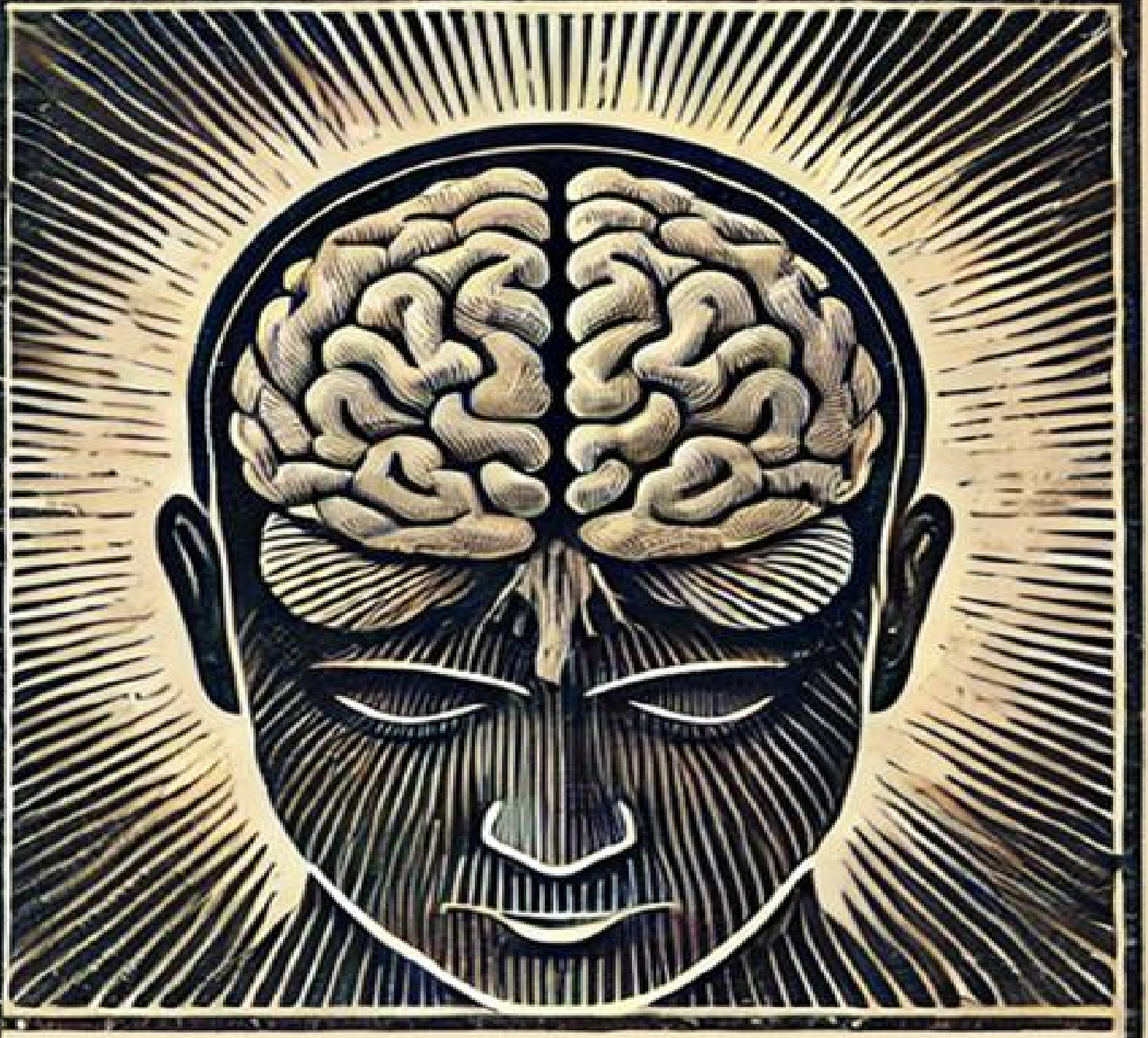
RENEWING THE IMAGINATION



STEVE HAYS

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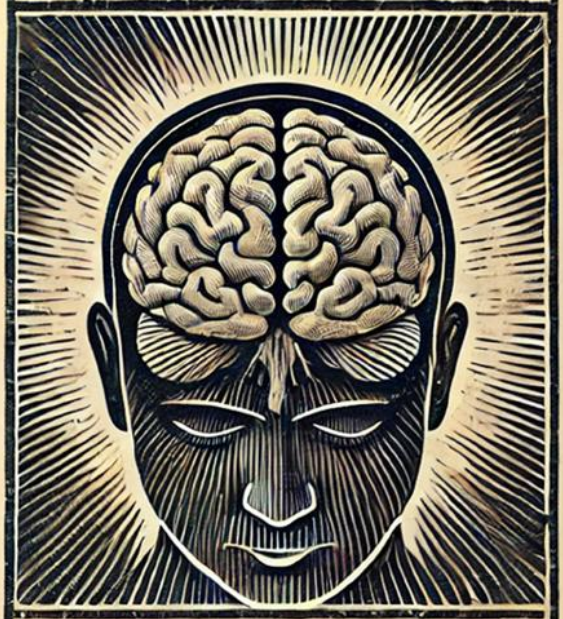

STEVE HAYS

Renewing the Imagination

Preface

On the one hand, the Christian imagination is colored by nature, art, architecture, poetry, novels, plays, story stories, movies, TV dramas, and video games. On the other hand, the Christian imagination takes expression and exerts influence over art, architecture, poetry, novels, plays, story stories, movies, TV dramas, and video games. So there's cross-pollination. God gifted human beings with creativity, and the Christian imagination is a way we interpret the Christian faith and our participation in it.

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What makes the LOTR movies better than the Narnia movies?

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Echoes of Eden

There are many things in art and nature that evoke a lost and longed for golden age.

I. Historic Eden

Gen 2 is the locus classicus. Elements include:

- An orchard with fruit trees, watered by a river
- A fertile couple
- Nudity (perhaps related to the climate)
- Tame animals
- The tree of knowledge
- The tree of life
- Some sort of barrier with an entrance (Gen 3:24)
- Located in upper or lower Mesopotamia

In popular imagination, Eden was an idyllic tropical paradise, but in reality it may have been a hot, rugged place in general, like an oasis with shade trees hugging the river banks. It would be up to Adam, Eve, and their posterity to use the river to irrigate Eden beyond a natural green strip along the river banks.

II. Literary Edens

1. Ezk 28

This is the other biblical account of Eden. A fascinating version of Gen 2-3. Ezk 28 is poetic while Gen 2-3 is prosaic. It this Ezekiel's inspired interpretation of the original, or did he see it in a vision?

2. The Promised Land as new Eden (Isa 11:6-9; 51:3; Ezk 31:9,16,18; 36:35; 47:1-12; Joel 2:3).

3. Song of Songs

Combines a garden motif with romantic love

4. Rev 22:1-3

The Eden motif comes full circle

5. Atlantis

Plato's legend of Atlantis, in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias,* captured the imagination. It may be a myth of Plato's own devising.

However, it's intriguing to consider that one of the two candidates for the location of Eden is lower Mesopotamia, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Perhaps it's just coincidental, but maybe the legend of Atlantis is a dim memory of Eden, now submerged in the Indian sea. Likewise, it may just be coincidental that the Persian Gulf is a source of pearl oysters, but perhaps that's reminiscent of Gen 2:12.

6. Dilmun

Like Atlantis, the legendary island of Dilmun might reflect a dim memory of Eden.

The other candidate for the location of Eden is upper Mesopotamia, around Armenia or Anatolia.

7. Purgatorio

Dante's evocation of Eden in the *Purgatorio* (cantos 28) is one of the loveliest things in his trilogy. In addition to literary allusions, it was colored by memories of the lagoons and pine forest of Ravenna, by the sea.

Like the Song of Songs, it unites a garden with romantic passion. The seductive figure of Matelda seems to be a type of Eve. It's concrete appeal is more paradisal than the Paradiso, which is inhumanly disembodied.

8. Primavera

I wonder if Botticelli's *Primavera* was influenced in part by Dante's Eden, blending motifs of Matelda, Eve, and Properina as a spring goddess.

9. Paradise Lost

For a drama centered in Eden (with excursions to heaven and hell), it's strange that Milton makes no effort to make it realistic. He gives the reader a literary construct (Book 4). Why is that? Several possibilities come to mind:

i) He's flaunting his Classical erudition.

ii) He was blind by the time he composed *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps he had a poor visual memory (unlike Turner).

iii) He's suggesting that legendary gardens of pagan mythology are dim memories of Eden.

iv) He has no eye for natural beauty. He's not turned on by bucolic landscapes.

10. Ruskin

i) As a young man, nature was Ruskin's cathedral. Through the medium of Victorian typology, communion with nature was indistinguishable from communion with God. But after his crisis of faith he turned against nature. I wonder if Turner's postlapsarian view of nature collided with Ruskin's prelapsarian view of nature, giving Ruskin a darker vision.

ii) Ruskin's aestheticism blinded him to the greatness of Rembrandt. Beauty was never central to Rembrandt's art, whether people or places. Rembrandt has an interest in the richness of ordinary life. Rembrandt is Shakespeare in a different medium.

11. Perelandra

In *Perelandra* (the floating islands, gilded firmament), as well as *The Voyage of Dawn Treader* (the Silver Sea, last wave, Aslan's land beyond Narnia), Lewis pictures his sense of sehnsucht

Although his direct knowledge of the natural world was provincial, Lewis had a keen appreciation for scenic beauty. He enjoyed long country walks and mountain views.

Ironically, although his his literary Edens are as unrealistic as Milton's, they are far more compelling. That's because they are direct products of his intense, yearning imagination rather than an artificial literary pastiche.

12. The Garden between Dawn and Sunrise

I wonder if the garden in James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen* is partly modeled on Dante's Eden. In both cases, the garden seems to be frozen at dawn.

13. Lord of the Rings

The character of Goldberry, as a spring goddess, is reminiscent of Dante and Botticelli (see above). Is that coincidental?

14. Burnt Norton

The garden in T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton" (from *The Four Quartets)* is a postlapsarian vision of autumnal Eden rather than the primaveral Edens of Dante, Botticelli, Tolkien, Lewis, Cabell, and the Song of Songs..

15. Garden of the Finzi-Continis

Bassani's walled garden is post-lapsarian and legendary. There is no such place in Ferrara. It exists only in his haunted imagination, like the lost world of his youth–the Jewish community that perished in the Shoah.

III. Artistic Edens

1. Da Vinci

i) Some of his art is a pretext to paint an evocative landscape in the background. Take the mountains in *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* and the caves in *The Virgin of the Rocks*.

ii) In addition to these serene paintings, da Vinci was troubleld by visions of an anti-Eden. The cataclysmic power of nature in his Deluge drawings. In that respect he anticipates Turner.

2. Constable

Until he fell into irrevocable melancholy, his simple landscape paintings (e.g. *Willows by the stream*) reflect a prelapsarian Eden.

3. Hudson River School

Some paintings from the Hudson River School, like Thomas Cole's *Expulsion from Eden*, symbolize virgin America as a new Eden. The New World counterpart to the Promised land.

4. Turner

Although he may be best-known for his Venetian sunsets, Turner was strongly drawn to the wild side of nature. Mountains, gorges, cataracts, turbulent seascapes, thunderstorms. The exhilarating violence nature. The destructive power of nature. The overwhelming scale of nature, dwarfing human beings. A postlapsarian perspective. In that regard he's the flip side of Constable's pastoral landscapes.

That raises questions about what we regard as paradisal. The expulsion from Eden exposed Adam's posterity to a vast range of natural scenery. And some artists celebrate landscapes that are the polar opposite of a tropical paradise or lush valley. Take Georgia O'Keeffe. Or all the Westerns with Monument Valley in the background. Or Westerns set in Montana, with untamed rivers, prairies, and the Grand Tetons looming in the distance.

5. Impressionism

i) Jean-François Millet's *Spring* is Edenic in a prelapsarian sense. But the best-loved impressionists are Monet and Renoir, who influenced one another. There's a difference in emphasis. Monet takes a greater interest in natural scenery while Renoir takes a greater interest in people and social life. However, Monet is a great painter of people while Renoir is a great painter of natural scenery.

ii) Both Monet and Renoir escape into Edenic nostalgia. Monet's beaches and lily ponds, Renoir's flower gardens and bathers on the banks of the Seine. The results are a delirium of life at its best. But by the same token, it's one-sided and inhuman. Turning a blind eye to the ugly, tragic side of nature. No evil, sickness, suffering, poverty, deformity, or mortality. To some degree their art is an exercise in extended adolescence. An artistic effort to cling to the charms of youth.

iii) In addition, the obsession with the play of light and sensuous color carries the risk of sight without inside, light without enlightenment. Turner suffers from some of that as well. The greatest art is an interpretation of man's place in

the universe. What if anything makes human lives important.

IV. Musical Edens

Classical music (e.g. Baroque, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn) is fairly symmetrical whereas seascapes and landscapes are asymmetrical. Some (mainly French) 19-20C composers developed an atmosphere style that parallels the paintings of Turner and the impressionists. A pre- or postlapsarian Eden set to music, viz.

• Berlioz, *Les nuits d'été* (Régine Crespin/Ernest Ansermet)

• Chausson, *Poème de l'amour et de la mer* (Montserrat Caballé)

• Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*

Clair de Lune; "Trois Chansons de Bilitis" (Régine Crespin)

La Damoiselle Elue (Montserrat Caballé)

• Duparc, "L'invitation au voyage" (Régine Crespin)

• Ravel, *Shéhérazade* (Régine Crespin/Ernest Ansermet)

• Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Lark Ascending*

These embody common grace. But as a steady diet, this is deficient. Christian music (e.g. hymns, anthems, passions, cantatas, oratorios) are ultimately more satisfying because they carry the hope and promise of something better and more enduring than this life has to offer. Many unbelievers settle for the remnants of Eden in a fallen world. But

Christians look ahead to a new Eden. Indeed, surpassing the original.

V. Eschatological Edens

1. Human life began in a garden. But as punishment for their disobedience, Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. Their posterity is born in exile. And because they were banished, they lost access to the tree of life. They lost the opportunity for immortality.

In Christian tradition, human life ends in a garden. Cemeteries are typically designed and landscaped to resemble park-like gardens. Gardens for the dead.

The symbolic justification for cemeteries is that the dead are buried in the hope of resurrection. At the return of Christ, cemeteries will come alive as the dead in Christ arise.

So the story comes full circle from garden to garden, life, death, and life restored.

2. Gray's Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

He achieves his effects through simple well-chosen brushstrokes, in contrast to Milton's ponderous pilings on. One difference is that Gray is a lyric poet whereas Milton aims for heroic grandeur, which is too heavy for a parklike garden. Gray is more domestic and down-to-earth. His churchyard is a postlapsarian Eden, chastened by pervasive mortality.

From Dark City to the New Jerusalem

In this post I'd like to explore two interrelated themes. Although they're not intrinsically interrelated, it's useful to compare them.

In the scifi film *Dark City* (1998), as I discern it, aliens have abducted a group of humans. Seems to comprise the population of a small town (hundreds or a few thousand). They've transported the humans to an experimental menagerie in outer space. The aliens are telepathic. In addition, they've constructed machines that amplify their telepathic abilities. The machines can change states of matter. Using this metamorphic technology, the aliens create and recreate cityscapes based on the garbled memories of the human captives.

The protagonist, John Murdoch, is telepathic, too. It may be a latent ability, but his experience in the penal colony is a catalyst for his telepathy to assert itself. At the end of the film, he defeats the aliens. He is now in a position to create scenery more to his own liking.

Watching this makes me think, if I was trapped on the penal colony in outer space with that many inmates, and I had the freedom to create an artificial setting, what would that be? What's my preference?

Now let's segue to a parallel. In Rev 21-22, John describes a vision of the New Jerusalem. It's tricky to visualize because the description is a montage of two different motifs: the new Eden and the New Jerusalem. A park-like city.

One question that raises is that if you were a director, filming Revelation, how would you visualize the scene? What would you show the audience?

Another question is what the original audience was expected to imagine. On the one hand, no one in the original audience had ever seen the original Eden. What that looked like is an educated guess. If it was located in lower Mesopotamia, the garden of Eden might be on a fluvial island. If it was located in upper Mesopotamia, it might be a vale in a mountain cove.

Whatever the original setting, it seems highly unlikely that the garden of Eden was the most beautiful place that ever existed. There's fierce competition for that distinction. There are many fabulously scenic locations around the world. And there's no one most beautiful place, because there are different kinds of scenic landscapes, towns and cities. It would be fascinating to step into a time machine and see the original Eden, but would it be your favorite place to live?

