrasting imagery and by internal interpretations. Later it receives all the borders, containers, or frames that come with various interpretations. Finally, it is bordered by the interpretative activity itself when it returns to being only water imagery again. The hermeneutical loop effect involves a movement beyond hermeneutics which is a return to the starting place, the text, but in the posthermeneutical state the text is changed (or the reader is changed). Having come through the experience of the loop, the reader of *The Waste Land* will be in possession of the experience of the poem's existence before and after meaning" (p. 165).

[8] In Romania, Marius Conkan has dealt extensively with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which he has explained as "alternative fantasy writing." See his two studies: "Imaginarul simbolic al Narniei," in *Steaua*, no. 9/2011, pp. 25-27; and "The Redeemed Land of Narnia and Its Internal Dystopias," in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Philologia. Utopies et Antiutopies, classiques et modernes*, 2012, pp. 173-182.

[9] It is not the intention of this study to undertake a detailed, pedagogical and dry identification of the Biblical references in the text, as Christin Ditchfield, for instance, does in *A Family Guide to Narnia. Biblical Truths in C. S. Lewis's The Chronicles of Narnia*, Wheaton Illinois, Crossway Books, 2003.

[10] *C. S. Lewis*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2006, pp. 1-3.

[11] Both J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are considered authors of "religious fantasy" or of "theologized science fiction," a blend that stirs interest in or even fascination with their works. See Martha C. Sammons, *War of The Fantasy Worlds. C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien on Art and Imagination*, Santa Barbara, ABC-Clio, 2010, p. 11.

[12] Lee D. Rossi, "'Logic' and 'Romance': The Divided Self of C.S. Lewis," in *C. S. Lewis*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2006, p. 67.

[13] Martha C. Sammons, *op. cit.,* p. 190.

[14] To the influences of Greek-Roman Antiquity we should add, of course, the Celtic and Nordic sources, important both for Lewis and Tolkien. Both were fascinated with the multitude of imaginary resources of the Middle Ages.

[15] In "The 'Narnia' Books" in *C. S. Lewis*, edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 2006, p. 90, C. N. Manlove speaks about a Paradise regained, reclaimed.

[16] In the study "The Redeemed Land of Narnia and Its Internal Dystopias," in *Studia*

Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Philologia. Utopies et Antiutopies, classiques et modernes, 2012, pp. 173-182, Marius Conkan claims that for the children who arrive in Narnia, Aslan is some sort of "eschatological paradise," required precisely because it has undergone – through Jadis and her agents (tested and recycled continuously to its ultimate shine) – "an infection."

[17] C.S. Lewis, *Despre lumea aceasta şi despre alte lumi*, translation and notes by Bianca Rizzoli, preface by Walter Hooper, Bucharest, Editura Humanitas, 2011, p. 73.