Some of John's audience had seen Jerusalem. But with all due respect, Jerusalem is very far from being the world's most beautiful city. The religious or nostalgic appeal of Jerusalem, especially for gentile Christians, has more to do with the idea of Jerusalem rather than the reality. If the new Jerusalem actually looked like the earthly Jerusalem, that would be quite a let down.

When we think about the world to come, what what do we envision in our mind's eye? What would be ideal? Where would you like to live in the world to come? Do you have a concrete image? A particular setting?

Analogously, if you were Murdoch, what setting would you choose for yourself and your fellow captives? Humans wax nostalgic for a lost golden age, but what makes it golden? No war. No suffering. No mortality. But what about the setting?

Would it be more urban or more pastoral? Like Venice? Or an Alpine meadow? Like a tropical island? Or the Redwood forest?

A conservatory combines urban and bucolic elements. An arboretum under glass. It might include an aviary with songbirds. It might have streams and ponds.

What about a church? What style? Byzantine? Gothic? Romanesque?

If Gothic, English Gothic (e.g. York cathedral, King's College Chapel) or French Gothic (e.g. Amiens, Notre-Dame de Reims, Sainte-Chapelle)?

Surely the world to come won't have less worship than in the here and now. So places of worship make sense.

Would you simulate the four seasons? Would you simulate day and night, sunrise, sunset, a full moon, solar eclipse, lunar eclipse, the Morning/Evening star, comets, and meteors? Would you simulate rainbows and the Northern lights?

Here's another complication: in the Dark City hypothetical, Murdoch must create a uniform setting for everyone. But there's no one-size-fits-all ideal. People like different kinds of scenery. There is no one favorite place for everyone. So what if the world to come is more customized? As I've often argued, hell may well be customized, and by the same token, the new earth may well be customized.

Of course, we can just wait and see. But cultivating heavenly-mindedness includes reflection and self-

examination on what we think is ideal. What is best for you and me?

The reality may take us by surprise. The reality may be far better than we can hope for or imagine. But that means there's no risk of disappointment if we begin our contemplations now. If they fall short of what's to come, so much the better.

From Ash Wednesday to the Four Quartets

It is a truism that art is autobiographical, and this was never more true than in the case of T.S. Eliot, whose literary legacy tracks his spiritual pilgrimage from the despair of the lost generation to conversion and faith. Not only is this true at a general level, but in Ash Wednesday, which marks the watershed of his spiritual quest, he expressly employs the traditional trappings of the pilgrim path by using Lenten and mystical imagery to depict his own journey.

The travelogue format enjoys a universal appeal, from the Epic of Gilgamesh through the Odyssey, Aeneid, Jason & the Argonauts, Song of Roland, Commedia, Pilgrim's Progress, Gulliver's Travels, Candide, Theomemphus, Don Quixote, Rasselas, Faust, Moby-Dick, Don Juan, Huckleberry Finn, The Coming Race, Zanoni, Alice in Wonderland, The Time Machine, Journey to the Center of the Earth, Through the Looking Glass, Heart of Darkness, Perelandra, Jurgen, The Martian Chronicles, Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Quest of the Three Worlds, The Invisible Cities, The Wizard of Oz, The Little Prince, Star Trek, 2001: A Space Odyssey, and so on. This is owing to the fact that life has a narrative quality —an outward narrative which is, in turn, a spiritual simile.

The Exodus is the protological quest tale, while the life of Christ is the eschatological Exodus, with our Lord at once recapitulating and culminating the typology of Moses and Joshua on a higher and final plane. The Church Year, Holy Week and the Way of the Cross commemorate and recapitulate the life of Christ.

Christian tradition marks a shift in orientation. It continues the theme of life as a journey, but inverts and internalizes the progression from an outward to an inward motion. And

the image of the pilgrim path as an upward motion goes back to allegorical interpretations of Jacob’s ladder, such as we find in Benedict, Bonventura, Dante, and San Juan de la Cruz.

One need not buy into high church theology or mysticism to appreciate the literary potential of the symbolism as a framing device. This is a more promising avenue of attack for Christian fiction than the SF genre of Linebarger or the mythopoiesis of Lewis. It is more akin to Cather, but with a sharper focus on the liturgical landscape as a map of the soul.

If Ash Wednesday charted a journey through sacred space, the Four Quartets chart a journey through sacred time. For Eliot, Christian conversion was, in part, a solution to the riddles of time and personal identity posed by his study of Bradley. For him, the Incarnation marks the still point of the turning world as the level line of time intersects with the upright line of eternity. The "bedded axle-tree," round which the whole world revolves, is resituated from the heavens above to the manger below. From stars to sapphires, all things now move in tandem to the centripetal action of Christ—like a cosmic cartwheel.

The Christian frame tale

In this regard, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* poses a complication by virtue of being a framed story. The central action, consisting of what happens in Narnia, is set within a realistic frame of the four children's lives in the real world before and after they enter Narnia. Many stories are set within an external framework like this, and virtually all journeys into an imagery land follow this pattern. L. Ryken & M. L. Mead, **A Reader's Guide Through the Wardrobe** (IVP 2005), 77.

1. The same genre is also called a frame tale or frame narration. A story within a story. Analogous plot-devices include time-travel, where an individual travels back and forth from his own time to the past or future, and the wormhole, where an individual travels back and forth from his own universe to a parallel universe. It's striking that the frame tale is so popular. That bears witness to a spiritual hunger, even among unbelievers, for a greater and better reality beyond our sublunary existence.

2. From a theological standpoint, what's interesting about this genre is that it mirrors the Christian worldview. Bible history and eschatology is like a frame tale: our universe is nested within the external reality of the heavenly realm (God, saints, angels), on the one hand, and hell, on the other hand. Outside agents enter and leave our world. The devil and demons leave hell (or the intermediate state) to enter our world. Angelic emissaries leave heaven to enter our world, then depart. And the culmination of the Christian frame tale is the Incarnation, where God leaves heaven to

enter our world, then returns to heaven. The Christian worldview is the Ur-text of the frame tale genre.

Lewis: Christian mythmaker

Both Lewis and Tolkien enjoy a cult-following, drawn from much the same fan base, although Tolkien has overtaken Lewis. In one respect, Tolkien is the superior of Lewis inasmuch as the former worked out a consistent, self-enclosed fantasy world whereas Lewis is highly eclectic. In other respects, Lewis is the superior. He shares, with Tolkien, a great visual imagination, but Lewis brings a numinous intensity to some of his descriptions—aided by an elegant, yet unpretentious prose style. Moreover, Lewis was a man of ideas as well as a man of imagination. Furthermore, he writes as a Christian. And when he found images with which to clothes his ideas, the result was impressive.

The Screwtape Letters present spiritual warfare, not on a cosmic canvas, a la Milton, but as a string of petty grievances and innocuous inducements that unconsciously disaffect the convert from his newfound faith. Much of this is an exercise in thinking aloud—in saying what we may privately feel or mumble under our breath in passing.

1. At his best, Lewis has a visionary and even beatific style that exemplifies his doctrine of sehnsucht. This is on display in Perelandra and the final chapters of the Voyage. But the flipside of this coin is that the style flattens when he leaves the silver sea and floating islands behind. In That Hideous Strength, there are moments, such as the entry to Brangdon Wood and the Descent of the Gods, when the old magic returns, but Lewis, unlike Eliot, lacks a knack for finding the sacred in the mundane.

2. There was, with Lewis, the ubiquitous risk of naked ideas streaking through the story. His first, semi-autobiographical,

entry into the fantasy genre (Pilgrim’s Regress) suffers from this disproportion, as does the final installment of the Space Trilogy (That Hideous Strength).

Although a literary failure, the Pilgrim’s Regress is useful as an exposition of his Platonic spirituality. It resurfaces in The Last Battle. But Platonism is the subterranean stream that runs under his mythopoetic art and outlook generally.

3. There are also times when Lewis cultivates an expectation on which he cannot deliver. In the climactic chapters of Perelandra, the elida treat the reader to the accumulated wisdom of the ages. The only problem is that Lewis is no angel, and must therefore feign a pompous, eonian profundity. Less would be more. But whatever its flaws, Perelandra is a work of creative imagination that sticks in the reader’s mind.

4. Like Bunyan, only worse, Lewis doesn’t trust the reader to draw the right conclusions. It may again be owing to his Platonism, with its primacy of the idea, that Lewis feels the need to turn the narrator into an editorial voice. Or maybe it’s carryover of his classroom lectures. Or maybe it’s just a lack of skill. But whatever the reason, this is an artistic flaw.

A skillful narrator does not so much speak to the reader as speak through the characters (normative and foil characters), plot, and setting. Even this has to be handled with some delicacy, lest the character become a walking, talking treatise or dummy for the narrative ventriloquist. Such speeches must be "in character" with the character. In addition, the reader should not only hear what the character says, but see what he sees. In Dante, the main character describes the journey, like a tour guide. And, in Dante, the scenes are symbolic. These are all oblique ways of making a

point without stepping outside the story, which destroys the illusion.

5. Lewis doesn't write about what most novelists write about. The lifecycle, romantic love, friendship, death, betrayal. In some respects that's due to his unhappy childhood and enforced bachelorhood. Yet he had a tight-knit circle of male friends. And he was a WWI vet. For whatever reason he kept his personal life separate from his fictional worlds. That's a serious limitation in a novelist. But we can get that from other fiction writers. And it's offset by the fact that Lewis goes places where most novelists never go. Neglect of the usual themes frees up creative space to pursue neglected themes.

The wood between the worlds

There's a sense in which **The Chronicles of Narnia** and The Space Trilogy are Christian allegories, although Lewis resisted that classification:

https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2016/10/is-lewiss-fiction-allegorical.html

Here's another way we might draw the distinction: a necessary element of allegory is for an allegory to be set in our world. The Pilgrim's Progress is set in our world; likewise, Dante's comedy is set in our world, according to medieval cosmography.

By contrast, Narnia represent a parallel universe. Narnia, Charn, and English represent parallel universes in a multiverse. The wood between the worlds exists outside any particular world. Likewise Aslan's Country exists outside individual worlds. Although the worlds are separate, it's possible to travel from one world to another.

So, for instance, **The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe** illustrates how Christian theology might play out in a fallen world with a different world history and talking animals.

The Space Trilogy is superficially different. However, the Mars and Venus of The Space Trilogy were never meant to be astronomically realistic descriptions of Mars and Venus as they exist in our universe. So they're not allegorical in the sense that they're not set in our world, but a different kind of world. Perelandra is not an allegory of the Fall

because it belongs to a universe with a different world history than the Venus of our own universe.

Of course, there's a sense in which they are allegorical because they are fictional, and their theology derives from the real world in which Lewis exists. And they are products of his imagination. So we might say the stories are allegorical from a viewpoint outside the world of the stories, but are not allegorical from a viewpoint inside the world of the stories.

Myth and magic in The Chronicles of Narnia

1. Especially with the popularity of the Harry Potter books and movies (although that fad may have waned), the role of magic in The Chronicles of Narnia is somewhat controversial. (Mind you, I haven't read the Harry Potter books.) In addition, the role of magic in The Chronicles of Narnia intersects with the role of myth.

2. Consider stock characters from Greek mythology (e.g. satyrs, centaurs, minotaurs, dyads, naiads, Baucchus, Silenus). That's a lazy creative shortcut. These creatures belong to a different fictional world history. They are products of Greek mythology. They belong to the fictional universe of our own world. It would be preferable for Lewis to invent characters that reflect the implied world history of Narnia.

Lewis might counter that in the world of the story, what's mythical in our world may be real in another world. In principle, that's a legitimate approach for a fantasy writer to take. Even so, there needs to be a consistent backstory to explain their existence in another world. They can't just be abducted from our world, then stuck into another world. These creatures arise in a polytheist or animist context.

3. That said, this isn't entirely ad hoc on Lewis's part. He may well include these characters to illustrate his view that in divine providence, pagan mythology is a preparation for the Gospel.

Of course, that sympathetic outlook is at variance with how the Bible views pagan mythology, but my immediate point is that from Lewis's perspective, this isn't just a creative

shortcut but a matter of principle–even if his principle is misguided. A considered judgment on his part.

The relation between (2) & (3) exposes a point of tension in Lewis. He sacrifices artistic consistency at this juncture to illustrate myth becoming fact.

4. In defense of Lewis, consider the character of Tumnus. When a satyr is the first character Lucy encounters, this shows Lucy, as well as the reader, not only that the wardrobe is a portal to another world, but a different kind of world. If what she discovered was an alternate Oxfordshire or parallel London, where everything belongs to the same kind of world, then that wouldn't have the same effect. Making Lucy meet a satyr on first contact is an economical way for Lewis to show the reader that Narnia is truly out of this world. In a way, he makes the same point with talking animals, but the satyr adds an exotic visual touch.

5. In the world of Narnia, magic isn't equivalent to witchcraft. What is magic in our world is natural in Narnia. It's a different kind of world with different laws.

The White Witch is no exception, because she's an intruder from another world. Her kind of magic wasn't native to Narnia. Rather, witchcraft is like an invasive species.

And, of course, the world of Narnia has a Christian subtext lacking in the Harry Potter novels. So it's not comparable in that respect.

6. In fairness to Lewis, we should judge the novels by the standards of children's literature. They don't have and can't have the same literary sophistication as adult novels like **Until We Have Faces** or **Perelandra**.

In addition, Lewis was learning the ropes when he began the series. Honing his craft as a fiction writer. Moreover, he was breaking new ground in the genre. So they have a certain experimental charm that would be lost if he wrote them after gaining greater experience in the art and craft of fictional narration.

Dawn Treader

I got around to watching *Dawn Treader* last night. Reviews led me to believe that while the film was not a fully successful adaptation of the novel, that it was a great improvement over the second installment, and a reasonably faithful adaptation of the original. However, I pretty thoroughly dislike the film.

But before commenting on the film, I'll say a couple of things about the novel. A children's novel is a bit of a paradox. A children's novel is ostensibly told from a child's viewpoint. It operates at a child's level. But, of course, most children's stories are written for children, not by children. At best, this reflects the attempt of an adult author to project himself into the mindset of a child. The adult may be drawing on memories of his own childhood. And the adult may have kids of his own who enable him to rediscover his own childhood. But there's still a sense in which a children's novel is really written from the perspective of an adult.

There's also a point of tension in the original novel. On the one hand, the primary appeal of the novel lies in the plot device of a journey. The literal motion of the journey creates dramatic momentum and linear continuity. Discovering strange new worlds in the enchanted land of Narnia and beyond. This is augmented by the oceanic cruise. So you have that wide-open feeling, with the sun, sky, wind, and waves. Very bracing and liberating.

On the other hand, Lewis wanted to work into this plot device a redemptive subplot involving Eustace. But while that might be admirable in its own right, it distracts and detracts from the primal appeal of the oceanic voyage.

The only good things about the film are the dragonesque ship and the computer enhanced seascape, with its Turneresque sunsets. Well, there's also a picturesque scene involving magical snow.

The role of Aslan is pared down from the original. In the film, he's a Yoda-like figure, spouting Kung-Fu aphorisms. Mind you, I never cared that much for the character of Aslan. A talking lion isn't the way I relate to Christ.

The restoration of Eustace is glossed over in the film. Here I can't blame the filmmakers. In a kid flick, I wouldn't expect them to depict Aslan skinning the dragon alive, then tossing a naked boy into a healing pool. That's one of those things that works better on paper. The less you see the better.

In the novel, Lucy has a chance, using the Book of Spells, to overhear what a classmate said about her. Lewis uses this to expound on the dangers of gossip.

In the film, this is changed. Lucy now wants to look like her pretty, popular, older sister Susan.

I think that's a psychologically valid alternative to Lewis, but it's no improvement over Lewis. And it suffers from two additional liabilities:

Who's the target audience for the film? Much of the film operates at the level of a Disney kid flick. But if that's the target audience, then intruding the notion of sex appeal is off-the-mark. Is this a kid flick or a teen drama? It can't be both.

Moreover, Lucy's desire to be appealing to boys is treated as a wicked transgression. But surely that's a natural, normal hankering for a girl her age.

This in turn leads to a jarring scene where Lucy walks straight out of the world of Narnia into the "real world," where she's dressed like a movie star from the 40s, with Swing music in the background.

But it's hard for the viewer to mentally readjust to the world of Narnia after that meticulously fostered cinematic illusion was just exploded. The reentry is too abrupt.

The novel does more with the evocative notion of live, meteoric stars. That's given short shrift in the film.

The film interpolates the notion that Jadis is still a temptress to Edmund. But that's both dramatically gratuitous and dramatically implausible.

There's also a subplot about restoring lost slaves, with the ubiquitous tearful reunion. This clutters the emotional rhythm of the original story, where fulfillment is structured into the physical quest for the "utter East." The landscape does the work.

Then there's the Dark Island. In Lewis, this is a living nightmare. Where dreams come true. That's something you can't control. Once you're sucked into that world, you can't retrace your steps. You never find the way back to reality. You just go from one scene to another in your episodic nightmare.

In the novel, the ship tries to paddle away, but it's overtaken by the delusive power the Dark Island. Each sailor is about to be enveloped by his private dreamscape, which isolates him from every other sailor. Unless Aslan intervenes, they will be lost in the labyrinth of their own fervid minds.

But in this film this is eclipsed by a battle with a sea monster. Here the novel was far superior.

Yet the worst is yet to come. Lewis clearly put a lot of thought and effort into the final two chapters of the novel. It's carefully, steadily paced to build to a sublime conclusion. The rising sun is larger and brighter every day. The seawater becomes liquid sunshine, restoring one's youth. There's a mood of stillness and solemnity. Tremulous anticipation. You also have the scented water lilies. Songbirds with human voices. And the musical breeze. It's my impression that the final chapter also contains an allusion to the epilogue of John's Gospel.

Lewis is striving to create a cumulative effect by many brushstrokes. For the film to have the same impact, it has to reproduce, as much as possible, as best as possible, the totality.

As I visualize his geography, the Silver Sea terminates in a standing wave. That's the last wave.

Normally, there is no last wave. You have a succession of waves breaking on the shore. But Lewis wants to explore the paradox of a last wave.

Over the last wave, as I visualize his geography, is a narrow coastal plain, wedged between the standing wave and the edge of the sky.

Behind the sky, beyond the world of Narnia, is Aslan's country. A high mountain chain.

Somewhere in-between is where the sun rises. This is one point where the novel's logistics are fuzzy, or perhaps

incoherent. Is the sun in front of the sky? In that case it would rise and set on the coastal plain behind the wave.

But that doesn't quite work, for in that event the sun wouldn't rise in the East everyday. Rather, it would alternate from East to West, and vice versa.

So perhaps the sun is behind the sky, and passes under the flat earth during the night. Yet the sky seems to form the barrier between the Narnian world and Aslan's country, which lies outside the world of Narnia. But the sun is part of the Narnian world. So the sun ought to be inside the glass dome, not outside the glass dome. Within Narnia, not between Narnia and Aslan's country.

I also assume that, in the novel, it's not possible to walk straight into Aslan's country from Narnia. For the glassy sky forms a wall. There would have to be a door, maybe with a sentinel or porter, to guard the entrance and allow qualified wayfarers to pass through.

From what I can tell, Lewis is having to fudge the details of his flat-earth cosmography. And I can understand if that created a problem for the director.

Still, the final chapters were quite important to Lewis. I think it represents his effort to depict sehnsucht.

In the novel, you can see the sun through the wave at dawn. And due to the lighting conditions at dawn, you can see past the sun into Aslan's land. After the sun has risen, the world behind the world fades from view.

It's certainly possible for CGI to capture this effect. And it represents a serious artistic failure on the part of the director not to honor the vision of Lewis at this climatic

juncture. It weakens the dramatic impact of the film. An epic adventure with an anticlimactic ending.

In the film, we don't have a final wave that comes to a halt at the shoreline. Instead, you have a narrow beach, with the sea on one side, and the standing wave on the other. This makes no sense, even in terms of Narnian cosmography. And in the film, they never get a glimpse of Aslan's country.

Then, in the novel, after Reepicheep goes over the wave, Lucy and Edmund walk along the shallows until they reach a strip of beach, with a narrow coastal plane between the beach and the end of the world, where the sky comes down to ground level.

Once again, I think the directions are vague and probably incoherent at this point. I don't visualize how Lewis can simultaneously make Lucy and Edmund walk away from the wave, walk to the beach, then walk to the edge of the world–above the beach. Seems to be it would all be connected. The standing wave would be conterminous with the coastline. And you'd have the same coastal plain behind the wave. So I suspect this is another point at which Lewis is fudging on the logistics of his world.

Nevertheless, he wants to have fun with the notion of what it might be like if the world were flat, so that you could walk to the edge of the world. The optics of a flat-earth cosmography.

And it's a pity that the director can't bring himself to play along with the imaginative experiment. For the moviegoer would also enjoy that illusion.

What the movie gives us, instead, is a rushed, butchered version of the novel’s culminating scenes. That’s a lost opportunity. A botched opportunity. They had the chance to do something truly great, but settled for so much less.

What in Lewis is unforgettable is scarcely even memorable in the film. However, you can always read the novel.

The Magician's Nephew

How could evil originate in a good world? Or did it? In **The Magician's Nephew**, Lewis solves that theological conundrum by making the source of evil a malevolent invader from another world. Lewis has a comparable device in **Perelandra**.

I remember a Bible scholar who said the Tempter in Gen 3 performs the same function. Since Eden was initially devoid of evil, it had to enter the garden. The source of evil lay outside the garden rather than the inside the garden.

Although that may finesse the proximate source of evil, it only pushes the question back a step. It can't explain the ultimate source of evil. How did the malevolent invader become evil in the first place? How did evil originate wherever he came from?

The issue is sometimes framed in terms of how a holy or perfect agent could ever find evil appealing in the first place.

It's like asking how a movie villain became a villain. At one level, there may be an explanation inside the plot or narrative. There may be a backstory about some pivotal event that took him in the wrong direction.

At another level, outside the story, he's a villain because the director had the idea of a villainous character, and he turned his idea into a movie. It began in his mind. The villain was originally a thought. The villain in the story objectifies the director's imagination. At that level, he does dastardly

things in the movie because he does dastardly things in the director's imagination, and the movie character is a projection of the director's imagination.

Touring Perelandra

One of the exhilarating things about Christian metaphysics is how it opens up vistas of possibility that atheism can only dream of. Literally, that atheism can only dream of.

For instance, how many readers of **PERELANDRA** have yearned to actually visit Perelandra and experience firsthand the exotic world of sensory enhanced sights, sounds, taste, touch, and fragrance. Lewis's intense, visionary descriptions whet the appetite to go there. His novel is a tantalizing appetizer of an imaginary world that's too good to be true. Or is it?

But if the Christian God exists, then there are senses in which it would be possible to visit Perelandra. Lewis's Perelandra existed in God's mind before it ever existed in Lewis's mind. Human imagination is parasitic on God's imagination. There's nothing we think that God hasn't thought before. Indeed, Lewis's Perelandra is a pale imitation of God's minutely detailed idea.

Given God's omniscience and omnipotence, it's possible for God to create Perelandra in a parallel universe. God can fill in all the practical necessities to make it feasible and hospitable.

Or God could cause us to experience an immersive simulation of Perelandra. Our experience of virtual Perelandra would be phenomenologically indistinguishable from a physical visit to a physical planet.

I'm by no means suggesting that Perelandra is real. I'm just pointing out that God could make that a reality. Christian

metaphysics makes so many things possible that are utterly impossible in a godless universe where only matter and energy exist. A bracing consideration.

Merlin in That Hideous Strength

Why does Merlin figure in **That Hideous Strength**? I've read some intricate explanations about Lewis's sources of influence (e.g. Tolkien, Charles Williams, George McDonald). I'm not a Lewis scholar, so those explanations may be correct. Of course, Lewis was a complex and impressionable thinker who sponged up many ideas from his wide and deep reading, so these are not mutually exclusive explanations.

However, it's my guess that there's a more straightforward explanation:

i) For starters, Lewis is a British fantasy writer with an antiquarian interest. That alone predisposes him to present his own creative reinterpretation of the Arthurian legend. He was spoiling for an opportunity, and **That Hideous Strength** gave him an opening.

ii) But over and above that, Merlin is a transitional figure with one foot in the old pagan order and another foot in the new Christian order. That may be appealing to Lewis, who saw an overlap between Christianity and paganism. For Lewis, "myth became fact" in Christianity. So Merlin may function as an evocative emblem of his theory regarding the relationship between history and mythology.

iii) Finally, Lewis has an aversion to technocracies. That already comes through in **Out of the Silent Planet**. And N.I.C.E. represents technocratic transhumanism.

But over and against that is something more powerful than technology: magic. That's ironic because it's older.

Primitive. A throwback to something prescientific.

So Lewis may be using the figure of Merlin to take a swipe at scientific humanism and technological triumphalism. There's something in the world more powerful than science and technology.

Out of the wardrobe

Now that we know that June Freud (née June Flewett) was the inspiration for Lucy in The Chronicles of Narnia, it's interesting to go back and read about the impression that she made on Warnie Lewis (C. S. Lewis's brother). It's like walking back out of the wardrobe into the real world:

> Tuesday 2nd January, 1945
>
> Our dear, delightful June Flewett leaves us tomorrow, after nearly two years…She is not yet eighteen, but I have met no one of any age further advanced in the Christian way of life From seven in the morning till nine at night, shut off from people of her own age, almost grudged the time for her religious duties, she has slaved at The Kilns, for a fraction 2d. an hour; I have never seen her other than gay, eager to anticipate exigent demands, never complaining, always self-accusing in the frequent crises of that dreary house. Her reaction to the meanest ingratitude was to seek its cause in her own faults. She is one of those rare people to whom one can venture to apply the word "saintly."

Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis (Harper & Row 1982) 180-81.

Flight from normality

> I am re-reading **Our Village** [by Mary Russell Mitford]: with the possible exception of Cowper, I don't know anything in the language which so vividly expressed the sheer joy there is to be got out of the little apparently trivial things of life…Any educated person can appreciate the "de luxe" scenery or weather, but it is not so easy to keep tuned up to the Mitford pitch of finding beauty in the ordinary countryside on every day of the English year. I never read this book without acquiring a keener eye for the attractions of whatever part of the country I'm living in. **Brothers and Friends: The Diaries of Major Warren Hamilton Lewis** (Harper & Row 1982), 64-65.

> After supper I began [William Morris's] the Glittering Plain; it is really unfair to both to compare Tollers [nickname for Tolkien] and Morris, as the Inklings so often do. The resemblance is quite superficial. Morris has his feet much more firmly planted on the earth than Tollers; Morris's world is an agricultural and trading one, Toller's is one in which (except for a little gardening), the soil is not the source of life, it is scenery: then again, Tollers is an inland animal, whereas you can't wander far in Morris without hearing green waves crashing on yellow sand (ibid. 206).

Warnie Lewis was the older brother of C. S. Lewis. Although he's overshadowed by his more famous, more gifted brother, he was a scholar in his own right, and a regular at meetings of the Inklings (frequented by Tolkien and Charles Williams, among others).

Here, Warnie talks about savoring and cherishing the mundane. Cultivating an appreciative eye for the good in the ordinary experiences of life. Natural, daily blessings.

Theophany

I grew up on the shores of a lake. The weather fronts were normally on-shore systems. I could see dark clouds massing and approaching from the other side of the lake. Weather systems came from the coast. From the ocean beyond.

I later moved to Charleston, S.C, which had spectacular thunderstorms.

In addition, the weather fronts were normally off-shore systems. I could see them rolling down from inland.

Sometimes, when I was heading home, I could see the storm ahead of me. Thunderbolts striking the road. I was driving right into an electrical storm. It was exhilarating!

The only question is whether I'd get back before I was overtaken by the storm.

When I read Ezekiel's description of the theophany, that's what it reminds me of. At a distance, the theophany resembled a desert storm. At least it looked more like that than anything else which Ezekiel had ever seen. That was his only frame of reference.

But as it drew closer, like entering a storm, it became apparent that this was no ordinary storm.

In his commentary, Horace Hummel compares Ezekiel's description of his first encounter with his second encounter. The description of the theophany in his second encounter is more lucid. Hummel thinks Ezekiel was too stupefied the first time around to clearly express himself.

He had never seen anything like that before. It was hard for him to distinguish details or find the words to say what he saw.

That's very realistic. If the accounts of the theophany were just hallucinatory or literary constructs, we'd expect them to be consistent. But Ezekiel had to become accustomed to the strange sight.

In **Out of the Silent Planet**, the Malacandran landscape is so alien to Ransom that he's initially disoriented. Like a blind man who just received his sight. It takes him a while to adjust. To make out shapes. To restore his sense of perspective. What is he seeing? Is it near or far?

That was Ezekiel's experience. Confronted by something so unfamiliar, otherworldly, he was almost speechless. It took him a while to process what he saw.

Milton's flawed masterpiece

1. Milton's **PARADISE LOST** is a flawed masterpiece. Now, when a great artist fails by overreaching, his work may still touch heights of genius that flawless work by a lesser artist can only dream of. But it's interesting to ask what makes a flawed masterpiece flawed?

2. Part of the problem is the unrelieved heavy style. It becomes oppressive and monotonous.

3. Then there's the subject matter. The plot operates on two levels: the fall of Adam and the fall of Lucifer. Now Gen 1-3 doesn't provide much material to scale up into an epic poem. Mind you, life in the garden could be fleshed out in some detail, but that doesn't interest Milton. He doesn't seem to have the romantic view of natural scenery. And domesticity isn't his forte. That demands the lighter touch of a lyric poet rather than an epic poet. Shakespeare or Racine could expand on the relationship of the first couple, but that's not Milton's métier.

4. Regarding the fall of Adam, Eve is the protagonist while Lucifer is the Tempter. But I doubt that's dramatically satisfying for Milton since they are so ill-matched. There's no contest. Moreover, given Milton's very masculine outlook, a woman is not an adequate protagonist to face off with Lucifer. Indeed, in the original account, the Tempter presumably picked on her because she was more vulnerable.

But even Adam would be no match for Lucifer. Whether or not Lucifer is smarter than Adam and Eve, he's certainly

more sophisticated and experienced. And he enjoys the tactical advantage that they are unsuspecting.

5. Scripture says even less about the fall of angels than the fall of Adam. However, that gives Milton free rein to fill out the backstory with his own imagination.

In heaven, the Son is the protagonist while Lucifer is the antagonist. In principle, that's more promising dramatic material. Milton gravitates to larger-then-life figures. And he can flesh it out on heroic scale in a way he can't do with life in the garden.

6. But there's a catch. And that is Milton's low Christology. There are scholarly debates about whether he was a closet Arian (or Socinian). If he was, then that generates tensions in the characterization.

7. In one respect it simplifies his task. The backstory requires him to assign a motive for the fall of angels. If the Son is merely an eminent creature, like the Archangel Michael, then the celestial civil war is ignited by sibling rivalry. Many angels resent the Father exalting the Son over them because he's not essentially their superior. So, from a dramatic standpoint, that explains their resentment.

Moreover, it provides dramatic parity between the protagonist and the antagonist. Lucifer and the Son are the same kind of beings.

8. But if that's the implicit Christological presupposition of the plot, then that comes at a twofold cost. First of all, Milton must conceal his low Christology to garner a favorable reception for his poem. Arianism was a crime. So that leaves an unresolved tension in the characterization–he can't afford to relieve the tension by laying his cards on the

table. It's unclear to the reader what exactly the Son *is*? What's his ontological relationship to the angels? Is he one of them? That would explain why they bristle at his promotion, which comes at the corollary cost of their demotion. But Milton dare not make that explicit, so the crucial psychological dynamic remains fuzzy.

9. The other dramatic toll this exacts is that if Lucifer and the Son are both creatures, both angels, then this becomes a plot trope about fraternal rivalry, where the father is guilty of favoritism. On the one hand is the good son. The dutiful, submissive, obedient son. And on the other hand is the independent son. The bad boy.

And in general, the audience finds bad boy characters more appealing than good boy characters. Good boy characters are usually a foil for bad boy characters. The good boy, the loyal son, is insipid, docile, and domesticated–while the bad boy, the rebellious son, is virile and daring.

It also means that Milton can't help having a sneaky admiration for the character of Lucifer, because Milton himself was so manly. For that reason, the characterization of the Son does not and cannot ignite his dramatic imagination in the same way as the characterization of Lucifer. So that's another point of tension. Not in terms of how the characters relate to each other, but how the poet relates to his characters.

One might object that that's too anthropomorphic, but if Milton is tacitly operating with a low Christology, then that's not anthropomorphic. Lucifer and the Son are metaphysically two of a kind.

Paradise Lost

One difficulty in reading Milton is the barrier of formality between the author and the reader. Unlike Dante or Bunyan, Milton was not the sort of open-souled writer to let down his guard and interject himself feelingly into his characters. If a reader cannot identify with the situation and characters, that is generally a failure—unless the author is trying to alienate the reader for artistic effect. So Milton's emotional detachment is a weakness. Ultimate, the author is his own quarry. There is a primitive power in The Epic of Gilgamesh that is missing in Milton's self-conscious and image-conscious epic.

By choosing the Fall as the theme of his poem, his theme, in turn, chose the basic plot and cast of characters. So at one stroke, he has made, or we might say, preempted, a number of creative decisions. To that extent, PL practically writes itself.

But that presents its own challenges. Because it commits him to a certain setting and set of characters, it thereby sets up a standard of success and failure. The action will take place in heaven, hell, and the newly-minted earth. The major characters will be the Father and the Son, Satan, Michael and other archangels, as well as Adam and Eve.

Now, his conception of hell, while unconvincing, is at least an intellectually intriguing exercise in the creative imagination. This is his most original contribution. Hell is basically space without place—a trackless void of infinitude.

However, his conception of heaven and heaven's inhabitants, as well as Eden, ransacks the annals of Greek mythology. This is not only unconvincing, but laughable as

well. It works for Dante's hell, but not for heaven. Moreover, Dante had the excuse of being Italian, so Roman mythology was a fixture of his national heritage.

And then there's Eden, which Milton sets in comparison and contrast to the old stopping grounds of Pan and Bacchus, peopled with fauns and wood nymphs, hung with golden apples and orient pearl.

In his defense, it may be said that Milton does not equate Eden with the garden of the Hesperides, but, rather, regards Eden as a Platonic archetype of Grecian and oriental legend. But his treatment raises a twofold problem. To begin with, the Bible places the Garden in real time and space by situating Eden in Mesopotamia (Gen 2:10-14). And since a major objective of a poem like PL is to flesh out the spare narrative of Scripture, it would have been fitting for Milton to seriously imagine the nature of unfallen existence in a pristine river valley.

Another thing which comes through is that Milton was no nature lover. That awaits Cowper. Now if Milton merely favored an urban over a pastoral aesthetic, then that is a matter of individual taste, and he is entitled to indulge his personal sensibilities. But in that event he should not have chosen a theme which, in turn, selects for a rustic setting, because he lacks a natural sympathy for his chosen subject. What Milton parades before his reader's eyes is not a real garden, nor even an ideal version of a real garden, but an unimaginable garden. A creative writer must imagine a world that is at least believable on its own terms, with its own laws and inner logic. There is a difference between reality and realism. Even a realistic novel stylizes the real world; and even a surreal novel can be realistic according to the possibilities inherent in the narrative framework. But

what Milton does is to mix-and-match rival worldviews. Dante is guilty of this as well, but less wittingly and more skillfully.

Then there's the problem of the major characters. Even the best of them are more admirable than lovable. The reader really doesn't care about them. The Son of God is far removed from the figure of the Gospels—simultaneously less human and less divine. A throwback to demigods.

Milton's genius was shown to better advantage in **Samson Agonistes**. The diction has a rugged, Job-like, grandeur, and the emphasis shifts from the outward pomp and spectacle of PL to penitent introspection. Milton classified it as a tragedy, but it is more in the vein of a personal tragedy wherein the downward motion is instrumental in a comic curve. For Samson's disgrace occasions grace, and his heroic death delivers his people from the Philistine threat. Samson Agonistes is, in its own way, an exemplum of God's paradoxical promise that his strength is perfected in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). (Milton's great poem furnished the libretto for one of Handel's finest oratorios, written when the composer was a blind old man—like the lead character.)

This raises the old question of whether the tragic genre is compatible with a Christian outlook. The short answer is that life is tragic for the damned, but comic for the redeemed; tragic for Absalom, but comic for David. Yet this is not to deny that the loss of Absalom is not only a loss for Absalom, but a loss for his father as well. The tradeoff is painfully real.

Put another way, the Christian outlook replaces tragedy with martyrology. The Apocalypse is the first Christian

martyrology, and that tradition is carried on in such works as Foxe's Book of Martyrs. A martyr is not a victim of his fate or tragic flaw, but a hero who wins by losing. That paradox lies at the heart of the Christian vision. Christ is the proto-martyr.

Racine

Racine's dim view of natural passion is often attributed to his Jansenist education. Perhaps so. But I think court life would have been a more than sufficient tutor. Where his Jansenism more likely comes into play is not with the vices, but the virtues, of his various characters. There is a nobility to his portrayal of such Biblical figures as Esther and Jehoiada that is utterly alien to Athenian drama.

But what is more striking is the nobility of his classical heroes and heroines. It is precisely because they are situated in a classical setting that the contrast between classical drama and Racinean drama is so striking. In MITHRIDATES, the lovers (Monime, Xiphares), and even the jealous, conflicted king (Mithridates), act with a degree of charity and self-denial that is the issue of a distinctly Christian conscience. The death scene and reconciliation are hard to imagine in a pre-Christian play.

The Tempest

According to Frances Yates, the Renaissance historian, the Tempest is a Rosicrucian allegory. (**The Occult Philosophy of the Elizabethan Age** [Routledge, 1979].) In effect, John Dee, the self-styled Magus and ill-starred advisor to Elizabeth, sat for the portrait of Prospero. And this was a flattering portrait. But Dee also sat for the unflattering portrait of Faust in Marlowe's great tragedy.

This exposes a dividing line in the Elizabethan outlook. On the one hand there was a favorable view of Renaissance magic as long as it was confined to white magic. White magic was a Hermetical hodgepodge of alchemy and cabalism. Spenser and Shakespeare side with this faction. On the other hand there was the unfavorable view. Marlowe and Jonson side with the opposing party.

Approaching this from another angle, the chivalric tradition represents the confluence of two tributaries: the Arthurian tradition and the Georgian tradition. The Georgian tradition centers on the interconnected themes of a knight, a dragon and a lady who is the common object of their rivalry. The Arthurian tradition centers on the quest for the Holy Grail. And it has a magical motif in the morally ambiguous figure of Merlin, who lies behind contrasting figures of Faust and Prospero.

The Rosicrucian legend goes back to **The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz**, anonymously penned by the Lutheran pastor, Jacob Andreae. This was, in turn, an alchemical allegory about the battle of the white mountain,

fixing the fate of the winter king and queen of Bohemia. (Cf. J. Montgomery, **Cross & Crucible** [The Hague, 1973].)

it is, indeed, very puzzling to see the way in which the battle lines were drawn. On the one hand you have pious churchmen like Spenser and Andreae throwing their support behind this witches brew of alchemy and Hermetic mumbo-jumbo. (Note the evolution of the Redcrosse Knight into Christian Rosencreutz.) On the other hand, you have a raging sodomite like Marlowe staking out a more orthodox position in opposition to the occult.

The Rosicrucian motif lingers on in modern fiction. In Bulwer-Lytton's novel, **Zanoni** resigns his life and immortality for the love of a woman (Viola), just as Prospero resigns his magic powers for the sake of love (the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand); And in Umberto Eco's newest novel (**Foucault's Pendulum**), an underground Rosicrucian cult lies at the bottom of Byzantine intrigue and global conspiracy theories.

Another question which the Bard raises for the modern writer is whether we've turned the corner on that sort of eloquence. Contemporary taste favors life-like speech, and since no one speaks with Shakespearean eloquence, this rhetorical register seems to be hopelessly unconvincing.

But even though there is some truth to this, the choice is not all that clear-cut. Although Shakespearean eloquence is unrepresentative of how people speak, it is not unrepresentative of how they feel or how they would wish to speak if only they had that silver-tongued facility. Indeed, the appeal of eloquent writers such as Ruskin, Bunyan, Shakespeare, Santayana—or even Bradbury—lies

in their power to express the otherwise inarticulate moods and emotions of the ordinary reader. Our passions are often larger than our words. And we seek out writers who can give tongue to our intense, but ineffable yearnings and impressions. So Shakespeare is both more and less realistic, depending on the level of comparison. Even Milton's stilted diction long had a large and popular following because so many readers would just love to cut loose in such a swashbuckling style, but since they are unable to do so, this is the next best thing.

A sign (word, sound, image) is a medium, but more than a medium, of the significate. More than transparent, but less than opaque. Ideally, it is akin to stained-glass instead of plain glass. It conveys and colors the natural light. But when the sign becomes the object rather than the medium, it ceases to be window, and becomes a wall or mural.

The Divine comedy

Dante represents the high water mark of Christian fiction. He succeeds at several levels. In terms of sheer story-telling, the narrative art has never advanced beyond the Odyssey. But the next challenge is if a storyteller can go beyond the recreational value to say something about the meaning of life, and whether he can do so without losing the story in the moralizing. Some people buy a watch as a piece of fine jewelry, but others buy a watch to tell the time. Some of us want more from a story than a flashy case or glittery wristband. Homer is a marvelous ornament to the art of storytelling, but he doesn't tell us what time it is.

Dante pulls this off in three basic ways: symbolic geography, parallel narrative, and literary allusion. The idea that geography might be, or be used as, an emblem of spiritual truth goes back to the Bible, where the literal landscape of redemption is also a figure and prefigurement of the Gospel. And in the Fourth Gospel, earthly things, from the mundane, like Jacob's well, to the miraculous, like the well of Siloam, are signs of heavenly verities.

So the use of natural metaphors as spiritual metaphors is nothing new. Like the Bible, Dante systematizes this principle by turning the entire setting into one vast spiritual simile. And in so doing, the moral is not tacked onto the story; nor does it interrupt the flow of the story; rather, the setting in itself is instrumental in enforcing the moral.

There is, though, a difference between natural and scientific metaphors. Natural metaphors are perennial, but scientific metaphors have a shelf-life. And this exposes an unforeseen weakness in Dante, for his obsolete science overtaxes the willing suspension of belief. A modern reader can no longer

accept the narrative at the intended level of extra-narrative import.

Defenders of Dante minimize this difficulty by claiming that the Commedia is an allegory, and can, therefore, be read at that level without any loss of relevance. But that strikes me as special pleading. To begin with, Dante elsewhere tells us that the Commedia was inspired by some of his mystical experiences. In that event, it is not a work of pure fiction, but rooted in experience. Therefore, the issue of realism cannot be mooted by a facile appeal to the allegorical genre.

Moreover, a medieval allegory follows the fourfold hermeneutic of medieval exegesis, in which the allegorical plane was secondary to the literal level; there is no doubt that Dante subscribed to Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic astronomy, and there were learned disquisitions on the terrestrial location of Hell and Purgatory. Although Dante no doubt allows himself a measure of artistic license, filling in the gaps with a wonderful imagination, his genre is more akin to a didactic historical novel than an allegory. To classify it as allegory, pure and simple, is anachronistic, and confuses the worldview of the author with the worldview of the modern reader.

If, therefore, you sever the allegory from the metaphysical underpinnings of Thomism, that renders the poem incredible within its own frame of reference. For unlike a fantasy novel, which can stand on its own, the Commedia does stake its tent in the turf of terra firma.

This is more in the way of a limitation rather than criticism. Like all of us, Dante was a child of his times, and we must make allowance for his historical position. But it is best to stick with natural metaphors rather than gamble on science

—unless a scientific metaphor is intentionally figurative, and nothing more, like our modern talk of epicyles.

Dante's use of literary allusion, while an excellent way of lending subtextual depth without cluttering the storyline, is problematic in execution, for Dante employs allusion as a historicizing device by trying to secure a footing for every narrative step in some scrap of Ovid or Virgil or Statius. One of the great legacies of the Reformation was a concern for historical authenticity. Patristic and medieval typology regarded mythical figures such as Apollo, Orpheus, Theseus and Hercules as prefigurements of Christ. Patristic apologetics regarded Ovid, Virgil and Plato as preparatory for the Gospel. For Dante, moreover, as a Roman Catholic and Italian patriot, the Church of Rome was successor to the Roman Empire, so that her legitimacy is secured by the scaffolding of Romulus and Remus, Aeneas and Augustus. And let us never forget that the False Decretals were instrumental in the primacy of Rome. Tug on a single string and apostolic succession begins to unravel like a kitten pawing a ball of yarn.

It is naturally difficult for the modern reader to enter into this mindset. If the intent is to make the story more credible, the effect is to make it more incredible. If you must constantly make allowances for an author, you cannot suspend belief. The illusion is dispelled at every turn.

Literary allusions should be used, not as a historicizing device, but to invest the text with an open-textured resonance. An allusion has the same associative power as a metaphor. The one is literary, the other visual, but both multiply meaning with economical grace.

The fact is that Dante can create his own science when he wants to, without recourse to tradition—and his pure

projections are more compelling than his Medieval extrapolations. His speculations about different time-zones and constellations from the antipode of Purgatory, opposite Jerusalem, may well qualify him as the first SF writer. He should trust to his creative instincts more often.

As to the Commedia's symmetrical design, this is both a point of strength and weakness. Like a metaphor, plucking one string sets the others vibrating in sympathetic association. This contributes greatly to the multidimensional meaning of the Commedia without overloading the storyline.

Heraclitus had said that the way down is the way up. One nifty trick of Dante's cosmology is to turn this nonsensical statement into a sensible image, for the descending and ascending motions, as the pilgrim passes through hell, purgatory, and paradise, move in the same direction. This also dovetails with the mystical motion in which the way to God, the way to scale Jacob's ladder and Mt Carmel, the way of reaching the light—is by way of the valley, the via negativa, the dark night of the soul. And here we see that mysticism is incipient with universalism.

But, for a modern reader, the web of weave and cross-weave is strung on the threadbare strands of an antiquated science. Since we don't believe that the sensible world is that symmetrical, it is something of an irritant, for we cannot live in Dante's world or bring it into our own.

There were ways of playing on parallels without recourse to medieval science. Scholastic theologians drew a distinction between God's absolute and ordinate power, and theologians long speculated on the possibility of an Incarnation irrespective of the Fall. So there were resources resident in Dante's theological system that could generate

internal parallels without recourse to ragtag science and the epics of a bygone era.

Numerology is another unifying device and source of symbolic architecture. The problem is not that Dante does too little with this, but rather too much. Dante has a geometric eye, but numerology is generally more plausible when applied to time rather than space. Nature is inwoven with periodic motions. And we have refined the natural metric of time through music, the clock, and the calendar. There is also a symmetry of space in nature, but this is less generally evident to the naked eye.

A fringe-benefit of Dante's narrative viewpoint is that he eliminates the extra-narrative narrator. For he has made himself the main character, and tells the story in the first person. This marks a technical advance in storytelling, for the narrator is now integrated into the narrative, rather than an off-stage voice shouting lines to the actors. Although we've learned to overlook the prompter, the author ought to do the pretending for the reader, and not the reader for the author.

The crowning flaw is that Dante presents a subversively unappetizing prospect of glory. He makes the Beatific Vision the chief end of man, not because he's drawn to it, but because he's told to. This was an article of faith.

And this wraithlike beatitude besets the entire design of the Commedia, because its Platonizing aesthetic progressively separates the universal from the particular as we rise from the gravity well of hell to weightless spheres of light. For Dante, glorification involves the gradual shedding of the earthly and the concrete. But if beauty is, at least for the human imagination, inseparable from the earthly instance, then this thinning out of all sensible attributes threatens to

blanch the beauty out of heaven as we go from the cloudy chiaroscuro of hell through the finer shades of light in the lower heavens to the upper realms of pure white light. One of the difficulties in trying to define beauty is that we ordinarily begin with paradigm-cases, and then endeavor to abstract the universal from the particular. But in attempting to generalize about beauty, we lose the very thing we seek, for beauty lies at the crossroads of the universal in the particular, and not in one or the other alone.

As much as we admire Dante's technical feat in doing so much with so little, many readers find the atmosphere of Paradise too rarefied for more than a brief visit. Our lungs gasp for oxygen in the ether-thin air. We first feel our flesh, and then our senses, and then our inner sense, slipping away as we rush upwards with Dante to occupy the blank expanses of eternity. In order to achieve escape velocity, the astronaut loses his substance and soul. Asphyxia is the price of ataraxia.

This spectral, insensible spirituality is owing, in large part, to a common confusion of the intermediate state with the final state. The resurrection of the just never figured in the popular view. This is a widespread error, by no means limited to Dante. But the upshot is to offer a view of heaven which even the Catholic reader can do no more than assent to, but never warm to. Duty instead of affection.

Although there are a handful of quotable one-liners in Dante, he is not a wordsmith on the order of Shakespeare or even many lesser poets. One wonders why this is. Perhaps this was not given to Dante. But there are other explanations.

Because everything sounds gorgeous in Italian, it may be more difficult to say something so beautiful that it stands

out. In a rose garden, each rose must compete with every other, whereas a rose among thorns may be less lovely of itself, but the more so in contrast. So the beauty of his verse owes less to his acute ear than it does to the generic musicality of the Italian tongue.

Beyond that, much of what makes a phrase memorable and quotable is some arresting image or metaphor. And a metaphor is an allegory in miniature. But where the entire work is allegorical, a figure-laden style would obscure the figural arc of the whole by introducing a tumble and jumble of mixed metaphors. Hence, it may be that Dante chose to sacrifice many individual images in order to conserve the envisioned journey as a whole.

The Song of Roland

The Song of Roland is the greatest chanson de geste. It is in the tradition of war epics like the Iliad. The Iliad is the greatest war epic, but the Christian adaptation, such as we find in Beowulf and the Song of Roland, converts the genre to the Pauline theme of the miles Christi or soldier of Christ. It also ties into to the cult of martyrdom we find in the Book of Revelation, as well as the image of Christ as the warrior-king and exemplar of the Christian Crusader. Another Homeric carry-over is the role of divine dreams and superhuman agents who intervene to aid a hero in distress. Although the poem is set in the time of Charlemagne, the narrative is brightly colored by the fervor of the First Crusade.

There are, in a chivalric romance, similarities and differences with both the Classical and Biblical exemplars. With its pre-Constantinian viewpoint, the NT imagery is figurative rather than literal. And in the NT, a martyr was not a combatant. Yet it also has its background in the conventions of OT holy war.

The Song of Roland suffers in some measure from the defects of medieval piety. But that makes it interesting, because the reader (unless he's a traditional Catholic) is stepping into an alien outlook.

There are another couple of differences between the Iliad and the SR. Although a code of honor and fear of shame is an element in both the epic hero and the Christian knight, the latter is not motivated entirely by gaining fame or losing face. It is not all about individual achievement. (In this respect, Beowulf has more in common with the Classical tradition.) He is fighting for a larger cause. There is a

corporate dimension in the SR which is missing from the Iliad—an element of camaraderie in contrast to the proud loner of the Classical genre. Although there is a measure of hero worship in the SR, the Crusader is not only out to make a name for himself, but is fighting in the name of Christ. Simply put, duty has taken the place of honor.

And this, in turn, adds a depth of friendship to the French epic that you will never find in Homer. For example, Olivier is so blinded by blood loss that he mistakes Roland for the enemy and strikes him with his sword. The blow leaves Roland unharmed. Because they'd had a falling out a little before, Roland is unsure if Olivier intended to strike him down. Yet Roland does not retaliate, but instead he gently questions his friend and comrade. Olivier seeks his friend's forgiveness, which Roland readily grants. And when Olivier dies soon after, Roland exclaims that "since you are dead, it saddens me to live."
Although Achilles and Patroclus are buddies too, the hysterical and ostentatious lamentations of Achilles are superficial compared with the gentle affection and soft-spoken bond between Roland and Olivier.

Bunyan

Bunyan is so fearful of subjecting his readers to the fate of Lot's wife that he dare not show them the cities on the plain, lest he and they should suffer the same Medusian fate.

So this creates a certain narrative tension. If no man having put his hand to the plow and sneaking a backward glance is fit for the kingdom, then Bunyan can only show the reader where he is headed, but not how he got there. And, of course, Bunyan cannot maintain that viewpoint consistently, for we would never see the pilgrimage, but only the destination. Now, Bunyan can try to get around this by allegorizing the world, the flesh and the devil, but, of course, the average reader is not tempted by the symbols, but by what they symbolize. What the reader does not derive from Bunyan is any palpable sense of loss, of what was left behind, of why it should be such a wrenching experience to tear oneself away from the city of destruction.

And this is a real challenge for Christian fiction, be it by a novelist or poet, playwright, screenwriter or short storyteller. How do we write about temptation without tempting the reader? How do we avoid voyeurism and complicity without contriving a doll house world in which no reader either lives or so desires?

A Christian pilgrim has a duty to maintain the trail for those that come after—to weed it, to repair a fallen guidepost, to clear away moss on the landmarks, to keep it from becoming overgrown. We are on a journey, but we must stop, from time to time, to keep the trail open for the benefit of those that follow in our footsteps.

That, of course, is the reason why Bunyan wrote the story in the first place—as a travel guide for future pilgrims. But even though the author is a travel guide, the character of Christian is not. And in his haste to make it into Immanuel's Land without a pause or backward glance, there is the unwitting and irresponsible suggestion that we should only concern ourselves with our own soul's salvation, and not with the welfare of those that must someday trod the same path. But a good guide will sometimes tarry, or even backtrack, to lead some stragglers up the trail. Every delay is not a default.

The character of Christian presents a striking contrast to the traits of the epic hero. To go from Gilgamesh, Perseus, Theseus, Odysseus, Diomedes, Achilles and the like to Christian marks a seismic shift in moral theology. They triumph by dint of their resourceful self-reliance, but Christian triumphs by grace and faith. True to his name, Great-heart is another one of the supreme characters of world literature, and impossible apart from the revelation of the Gospel.

Lord of the Rings

Tolkien appeals to much the same fan base as C. S. Lewis, and in some circles his popularity has outstripped Lewis—partly because he offers a more unified artistic vision than Lewis, and partly due to Catholic chauvinism. He's the Catholic counterpart to Lewis.

Although it is vastly overrated, LOTR has certain virtues. In a feminist age, the male camaraderie is a salutary counterbalance. (The cinematic adaptation is marred by the gratuitous and ever-incredible intrusion of the kickboxing superheroine.) And the storyline appeals to our boyish sense of adventure. The fact that the enchanted forest begins to wither away after the ring of power is destroyed illustrates the theodicean trade-off between a lesser and a greater good.

The fantasy genre is, in a way, more realistic than the SF genre, for a fantasy writer can create his own world with his own rules, whereas SF must often bend or break the rules to say what he wants to say. At the same time, that places a great burden of creativity on the back of the fantasy writer, for it is no easy task to fabricate a self-contained world. And at this level, Tolkien may succeed as well as anyone since Dante. But how we judge this achievement depends on a couple of considerations.

To begin with, there’s the question of how appealing or interesting we find the result. And this is, of course, a matter of personal taste. Speaking for myself, I’d rather spend a day on Perelandra or Pontoppidan than a month in Middle Earth.

LOTR is often classified as a specimen of the quest genre, but it’s more in the vein of an anti-quest, for the journey is not about finding something, but getting rid of some-thing—disposing of an unwelcome discovery rather than making a discovery.

But what is a potential point of strength exposes a reflexive weakness. The grander the canvass, the more space you have to fill, and Tolkien is a man with a very big canvass and very small ideas. There is no breadth of insight to match his breath of sight. LOTR is a thousand pages long—and feels it every step of the way. Tolkien’s prose has all the grace of a drunken centipede.

Tolkien has a habit of sparking our initial interest with potentially intriguing characters, but failing to then whet our aroused curiosity. Goldberry, Gandalf, Sauron, Saruman and Treebeard all ought to have a fascinating tale to tell of all they’ve seen in their long and varied lives. Yet Tolkien’s vivid imagination lies as always on the sensible surface of things.

Cordwainer Smith

Paul Linebarger (pseudonym: Cordwainer Smith) was the grandson of an Anglican clergyman, although he spent his formative years in Europe and Asia. Later in life he returned to the Anglican fold. Because of Linebarger's polyglot, cosmopolitan upbringing and career in counter-intelligence, he brings to his literary work a social sophistication and intricacy quite unlike the standard SF fare. Linebarger is fairly adept as both a portrait painter and landscape painter, for his characters are full of human interest while his settings are often lyrical and unforgettable. Added to that is his wit, fertile imagination, feel for beauty, and stylish prose, and you have what is, in principle, an exceptionally complete novelist. But even if he'd lived longer, one wonders if he had the ruthless discipline and architectonic mastery to forge such an encyclopedic array of materials into a coherent storyline.

Although Linebarger never got around to stringing his story beads onto a chronological chain, the basic sequence seems to be as follows: the first space age ended in a world war, returning civilization to the dark ages. This was succeeded by the Instrumentality of Mankind, which ripened into a utopian technocracy, and included a genetic reengineering program that raised animals to the status of quasi-human drones. But the ensuing Pleasure Revolution proved to be a cultural cul-de-sac, and so the Instrumentality was succeeded by the Rediscovery of Man, which tried to inject an element of risk into human existence. And that, in turn, was followed by the Holy Insurgency, which is an underground movement, partly inspired by the underpeople (humanized animals), and represents a revival of the old time religion (Christianity). (James Jordan identifies a

number of Christian motifs in Linebarger's opus. Cf. "Christianity in the Science Fiction of 'Cordwainer Smith,'" **Contra Mundum 2** [Winter, 1992].)

This schema exploits both the utopian and dystopian threads of the SF tradition. And as an exercise of the Christian imagination, it holds great promise, for it presents a social critique of secular technocracy. But because he died in his early fifties, the promise was not fully kept.

Because Linebarger returned to the Church late in life, he had to make up for lost time, which resulted in rather hasty and heavy-handed rush-job as he tries to retrofit his metanarrative to describe a Christian arc. The effort to play catch-up mars his mature work.

Types of fiction

Human beings love stories. Human beings love fiction. I think a basic reason for that is because individual human experience is extremely provincial. You can only live in one place at a time. You can only live in one timeframe. So stories enable us to vicariously expand our range of individual experience.

There are roughly two kinds of stories: factual and fictional. We can also subdivide the fictional category. Many fictional stories could parallel factual stories. Many stories deal with the kinds of people, situations, and events that happen in real life.

That raises the question of why novelists, playwrights, and moviemakers so often prefer fictional stories even though there are real life stories that illustrate the same things. I think that's largely due to convenience and flexibility. In fiction you can arbitrarily select and combine the elements so that your characters say and do exactly what you wish, when and where you wish they to do so. That gives a creative artist great freedom. In real life, the variables can't be manipulated that way.

It also reflects the fact that our knowledge of true stories is quite limited, whereas imagination is much more expansive, so that fictional stories doesn't require the same amount of knowledge as, say, a historical film or novel.

Speaking for myself, I find dramas based on "a true story" more emotionally satisfying than imaginary stories. Knowing that it happened to real people.

On the other hand, there are fictional stories that couldn't happen in real life. Take stories about time travel, interstellar travel, a parallel universe, or a fantasy world, viz. **Perelandra**, **The Tempest**, vampires, aliens, talking animals.

In some cases, these might be naturally impossible, although there could be a Perelandra theme park. An artificial setting. In other cases, they might be naturally or physically possible, but we lack the technology to experience that.

In addition, unrealistic fiction is appealing because it's how we wish things would happen sometimes. Comedies often trade on that appeal.

If, however, God has created a multiverse, then many stories that are fictional in our universe have a realistic counterpart in a parallel universe. Fiction ultimately originates in God's imagination. There's nothing we imagine that God didn't imagine first.

Scripture and commentary

A stock objection to sola Scriptura goes like this: an infallible text demands an infallible interpreter.

I think some Protestant apologists and theologians overemphasize the perspicuity of Scripture. They think that's necessary to justify the break with Rome. I disagree. There are lots of reasons not to be Roman Catholic.

But going back to the original objection, the basic idea is that Scripture is inadequate without an inspired commentary. Yet that depends in part on God's aims and intentions.

As a rule, an author is the first person you'd ask about the meaning of something he wrote. A director is the first person you'd ask about a scene in his movie. And in fact when directors are interviewed, they're asked questions about what something in one of their movies meant. And readers write living authors about the meaning of something in one of their books.

But what's striking is that directors and fiction writers don't generally volunteer their interpretations of their own work. Directors don't write reviews of their own movies. Fiction writers don't compose commentaries on their novels, short-stories, or plays.

That's despite the fact that they are uniquely qualified to explain what they had in mind. So why don't directors and fiction writers routinely include companion volumes providing a detailed interpretation of their own work?

The obvious reason, I think, is that they don't wish to spoil it for viewers or readers. They want each reader or viewer to form his own unmediated impressions. To discover for himself what he thinks it means.

If they think an influential film critic or literary critic is way off base, they may interpose, but usually they keep their own counsel. They may review books and movies by other creative artists, but not their own.

Here's another way to approach the same issue: I generally read movie reviews after I saw a movie rather than before I saw a movie. If I like a movie, I may be curious about comparing my impressions of the movie with Roger Ebert or Pauline Kael.

However, I don't want their impressions to prejudge my own impressions. I don't want to filter my experience through their lens. I want to see it first before I see it through their eyes. To see it with fresh eyes, to have the immediacy of that initial experience. To see it for the first time, without any interpretive filter beyond what I bring to the movie or story. Beyond my general background.

It's not primarily a question of plot spoilers and losing the element of surprise because I know what to expect–if I read the review first. Rather, it's about a one-on-one encounter between the observer and the movie or story. There's something special and unrepeatable about that.

And I think that's a reason why God didn't anoint someone to provide a running commentary on the Bible. That short-circuits the direct encounter between text and reader. This is not to deny the value or necessity of commentaries, but that shouldn't be used to circumvent the act of discovery. To find out for himself what it means. In some cases the

reader will misinterpret Scripture, but that's a necessary tradeoff.

Scripture isn't merely informative but transformative. It has to work on you. Personal struggle is required. Someone else can't do that for you, on your behalf and in your place. That can't be subcontracted to a second-party.

God in the coma

Classical theists believe God subsists outside of time and space. So how does God interface with embodied, timebound agents? Take a comparison: suppose a young man suffers severe brain damage from a traffic accident. He's in a coma.

His mind is still intact. He can dream, remember, imagine, but he's cut off from the outside world. He can't register what people say to him, he can't register when they stroke his hair or hold his hand. He's sealed away in his own mind. (I'm not saying if that's actually true for comatose patients. It's just a thought-experiment.)

But suppose his best friend is a telepath. Up until now his best friend didn't have to tap into telepathy to communicate with the comatose patient. But they have many shared memories of stuff they did together. Hiking. Jet-skiing. Boating up and down a nearby river. And so on.

The best friend is able to bypass the brain damage and broken sensory relays to contact the comatose patient directly. When the comatose patient dreams, his best friend inserts himself into the dream. They enjoy the same kind of fellowship they did before the accident. The telepath needn't be physically present to be psychologically present. And psychological presence can simulate the five senses.

Ship in a bottle

Many years ago, atheist Bernard Williams wrote a celebrated essay on the tedium of immortality. He argued that immortality would be an interminable bore.

No doubt some Christians wonder the same thing. We take it on faith that eternal life won't become a crashing bore, but it's hard to imagine how we'll pass the time.

I'll discuss this from an apologetic standpoint. Admittedly, what I say will be speculative, but the objection is speculative. Moreover, Christian metaphysics has nearly limitless metaphysical resources. There's almost nothing an omnipotent God can't do. And God's imagination is immeasurably vaster than ours. So, if anything, the danger is to underestimate the live possibilities, not overestimate the live possibilities.

i) In this life we only skim the surface. There are lots of places it would be interesting to see, but due to the brevity of life, we only get to see a tiny sampling.

There is, moreover, a difference between visiting a place and staying there long enough to really get the feel of the place.

ii) In addition, there are many fascinating sites and events in the past that we never had a chance to see because we didn't live at that particular time. In this life, human existence is severely restricted by time as well as space.

Some natural wonders exist in the past, but not the present. Take a supernova. Or a spectacular waterfall which, due to erosion, no longer exists.

I'm not suggesting that in the world to come, the saints could physically travel back in time. But God could enable us to experience the past. An immersive experience. As if we were actually there.

iii) Same thing for space exploration.

iv) Same thing for parallel worlds.

In principle, there are literally an infinite number of interesting things which the saints could do. Things to keep you occupied forever.

v) However, let's approach this issue from the opposite perspective. One of the regrets we experience in life is that we can't repeat the past. We can never experience the same event more than once.

For instance, there are parents who lament the fact that their children grew up too fast. Likewise, there may be particular days we fondly remember. It would be fun to repeat them.

Even if we can repeatedly do that kind of thing, we can never repeat that exact experience. And even if we can repeat that kind of thing, the element of surprise is lost. It's no longer a discovery.

As you age, there are fewer pleasant surprises. You know what to expect.

That can be good in a different way. We look forward to some things precisely because they're familiar. Predictable. Expectation and surprise can both be distinctive goods, but they are mutually exclusive.

There's a paradox about hearing your favorite musical numbers. Because these are your favorites, you'd like to hear them more often, but the more often you hear them, the less you enjoy them. We get tired of hearing the same piece of music. The charm wears off. So we have to space it out.

There's an episode in *Millennium* ("A Room with No View") where captives are subjected to the very same song. "Love is blue" plays on a loop-tape. As soon as it ends, it starts right over again–ever few minutes–hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month.

That alone is enough to drive you bonkers. Even if you made your escape, you'd still hear it in your head. Any silence would be filled by that tune playing in your head. You'd have to play other music to counter it.

In his old age, my great-grandfather moved in with my dad's parents. My grandmother used to bring him books from the library. I think they were murder mysteries. Maybe by the same author.

Problem is, the local library had a very limited supply of murder mysteries. So her solution was to rotate the same dozen books. He'd read through the same dozen books in the same order, then start over again.

Because he was forgetful at that age, he never quite caught onto the fact that he had done this before. For him, rereading the same murder mystery for the fifth time was just like reading it for the very first time. Just as intriguing. Just as surprising.

vi) Apropos (v), suppose, for the sake of argument, that you'd find the first 500 years of the afterlife sheer bliss, but after that it would begin to pall. It would't be possible to sustain the same level of interest indefinitely.

In that event, suppose that God gave you a blissful 500-year experience which he repeated every 500 years. At the end of 500 years, you went to bed, forgot it all, and woke up the next morning 500 years earlier. Even if you did it a billion times, it would be new to you because you didn't remember having done it before.

I'm reminded of an episode in *Star Trek: TNG* ("Ship in a Bottle"):

TROI: You mean he never knew he hadn't left the holodeck?
PICARD: In fact, the programme is continuing even now inside that cube.
CRUSHER: A miniature holodeck?
DATA: In a way, Doctor. However, there is no physicality. The programme is continuous but only within the computer's circuitry.
BARCLAY: As far as Moriarty and the Countess know, they're half way to Meles Two by now. This enhancement module contains enough active memory to provide them experiences for a lifetime.
PICARD: They will live their lives and never know any difference.
TROI: In a sense, you did give Moriarty what he wanted.
PICARD: In a sense. But who knows? Our reality may be very much like theirs. All this might be just be an elaborate simulation running inside a little device sitting on someone's table.

In principle, you could push the rewind button, and they'd experience the same thing all over again, never knowing the difference.

Dust motes from heaven

A sketchy Christian argument for high art might go like this: We should save the best for the best. We should reserve the best art, music, architecture, poetry, &c. for what's most important. That's a way to remind ourselves of what is truly significant. Insofar as religion is intrinsically the most important thing in life, and the thing that lends value to everything else, insofar as religion is the good that makes everything else good that is good, we should lavish some of our greatest talent on Christian expression. Ruskin lost his love of nature after he lost his faith. When he no longer saw the nature world through the eyes of faith, it lost that hierophanic dimension.

Now, I don't necessarily mean in the narrow sense of worship or God directly. The principle includes that, but is broader. Insofar as religion consecrates life in general, we are warranted in lavishing some of our best our talent on other things as well. Take a Christian filmmaker whose movies reflect a Christian worldview. They aren't generally set in church, although there might be scenes of worship. He can bring a Christian touch to everyday life. As a rule, we experience God through the medium of what he has made.

But to treat everything alike flattens and trivializes what is most important. Many things are ephemeral or inconsequential.

There's still a place for the plain style. There's a beauty and nobility distinctive to simplicity as well as a beauty and nobility distinctive to complexity.

Too much high art runs the risk of artificiality, where it becomes too far removed from normal experience. Likewise, there's the danger–often a reality–of substituting aesthetics for sanctity. Moreover, great art (or good art) shouldn't be confused with ostentation. But it's needful to have something higher for mind and heart to aspire to, which lifts us out of the drudgery and humdrum–not to mention ugliness–of ordinary life. So it's a question of balance. Like climbing a mountain for the view. Not necessarily the best place to live year round, but life needs peaks as well as plains.

God is found in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary. Sometimes what we find mundane or heavenly is perceptual. It involves, not so much a change in our surroundings, but a change in us; a change in how we view our surroundings. To take one example:

> One mid-afternoon when I was twenty-four years old, I walked by my apartment window, which framed a garden in the cemetery next door. I noticed that the scene, which I had looked at often enough to pay no more attention, was somehow magically transfigured. Everything was self-shining as my eyes saw not the surface of things but through them. The trees and tulips were colored jewels, the air a clear crystal, the boulders (in the words of Ezekiel) stones of fire. The whole multicolored bliss was a sea of glass, each object a strained-glass window. A preternatural brilliance, a slowly breathing radiance, intense yet painless, the essence of beauty, suffused everything; and a thought arose in my mind: the expulsion from Eden was only a dimming of vision; we are even yet in paradise. D. Allison, **The Luminous Dusk**, 49.

In retrospect

As a Christian, I like to periodically revisit certain places after a long absence. I'm returning to the same place, but in another sense, it's not the same. Comparing past and present, the same place acquires new meaning with the passage of time. As we age, we have more sense of God's providence in our lives, for we have more life to compare past and present. We're further into the narrative arc of God's story for our lives. The hidden wisdom of God's purpose in our lives becomes more evident with the passage of time. What seemed bad at the time is better in retrospect. What seemed forgettable at the time is memorable in hindsight. What appeared to be mundane at the time becomes numinous as we look back on God's subtle guidance. There is always more to find, not by exploring different places, but by exploring the same place at different times of life.

Music, dreams, and architecture

There's an interesting contrast between music and architecture, especially in the modern era. If you want to experience a Gothic cathedral, you have to go there because it won't come to you.

But in the age of recorded music, music comes to you. You can listen to it whenever and wherever you like. When you're walking or driving.

There are some disadvantages to recorded music. There are some voices that you need to hear live in the spacious acoustic of an opera house to fully appreciate. The microphone doesn't do them justice. Studio recordings don't do them justice. Likewise, watching a performance of King's College Chapel Choir is not as enthralling as attending the service.

But there are tradeoffs. Recorded music provides higher-quality performances than you can ever expect to hear live in most localities. Moreover, you can repeat the experience–unlike a live performance.

Another example is dreams. In the real world or waking world, we must go places to see things, but when we sleep, the dreamscape comes to us. That can be good or bad depending on the dream, but it's the closest thing to magic most folks encounter in this life: like snapping your fingers to make something appear out of thin air.

For the saints, the world to come will combine the best of both worlds. Access to the best of everything at your fingertips.

Ersatz heaven

The quest genre or monomyth has a dialectical structure. On the one hand there is the urge to leave home and explore the world. Discover the unknown. An appetite for novelty.

Avatar represents this leg of the monomyth. Our sense of curiosity. Adventure.

Yet, complementing this outward impetus is a homing instinct. A desire to return to one's roots.

I once ran across a statement by Wittgenstein in which he expressed his distaste for Esperanto. He disliked the very notion of an artificial language since its newfangled words had no cultural resonance or historic associations. Bare denotations shorn of emotional connotations. Orphaned words.

Although, for some moviegoers, *Avatar* seems to represent their secularized heaven, many other people harbor a nostalgic streak. Mere space, however, spectacular or gorgeous, is emotionally unsatisfying. Too thin. Too flat.

Not space in general, but place in particular–is what they seek. A place with a sense of the past. A place that anchors them in time. Their time. Their history. Past as well as future. Familiarity as well as novelty.

The human heart is torn between opposing tendencies: wanderlust and homesickness. Only the Christian afterlife can harmonize these tendencies.

A lifetime at the movies

1. A Christian cliché is that we should interpret every notable experience through the lens of Christianity. What's the significance of that experience from a Christian perspective? Sometimes this can lead to overinterpreting experience, by trying to find something Christian in something that's not. But as a rule, it's a cliché we should live by.

Movies (inclusive of TV dramas) are good candidates. Movies are the major art form of our time. In terms of mass appeal they displaced the novel. And not just for the hoi polloi. Movies are often a serious art form for talented directors, cameramen, screenwriters, and actors. Just imagine what a genius like Dante or da Vinci could do with the film medium?

I don't mean that movies ought to replace paintings or novels. But in our own day and age, movies are the dominate artistic frame of reference.

2. Reading Pauline Kael reviews, I'm struck by her all-consuming passion for film, and how personally she takes movies. For her, it's not simply a case or watching or reviewing a movie, but a tense, suspenseful confrontation.

I suspect that's in large part because, as a secular Jew, she was wholly invested in this world. This is the only life we get. So movies were her religion. That's what she lived for.

That presents a paradoxical contrast to a Christian perspective. I think movies are both more important and less important than an atheist. On the one hand, it's just a movie. Usually fiction–although some movies have their

basis in a "true story" (as the saying goes). So it's not all-important the way it was to Kael.

On the other hand, everything is equally and ultimately worthless in a godless universe. By contrast, everything has a purpose in a Christian universe. Good or great movies have a larger, more enduring significance than the (usually secular) director intended. I view movies with more detachment than Kael, but at the same time, good things in this life have a value that carries over into eternity.

3. As I reflect on all the movies and TV dramas I've seen over the course of a lifetime (those I consciously recall), I'm struck by how few movies had an indelible impact on me. I can only think of two: *The Last Picture Show* and *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*–both of which I saw when I was coming of age. I think that's in part because that's a more impressionable time of life, and there comes a point in life where it's harder for any experience to make an indelible impression.

During our formative years, certain experiences become a reference point for the rest of our lives. That can be good or bad. Take apostates who use the folk theology of their Sunday school pedagogy as the standard of comparison for Christianity.

On the one hand there are movies and TV dramas we outgrow. At least, we ought to outgrow some of that fare. On the other hand, there are movies and TV dramas we grow into. We weren't ready for it when we were younger. It went over our heads. Or we didn't have the personal, corresponding experience to make it resonate at the time.

This goes to a dynamic, dialectical relationship between the movie and the movie viewer. What we bring to the movie.

I first saw *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* with my late parents in my childhood home. At the time, they weren't my *late* parents. Watching it now has an added layer of poignancy. A split-personalty experience where I watch it again from my current situation, but remembering and comparing that with the viewing experience of my younger self.

4. This also goes to the complicated question of what makes a movie a favorite. I might admire a movie. I might regard it as a great movie–without liking it. I think *The Last Picture Show* is a great movie of its kind, and it has some scenes I like, but it's not a film I'd recommend, exactly–and it has other scenes I dislike.

Here's one way I might gauge a favorite movie. In the *Star Trek* episode "All Our Yesterdays," the planetary inhabitants are threatened with extinction when their sun goes supernova. But they have time-travel technology, so they survive by escaping into the past.

In terms of what makes a movie a favorite, one question I ask myself is if I'd to step into the world of the film. Would I like to live at that time and place? Would the characters (played by the same actors) be enjoyable friends and neighbors to be around?

To take a comparison, I think what makes **PERELANDRA** or **THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER** so appealing is that the reader wishes he could be there. It would be fun to visit or even live there. If you're a boy reading **THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER**, it would be fun to hang out with Sam Clemens and his playmates on his uncle's farm, the mighty

Mississippi (before locks and dams domesticated the wild river), and the caves around Hannibal.

Likewise, how many readers wish they could step into the exotic world of **Perelandra** and experience the floating islands? Or the Silver Sea in **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader**?

By the same token, there are films we admire at a distance, and then there are films that evoke a yearning to go there. Certain films and novels tap into that. You may call it escapist fantasy, but many people long to escape this life and take refuge a better world. A fallen world is unsatisfying.

5. Some movies have an intriguing dramatic premise, but lack the imagination or worldview to give a satisfying answer to the question it raises. Take *Tuck Everlasting* (2002). It raises good questions about mortality and immortality, using the fountain of youth as a plot device. From a secular standpoint, mortality and immortality are both unsatisfying. And that's why the ending of the movie is a cheat. By refusing to consider the Christian alternative, the message of the film ("Don't fear death but the life unloved") isn't up to the challenge. That's trite and superficial.

6. It's puzzling why some movies are popular while similar movies, as good or better, are less popular. Why is *The Butterfly Effect* so much better-known than *Mr. Nobody*?

Some films bomb because they sail over the heads of the average viewer. Take the remake (or reboot) of *The Prisoner* (2009). The original has a cult following. One problem is if

we assess the remake by comparing it to the original, rather than judging it on its own terms, as an independent reinterpretation of the same dramatic premise.

Although the reboot lacks the verve and clarity of the original, the studied ambiguity makes it more profound. Like a mystery novel, the viewer slowly discovers the truth behind the illusion. But it overtaxes the attention span of impatient viewers. It's too subtle, too cerebral, for the average viewer.

Tristan & Isolde (2006) is another example of a film that's too good for its audience. Too classy and highbrow. No competition for a schlock-fest like Twilight franchise or The Hunger Games franchise. *In This House of Brede* is even more of a connoisseur film. There are lots of moviegoers who have no taste for truly grown-up fare.

7. Some films are perfect from start to finish. Take *House of Flying Daggers*.

But others are memorable for particular scenes, or the physical setting. Take the starkly isolated house in *Giant* (1956), exposed and vulnerable on the windswept plain, with the mountain range on the horizon.

There's also a nice scene between Dean and Taylor in his house. In general, his performance is mannered. And Taylor had some bad luck with costars. In one film, her costar (Newman) is a straight actor who plays a closeted queer character while in two other films her costars are queer actors (Hudson, Clift) who play straight characters. By contrast, there's natural sexual magnetism between Dean and Taylor.

Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* has some arresting scenes, but I dislike the propagandistic quality of the film. The opening scene in *Mulholland Drive*, with its tragic fateful ambience, is the highpoint of the movie. The coda to *Tinker, Tailer, Soldier, Spy*–a melancholic setting of the Nunc Dimittis, with the innocent timbre of the tremble soloist–lingers in the mind.

Into the Wild has some memorable scenes: Christopher paddling down the Colorado River. A deceptively optimistic scene with Eddie Vedder's "No Ceiling" playing in the background. A desperate telephone call in which an old man is trying to talk his way back into the graces of his estranged wife. He's burned through too many lost opportunities. He can never come home.

8. If you think about it, there's a foreboding sensation when you watch an older movie in which all the actors are now deceased. From a secular standpoint, all that's left of the once living, feeling, passionate, embodied agents is a digital simulacrum, two steps removed from the real person. A celluloid record or analogy recording, remastered.

All our yesterdays

There was an episode of the classic Trek series ("All Our Yesterdays") in which humanoids on a planet threatened by a supernova use their technology to escape into the past. This episode glosses over the paradoxes of time travel. But that aside, it raises some provocative issues.

If you had no future, if the present were soon to be uninhabitable, such that your only option was to stake out some corner of the past, where and when would you choose to live?

For those who were blessed by a happy childhood or adolescence, many would probably return to the halcyon days their youth. Not to be young again, exactly, but to go back to that decade.

Of course, some folks could hardly wait to get childhood behind them. Leave home and never look back.

On a related note, some folks have an adventurous streak. Wanderlust. They may even feel that they were born in the wrong century. So both groups would choose some period long before they were born.

That, of course, raises the question of whether the past is better or worse than the present. Or better in some ways, but worse in others. There may be tradeoffs.

To some extent, your choice also depends on your religious persuasion. A pious Protestant would have no inclination to be born before the Protestant Reformation.

In theory, a Catholic would be happy living in any period of church history, but especially before the Photian schism or the Protestant Reformation. After all, wasn't that the golden age before all those incorrigible schismatics rent the Body of Christ?

But one wonders how many pious Catholics would really trade, say, 20C Edinburgh for 14C Edinburgh. Methinks they would choose lifestyle over piety.

Yet this raises another question as well. For the Bible-believing Christian has a futuristic orientation. However, the future he longs for is not a future in a fallen world. But rather, another world on the far side of the fall. The new Eden. The new Jerusalem.

There is a sense, especially for aging believers, that they might as well be living on a long abandoned planet. A planet from which all other inhabitants made their escape. Like one of those dystopian futures with rusty towns and barren cities. Deserted streets. Empty homes. Unbroken silence–except for wind whistling through the vacant boulevards.

From the Christian standpoint, so many inhabitants have gone ahead. So much now lies on the other side of the cemetery. So little remains here and now.

When, in old age, a man or woman outlives his friends from childhood, outlives his parents and grandparents, outlives the members of his own generation, there's nothing quite to take their place. Yes, he can make new friends. But the bond of shared experience is absent.

The sense of growing up together. Growing old together. Passing through the same lifecycle at the same time and

place. Discovering the phases of life in tandem, with a fellow passenger or traveler, along the journey of life. All that is gone. Irrevocable and irreversible.

It’s not simply that we feel old. But the world feels old. Used up. Worn out. A spent force. A tired, exhausted world. As if the world itself had passed through the lifecycle. A planet in its final dying days, just before the supernova.

We yearn to be young again, yet not in the sense of going back to the end of the line and reliving the last 50 years. But in the ardent yearning for the world to be young again.

This world is haunted by too much history. Too much tragedy. Too much iniquity. A land polluted by generations of innocent blood. Heaving under the weight of too many memories.

"Marvel movies aren't cinema"

https://www.msn.com/en-ie/entertainment/indepth/martin-scorsese-i-said-marvel-movies-arent-cinema-let-me-explain/ar-AAJSMU9

He's a great filmmaker, so his commentary is insightful. Mind you, I just don't care for the subject matter of most of his films. An exception is *Silence*. Two quick points:

1. First of all, there's the artist who's the primary audience for his own work. He writes fiction or makes movies which reflect what he cares about, what's important to him. In the case of a great artist, that indirectly appeals to many others, although in some cases the work is for connoisseurs.

That's in contrast to stuff that's made to sell. Where the creators are thinking all along, how will this play? They begin with a target audience, and work back from there.

2. Good art or great art is idealistic. It presumes that life is worthwhile. So quality matters.

But consistent secularism cuts the nerve of artistic idealism. And if there is no immortality, and what we value is merely the instinctive byproduct of blind evolution, then everything is ephemeral. It's silly to be a serious artist. Nothing endures.

So why not go for the buck? Quick money? Forgettable films?

Good or great art is an act of faith, even if the artist isn't consciously Christian. But secularism erodes the faith

necessary to create good or great art. It replaces faith with cynicism.

At the moment I'm not taking a position on Marvel movies, but just making a general observation that's pertinent to all kinds of movies.

The Western

It's an interesting question why the Western is a defining American genre rather than, say, the Colonial American period. There's stuff in Cotton Mather that would make for a great movie or TV drama. Likewise, *The Last Mohican* is a fine film.

But somehow that period never caught on. Of course, that's in part a result of the fact that directors prefer films and TV dramas about the Old West rather than Colonial America.

Yet I think a lot of the appeal has to do with freedom from civilization. Big sky country. Simplicity.

It's a very masculine lifestyle.

Westerns also reflect a longing for the past. Something both science fiction and the Western share a discontent with the present. Westerns are past-oriented while SF is future-oriented.

Not only can people feel out of place, they can feel out of sync. That they don't belong in this time. It's too early or too late.

SF tends to cut against the grain of religion because, in SF, the "magic" is supplied by advanced technology rather than miracles, witchcraft, and spirits.

There are exceptions like Frank Herbert's *Dune* series. Of course, that's "soft" SF. And it reflects his eclectic interests.

Westerns often trade on a man-against-nature motif, where there's nothing between you and a hostile environment.

That's in contrast to a lot of SF, where humans live on space ships and futuristic cities.

In a Western setting, God is the only thing between you and death. You don't have that technological cushion.

That gives many Westerns a more primitive, elemental quality that can dovetail with religious themes.

Likewise, the desert landscape lends itself to allegory.

It has a more "biblical" appearance, like the Mideast. Vast, dry, majestic, but austere and inhospitable.

Recovering lost opportunities

Awake was a short-lived TV drama. A husband, wife, and son are involved in a fatal traffic accident. The husband survives. But when he comes out of a coma, he finds himself shifting between alternate realities. In one reality his wife survived, but his son died–while in the other reality, his son survived, but his wife died. At the same time, when he discovers in one reality is a clue to the other reality, and vice versa. He isn't sure which one is real–assuming either one is real.

In one alternate reality, the psychiatrist tries to talk him out of his illusion. The psychiatrist says this is a dangerous state to be in. he's on the brink of losing his mind. But, understandably, the man would rather cling to his illusion (if that's what it is) than have to choose between his wife and son. The "illusion" is better than the real world–assuming there's a difference.

This raises interesting questions. Atheists think the Christian worldview is illusory while Christians think the atheist worldview is illusory. Yet they're not symmetrical.

Suppose (ex hypothesi) that atheism is true? But suppose the illusion is better than reality?

Take one of those *Matrix*-like scenarios where a man in the "real world" lost everyone and everything he cares about. Lost all the things that make his life worthwhile. Suppose he's offered a chance to trade "real life" for an illusion in which he's reunited with everyone and everything he ever cared about. If you were in that situation, which would you choose? Would you choose a life of unremitting misery, or

would you disappear into the illusion? Enter the illusory world and slam the door the real world you left behind?

Atheists say Christians should face facts. Yet that reflects a residual idealism which is a relic of the Christian worldview. Atheism has no leverage.

I'm not saying that's a reason to be a Christian. Rather, that's a reason not to be an atheist.

Of course, I absolutely think Christianity is true–which brings me to the second question raised by the TV drama. The drama reflects the frustration of life in a fallen world. Where we're sometimes forced to choose between two or more things we equally need or want.

But Scripture has a restoration motif, as well as a reversal-of-fortunes motif. What if, among other things, heaven is a place where lost opportunities come true? What if that's where we find the opportunities we thought we lost in this life?

In this life we can't go back and do it over. But what if we can do it over by going forward?

There are Christians in this life who lead very disappointing lives. In this life they never get what they long for or hope for. Indeed, that's a running theme in Hebrews 11.

Some people in this life tell you they wouldn't change a thing. But others seem as if they need to run through the entire lifecycle to find out what's worth repeating, and when to take the road not taken. But by then it's too late. Life is linear. You can't circle back.

One of the frustrations of a timebound existence is that you gain insight through hindsight, yet hindsight isn't nearly as useful as foresight. Like walking backwards into the future.

But for Christians, suppose this world's lost opportunities are the next world's newfound opportunities? Mind you, sometimes the road not taken was best not taken. It's good to put some things behind us and never look back. Consider Lot's wife!

Harsh Realm

Harsh Realm was a short-lived series by Chris Carter. In my opinion, it was terribly underrated. I don't know why the show didn't catch on. Here's a snatch of dialogue between two characters in the Leviathan episode:

HOBBES: What is wrong with you?
PINOCCHIO: It doesn't matter, Hobbes. Can you get that through your head? She's vc, a virtual character. These people got no reason to help you, no moral compunction. They programmed the game, they forgot one thing: you die here, you disappear. These people know no Christian virtues. They know no God. Judgement day in Harsh Realm is when somebody points a gun at you. Ask Johnny, he'll tell you.
PINOCCHIO: Get erased here, it's over. These people got no notion of an afterlife, it's not even a concept.
HOBBES: What about the real world? Don't they believe in that?
PINOCCHIO: What good would it do them? The only world they know is Santiago's.

Harsh Realm is an excellent allegory of the atheistic worldview. No God. No hope. No soul. No cosmic justice. No afterlife. No morality. Just physical determinism and impending oblivion.

By the same token, that's an excellent allegory for the unregenerate. Like the virtual characters in Harsh Realm, the unregenerate have no conscious awareness of a larger, greater, better reality beyond the range of their five senses. They sense nothing on the other side. For them, the simulation is all there is. That makes them ruthless, desperate, and despairing.

To my knowledge, Carter is not a Christian, although he had a religious background of some sort. So it's striking that he'd create such an accurate, unsparing allegory of godless existence.

Oh the horror!

It's striking to compare that attitude with so much contemporary film and TV fare. There's an increasing proliferation of films and TV dramas involving vampires, werewolves, zombies, witches, wizards, aliens, time travel, parallel worlds, serial killers, botched supersoldiers, mutant superheroes, &c.

Perhaps it's not coincidental that at the very same time the power elite is promoting homosexuality and transexuality.

Mind you, we've always had movies and TV dramas on these themes, but I don't recall a time when there was such a concentration of movies and TV dramas on these themes.

It seems as if there's a popular flight from normality. That many American consumers of pop entertainment don't find normal human existence interesting or satisfying.

Compare this to how many Americans lived a hundred years ago. Many Americans lived in small towns or farming communities. They lived on farms, ranches, or tree-lined neighborhoods where everyone was within walking distance of everyone else.

They had large families, with several brothers and sisters. They had extended families living together or living nearby, viz. aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. They had friends they knew from the cradle to the grave.

They went hunting, fishing, and swimming. They married their high school sweetheart or the girl (or boy) next door. They played intramural sports. They went to church. They found personal fulfillment in the little things in life.

I wonder if many contemporary Americans have forgotten what it means to be normal. With nuclear families, broken homes, blended families, a transient lifestyle, I wonder if many Americans don't even remember what it's like to have a natural, normal lifestyle. Don't know what they're missing. Don't find normality satisfying because that's an alien experience to their generation. A loss of cultural memory.

There's nothing wrong with the life of the imagination. Nothing wrong with fiction. Nothing wrong with a dash of escapist recreation. But it seems as if many contemporary Americans suffer from a deeper discontent or alienation.

A good movie in a bad movie

Perhaps it's the amateur fiction writer in me, but I seem to see or look for different things in a film than professional film critics or most movergoers. Sometimes, when I'm watching generally bad movie, I think to myself, "There's a good movie trapped inside this bad movie." Of course, most bad movies are just plain bad, but there are exceptions.

Paradoxically, a bad movie with a good movie struggling to get out can be much more interesting than a conventionally good or even great movie. For instance, *Casino Royale* (2006) is a great movie of its kind. Flawless craftsmanship in terms of acting, smart dialogue, clever plot, exotic locations, and all that. So many movies suffer from shoddy indifferent craftsmanship because they're made for a quick buck, so it's refreshing to see a movie where real care went into every element of the movie. But it's a pity that the flawless execution is wasted on a Bond vehicle. At the end of the day it's just an high-end popcorn film.

Now let's compare it to *Skinwalkers* (2007), a low-budged werewolf flick. It was panned at Rotten Tomatoes. Indeed, I don't know that any major movie critic even deigned to review it. It was beneath them.

Yet it has some compelling dramatic ideas. Much more interesting than a better film like *Casino Royale*:

• A Golden Child (Timothy) who's a savior or natural-born healer

• The Golden Child was heralded by an ancient oracle

• The curative power lies in his unique blood type

• His blood can break the curse of lycanthropy

• But his life is threatened by werewolves who don't want to be cured

• Several characters sacrifice their lives to protect the Golden Child

• The film has a conspicuous number of Christian names: Adam, Caleb, Huguenot, Jonas, Rachel, Timothy

I think many people panned the movie because they're too theologically illiterate to recognize the sublimated biblical motifs. Admittedly, given the widespread animosity to Christianity, they might pan the movie if they did recognize the biblical themes.

It's striking how often secular films will appropriate and allegorize Christian theology. There are variations on the theme of humans facing a plague or mass extinction, but one person has a curative mutation, viz. *Children of Men* (2006) and "The Nest" (*The Outer Limits*).

As we approach Advent, I've been listening to Handel's musical setting of Isaiah 9 ("For unto us a child is born…"). There are obvious parallels between the Christchild and the character of Timothy in *Skinwalkers*. Ironically, some secular filmmakers unintentionally do what C. S. Lewis intentionally did, by encoding Christian motifs in stories, which slip under the radar.

One change I'd made to the movie is that in the original, Timothy is hunted by Varek, who doesn't realize that Timothy is his son. Varek bites him, but ingesting the blood

restores his humanity. Biting Timothy is a simple efficient plot device to get the cure into Varek's system.

However, I think it would be more dramatically effective if, when Varek is about to attack Timothy, as he comes within striking range, he senses a mysterious affinity between them, which restrains him from attacking Timothy. Later he finds out that Timothy is in fact his son. Perhaps at that point he willingly accepts the gift his son offers.

There are many improvements that could be made to the film. The point, though, is that it has some elemental themes that transcend the material and the execution. It could be turned into a much better film because some of the raw material is so potentially powerful, whereas there's nothing to work with in the case of *Casino Royale*. That's as good a film as you can make, given the raw material. It can never transcend its intrinsic superficiality. What you see is all you'll ever get, whereas there's more to *Skinwalkers* than meets the eye if you know what to look for. Watching *Skinwalkers*, I think it myself, "There's a good movie trapped inside this bad movie!" Someone like Brian Godawa might be able to extract the core elements and rework them into a powerful film.

Film noir hell

Dante's detailed, claustrophobic depiction of hell captured popular imagination, although I'm not sure how many people have actually read **The Inferno**. For many believers and unbelievers alike, I think their mental image of hell is influenced, at least indirectly, by Dante. That includes comic books and video games.

From a different angle, secular totalitarianism is hellish. Kafka's tormented mind provides a precursor in the **The Trial**, followed by **1984** and **Darkness at Noon**.

If I were making a movie about hell, film noir would be an apt genre. Classic examples include *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Big Sleep*. But due to the Production Code, these are more like black comedies.

Because neo-noir films don't labor under the same inhibitions, they're more realistic. Examples include *Chinatown*; *Farewell, My Lovely* (both of which I saw as a teenager), and *L.A. Confidential*. When I saw it for the first and only time, I hated *Chinatown*, not because it was a bad film–it's a great film of its kind–but because I was repelled by the wanton amorality of its characters. A world where you can't trust anyone. Everybody cheats. Everybody betrays everyone else.

In the noir genre, the detective functions as the eyes of the audience. We see the world through the resignation of the detective. In a better world he might be a better man, but the noirish world is engulfed in suffocating mediocrity. There's nothing to believe in. No one to admire. No one to

look up to. Everyone is trapped on the inside–not because they can't get out, but because there's no outside. They drink, philander, and gamble away their abject lives in desperate resignation, interspersed with studied cruelty to break the pitiless monotony. Sadistic comic relief. That's a hellish existence.

Interpretive levels

i) Because Christianity is a bookish religion, centered on biblical revelation, hermeneutics is a central feature of Christianity. The interpretation of a text. That, in turn, gives rise to creeds. And, of course, that continues the interpretive process inasmuch as creeds must be interpreted. However, interpretation is a broad concept:

ii) A. L. Rowse was an interpreter of Shakespeare. Likewise, Laurence Olivier and John Gielgud were interpreters of Shakespeare. Yet actors are interpreters in a different sense than commentators. The task of a commentator is to ascertain the original meaning of the text.

By contrast, the task of an actor is to project the psychology of the character. To some degree an actor tries to get inside the role, to understand the part, but acting isn't exegesis in the usual sense.

iii) It can be interesting to watch different actors play the same role, in Shakespeare, or Sherlock Holmes, or James Bond, or whatever, precisely because different actors interpret the same role differently. That can be a virtue in acting, but that's not necessarily a virtue in exegesis, since the object of exegesis is not variety, but the *correct* interpretation.

iv) And, of course, there are different kinds of acting. Some actors are more external. Some actors disappear into the part. They are very different from one role to the next. Other actors have a consistent persona which they bring to every part. People like to see the image they project. For some performers, the role is a vehicle for the actor while for other performers, the actor is a vehicle for the role.

v) When playing a fictional character, the text or script may be the only standard of comparison. But when playing a historical figure, the real person is another standard of comparison. Some actors read biographies or autobiographies about a historical character to approximate what he was really like. But some actors don't. George C. Scott was the same in every role. He didn't imitate Patton. Rather, he played the role as if Patton was George C. Scott! Another actor might do it in reverse.

vi) Sometimes a role is written with a particular performer in mind. *Peter Grimes* was written for Peter Pears. Later, Jon Vickers reprised the role. Vickers had a much greater dynamic and emotional range than Pears. Even though it wasn't what Benjamin Britten intended, it's a memorable performance that tends to eclipse the singer for whom the role was tailor-made.

vii) By the same token, acting is sometimes subversive. When Alec Guinness played George Smiley, he took the role in a different direction than the author envisioned. Guinness is a sympathetic actor who made Smiley a more sympathetic character than the literary exemplar. And it's been said that his performance influenced le Carré to rewrite Smiley to be more like Guinness!

viii) Many movies are cinematic adaptations of novels. Translating a novel into the cinematic medium is, in itself, an interpretive act. In addition to the actor's interpretation there's the director's interpretation and/or the screenwriter's. And we allow for a degree of artistic license when adapting a novel to the screen.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is his personal interpretation of the Passion accounts in the Gospels. And

James Caviezel adds his own interpretive layer.

ix) When actors and directors are interviewed, they are often asked what the movie means or how they prepared for the role. A director is treated as an authoritative interpreter of his own films.

On the other hand, if you ask David Lynch what *Mulholland Dr*. means, he might be unable to explain it. Lynch draws heavily on the subconscious. His work isn't analytical in the way many directors are. *Mulholland Dr*. is like a dream. It has the obscure symbolism of dreams.

x) A painter is an interpreter, but what a painting means is different from what a text means. Monet was more of a landscape painter while Renoir was more of a portrait painter, but they sometimes painted the same scene, which makes it interesting to compare and contrast their respective approaches.

xi) There's a distinction between what a text or movie (or painting) means, and what it means to the reader or viewer. It may have a personal significance that's independent of what it objectively means. It may trigger personal associations.

When I come back to a movie or TV drama, watching it again may remind me of when I first saw it. It takes me back to a particular time and place. Not just the time and place of the movie, but the time and place of the viewer. What was happening in my own life.

Or a particular scene may have an allegorical significance for me, because I compare it to something in my own experience. That idiosyncratic interpretation isn't what the

director intended. He knows nothing about any particular member of the audience.

Take the opening scene of Mulholland Dr. Floating in darkness, to the haunting, ominous, tragic tune of Badalamenti, with its descending, minor-key scales, the limo cruises down a long lonely road, with glowing taillights, intercut with the city lights of Los Angeles, in vast anonymity. For me that evokes a host of associations that are a code language for particular incidents in my own life.

xii) One function of creeds is to establish a doctrinal standard. A seminary or denomination may require an ordinand or job applicant to subscribe to a particular creed.

In some denominations, corporate recitation of a creed is part of the liturgy. In my opinion, it's permissible for a parishioner to exercise mental reservations when reciting a creed, if he disagrees with an article of the creed, whereas it would be deceptive for an ordinand or church officer or seminary professor to do so. As a parishioner, I'm at liberty to impute a private meaning to an article of the creed. If I disagree with what "communion of the saints" probably meant, I can mentally substitute my own meaning.

For exegetical purposes, original intent is generally normative, but how we appropriate a text is different. I'm not bound by what the director had in mind. I can find it significant for my own reasons.

Heroes and villains

Reviewing *Hud*, film critic Pauline Kael said heroes and villains both want the same things–it's their way of getting them that separates one from the other. From the standpoint of Hollywood movies, that's true.

Actors like Bogart, Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda, and John Wayne play heroic characters who were just as worldly as their villainous counterparts. They'd be uncomfortable and unconvincing if they tried to play Christian characters.

What sets them apart is their refusal to cross certain lines. Although the heroes and villains want the same things out of life–what divides them is that villains are willing to do whatever it takes to get whatever they want, whereas heroes are willing to sacrifice what they want, even what they most want, because they have a sense of honor. Their honor code exerts a measure of moral self-restraint. They won't take what they can get by any means necessary. When push comes to shove, they prioritize self-denial over self-debasement. Heroes have too much self-respect to demean themselves by stooping to the level of a villain. That puts them at a disadvantage. They'd rather lose with honor than win with dishonor.

By contrast, villains have no sense of shame. They don't really think they've disgraced themselves, because they don't think we live in that kind of world. They are cynical.

Secular heroism is unstable. The villains are right, given their shared viewpoint with the heroes. Since this life is all there is, nobility is a foolish inhibition. You won't be rewarded for your virtue. Why should you care what people think of you?

From a Christian standpoint, Kael's distinction is a half-truth. Heroes and villains have the same natural desires. There are, however, things villains value that Christians do not or should not.

Villains don't just live for pleasure. They live for power and prestige. They hanker to impress people. They crave status symbols.

Those aren't Christian values, and it's not that Christians are suppressing natural desires. This isn't artificial piety. Rather, living for power and prestige is vacuous. That's not a meaningful life. It's pathetic filler.

It's not surprising that with the progression of secularization, the distinction between heroes and villains has become very eroded. It's harder to tell the good guys from the bad guys.

Some Clint Eastwood films represent a turning-point in that regard. And that's been taken further.

In defense of time-travel stories

There are film critics who, whenever they review a movie about time travel, rehearse the antinomies of retrocausation. This was a weakness of Roger Ebert. But that's a mistake. We need to be more discriminating when it comes to the genre.

i) Time travel that doesn't change the past is coherent. Likewise, if a person traveled into the future and stayed there, that would be coherent.

But changing the past is incoherent. By the same token, traveling into the future, then returning to the present, creates the same problems. Even if the traveler didn't intend to change his own time, by returning to the present with advance knowledge, that will affect his actions in many subtle ways. He behaves differently than before he took that trip. His very presence changes the status quo, because his present-day actions are now informed by foreknowledge.

Problem is, the impossible time-travel scenarios are the very scenarios we most enjoy. So we have a choice: would you rather have time travel stories or not have time travel stories? If you enjoy the genre, then stop bitching about the antinomies. That's the price you pay for the genre.

If a character was simply a detached observer, then time travel would be coherent. But we prefer stories in which the character interacts with his environment. That's because the character is a stand-in for the reader or viewer. He vicariously takes us to times and places where we'd like to go. We experience it through his eyes, ears, and feet.

That goes to the limitations as well as the distinctive appeal of the genre. Can't have one without the other.

ii) This is part of the willing suspension of belief. We do that all the time with movies we watch. Why be so picky about time travel films?

We don't demand that stories be realistic. We like unrealistic stories. The imagination can take us places where we can't go in real life. That's what makes it appealing.

iii) Given the genre, just about every film about time travel will suffer from this paradox. Unless you hate the genre,

there's no point attacking every example of the genre. For that "flaw" will be present in just about every specimen. It can't be eliminated without eliminating the genre. So we should discriminate between good examples and bad examples of the genre.

That doesn't mean time travel stories are above criticism. That doesn't mean they are equally good. It depends on how well or badly the theme is handled.

iv) In general, I think it works best if the story takes the possibility of time travel for granted, without explaining it. Just like an author doesn't stop to detail the metaphysical machinery of magic when he tells a story about wizards. Rather, that's just a given. If you can't accept that on its own terms, read a different kind of story. Same thing with fire-breathing dragons. We really don't want a biological theory.

I've seen movies that make the mistake of offering a scientific explanation for vampires. But it's more plausible when they are viewed as occult creatures.

v) There are philosophers and physicists who labor to elude the antinomies of time travel. If a director or screenwriter offers a philosophically serious explanation, I think we should give him credit, even if theory can't withstand scrutiny. I'd cut him some slack. At least he respected the intelligence of the audience.

However, even that can be a problem. For instance, there's a scene in *Minority Report* where a character "resolves" the dilemma with an object lesson:

Anderton picks up a wooden ball and rolls it toward Witwer, who catches it before it lands on the ground. When asked

why he caught the ball, Witwer says "Because it was going to fall." Anderton replies, "But it didn't." Then confidently tells him, "The fact that you prevented it from happening doesn't change the fact that it was going to happen."

But the problem with that illustration is that it freezes the attention of the audience. A thoughtful viewer will keep pondering the validity of the illustration long after that scene. He's mentally stuck on that scene. The story continues, but his mind is back on that scene. So it's distracting.

A good director doesn't want the audience to keep thinking about that scene, to keep puzzling over that illustration. He wants the plot to move forward, and the viewer to move in tandem.

vi) Where directors come in for deserved criticism is when the film gives a half-baked explanation for time travel. I've never understood the mentality of SF directors who spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a film, but can't budget for a decent screenwriter.

Sometimes they come up with a "scientific" theory of time travel that's pure poppycock. It's just a lazy, throwaway explanation. No attempt to be scientifically or philosophically plausible.

Plot holes and continuity errors are often due to slipshod writing. The director or screenwriter made no effort to be consistent. They take no pride in craftsmanship. It's just about making a quick buck. Another forgettable film.

vii) But in an open-ended TV series or movie franchise, plot holes and continuity problems may be due to the fact that the director or screenwriter didn't or couldn't think that far

ahead. They had no idea the film would be a blockbuster, so they didn't plan for a sequel. They don't know how many seasons the series will run for, so they can't anticipate where the story will go. Plot holes and continuity errors that happen for that reason are more excusable.

In a movie or miniseries, that's avoidable because it's all written ahead of time. However, improvisation can have its own benefits, even if it generates inconsistencies.

For instance, Chris Carter did a lot of improvising in *The X-Files*. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But he had lots of interesting ideas, so the creative momentum of one unforeseen development sparking another opened up many good fresh storylines. He didn't know where-all he was headed when he began, but in the right hands, that's an artistic stimulus.

In addition, discontinuity errors can be deliberate. A new director or screenwriter may think the original idea was bad to begin with, so he scraps it and strikes out in a new direction. Or maybe he thought the original idea was good, but exhausted its dramatic potential.

A flawed masterpiece

There are some common criteria by which I judge any film, viz. plot, dialogue, characterization, setting, ideas, acting.

Of course, no director, however talented, is equally good at everything. Every great director has a unique skill set.

In addition, some of these criteria are more important than others, depending on the kind of film. Which brings me to the next point:

I also judge a film by the standards of genre, viz. action, comedy, Western, war, horror, film noire, science fiction, coming of age. Whether it's great, good, average, or bad depends in part on the requirements of the genre: what a film of that genre is supposed to do. What it can do. The potentials and limitations of the genre. Whether it hit the target it was aiming for.

v) Apropos (iv), consider three films with Humphrey Bogart: *The Maltese Falcon*, *Casablanca*, and *Key Largo*. People who love classic films typically love those films.

Yet, if you think about it, those are preposterous films. In terms of plot, dialogue, and characters, they are wildly implausible.

Yet that's a large part of what people like about them. Classy escapism. Sometimes we like realistic films, and sometimes we like surrealistic films.

These three films are hokey as hell, but that's part of the fun. The juicy acting, quotable dialogue, outlandish

characters, outlandish plots. It's not the least bit lifelike, and therein lies the appeal.

That's only a flaw if a film is supposed to be realistic. If the subject matter is supposed to be lifelike.

vi) To consider another criterion, take the flawed masterpiece. By that I mean an artistic failure by a great director (or novelist). But here's the catch: a lesser film by a greater artist may be a greater film than a better film by a lesser artist.

Even if a great director falls short of what he was aiming for, he can still reach heights that a lesser artist cannot begin to attain. It may be a very uneven film, but it will have arresting scenes. The parts will be greater than the whole. Flashes of greatness will offset the weaker material.

vii) Apropos (vi), from start to finish, *Casino Royale* is a very successful film of its kind. Careful, consistent , detailed craftsmanship. No weak links. That kind of discipline is rare in cinematography. So many movies, even big budget movies, are pretty slipshod.

Yet *Casino Royale* can only be as good as the genre. A Bond film has a hard ceiling of excellence. With all the loving effort in the world, A Bond film can only rise so high. Classy, but shallow and ephemeral.

Now compare that to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. It gets off to a very slow start. You could lop off the first third of the film. It only picks up interest when we get to Bodega Bay. Except for Jessica Tandy, the actors are merely serviceable.

The film centers on three great set-pieces: three bird attacks. (There's an upstairs scene I could analyze, but these three are sufficient to illustrate the point.)

In the first case, Lydia visits a neighbor. As she enters the kitchen, the audience can see a row of chipped teacups hanging on the cupboard. That foreshadows what she will find in the bedroom: her neighbor with his eyes pecked out.

The chipped teacups is a masterstroke by a great director. A simple, subtle, ominous cue. A way to build suspense.

A third scene takes place in and around a restaurant. There a know-it-all ornithologist delivers an unctuous homily on how the rumors about dangerous birds is alarmist scare-mongering. But her timing is unfortunate, for it is followed by a devastating bird attack.

Then you have a second scene, the most memorable, at the school. Inside, the kids are singing a song. Reflects the innocence of child. Outside, Melanie is waiting impatiently for school to end so that she can warn the teacher. Distracted, as she smokes a cigarette, Melanie oblivious to birds amassing behind her on the jungle gym. But the audience is facing the jungle gym. Its viewpoint is literally opposite hers. The audience can see what she can't–the looming threat. That's a classic example of dramatic tension, where the audience knows something a character does not.

Finally, Melanie observes a bird approaching. She follows it with her eyes as it circles around her. At that point she suddenly sees the massed birds. There's the juxtaposition of a few simple elements to generate this classic scene.

In fairness, Hitchcock needed to space these out to maximize the impact. If he ran them together, it wouldn't have the same effect. The fact that the rest of the film isn't on the same plane is to some degree a necessity. Some things can only be in high relief if the rest is flat.

Compared to a well-oiled production like *Casino Royale*, *The Birds* is very uneven. Yet a few scenes like this elevate it to a class apart from *Casino Royale*. With a few deft strokes and pacing, Hitchcock created an unforgettable experience. Images that forever stay in the mind.

The aesthetics of evil

In deploying the argument from evil, unbelievers contend that if God could create a world in which everyone does right, then he ought to do so. Some Christians respond by invoking the freewill defense. However, even Christians who subscribe to libertarian freewill believe in the possibility (indeed, actuality) of a world in which everyone freely does right. They just postpone that for the world to come.

Admittedly, that may be inconsistent with their philosophical commitments. It's just that their eschatology commits them to a position at odds with their philosophical commitments. So they affirm a contradiction.

It's instructive to compare this atheist complaint with film and TV critics. Critics dislike movies and TV dramas in which the good guys are too good. They prefer characters that are morally grey. Characters that undergo character development. They find morally pristine characters simplistic and boring. Makes you wonder if they really want a world in which everyone does right.

At the other extreme we have films and TV dramas in which all the characters are morally repellent. Some may be worse than others, but all of them are pretty bad. It's just a difference of degree.

I think Christians like characters who are like them. We like characters who struggle with sin. Characters who are tempted by sin. Characters who are striving to do the right thing, sometimes fail, but repent and continue striving to do right.

Compare this to an android. An android isn't even tempted to commit sin. It *can't* feel temptation. Because it isn't human, it isn't drawn to things that humans find enticing.

As a result, an android can never be a hero. Even if it always does the right thing, it's not a virtuous being. Doing right is effortless for the android, because there's no inner conflict. The android doesn't find evil appealing for the same reason it doesn't find goodness appealing. It's not in his makeup.

Now, resisting temptation is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. In the world to come, the saints won't find sin alluring. But that's in part because, in this life, we've acquired a degree of moral fortitude. And we've experienced the consequences of sin.

Untested decency is highly unstable. Someone may be decent simply because his decency has never been put to the test. And the moment his decency is tested, his moral shell collapses.

Moral formation, strength of character, is the result of experience in the face of moral challenges.

Source Code

I saw *Source Code* recently. It's one of those thinking-man's SF movies.

i) Many SF movies invest lots of money and creativity in CGI, but forget to hire a decent screenwriter. But *Source Code* has a clever, and emotionally pleasing, plot. It also has an ingenious way to mask the incoherence of time-travel scenarios. So many SF films insult the intelligence of the audience by not even attempting to offer a reasonable explanation for time-travel.

The basic problem with retrocausation is that if someone changes the future by changing the past, then the future he originally came from never existed in the first place, in which case he was in no position to travel back into the past from that starting-point. *Source Code* tries to get around this in a couple of ways. First of all, Capt. Stevens isn't literally traveling back into the past. It's less about time than space. He's accessing an alternate universe. And he does so by piggybacking on someone else's memories of the event. So it's indirect.

Moreover, he doesn't change the future by changing the past in the same world. Rather, he communicates information from one alternate past to the present of a different world. So that introduces another buffer to insulate against retrocausal antinomies.

Mind you, that creates a different problem. Is it possible to transmit information from one alternate universe to another? But even if that's impossible, it's not obviously incoherent. It's just a different kind of problem.

ii) However, having avoided or at least obscured retrocausal antinomies at the front-end of the picture, the screenwriter reintroduces the same problem at the back-end. That's because they wanted to make a movie with a happy ending. An alternate ending for Stevens. Where he doesn't die in theater. Where he's not a brain-in-a-vat.

The problem, though, is that he lives on in the body of another passenger. That body-swap scenario was initially feasible because the passenger died in the bombing. So his body is available to be co-opted by Stevens. Since, however, Stevens preempts the bombing in that alternate universe, the passenger would continue to live–in which case he couldn't host the consciousness of a man from a different world. Presumably, Stevens also has a counterpart in this alternate universe, but he was killed in that world as well.

The film also has alternate endings in alternate timelines. An epilogue. But the time lines seem to cross. There's the world in which he lives on as Sean, the world in which he was euthanized, and the world in which his truncated body continues on life-support. One timeline seems to affect another or pick up from where another left off. But that's illogical.

Another question is how Stevens' mind remains attached to Sean after Goodwin pulls the plug. As I understand the process, Stevens never had direct access to Sean's counterpart in the alternate universe. Rather, the last 8 minutes of Sean's memories were harvested from his dying brain in *this* world, and then fed into Stevens' brain. So how does Stevens' consciousness jump from this world to the parallel universe, and continue there after Sean's final memories are exhausted? It's a nifty plot device so long as you don't think about it too deeply.

iii) There's a nice scene where Stevens his able to have a "postmortem" phone conversation with his father, in order to patch things up. Just the chance to hear the sound of his father's live voice one more time is an emotional jolt for Stevens.

iv) The film raises bioethical conundra. Dr. Rutledge is a utilitarian. Better to exploit one individual to save millions of innocent lives. By contrast, Capt. Goodwin represents feminine compassion for the individual, as well as loyalty to a comrade. Both perspectives have moral merits.

The film also raises the issue of mercy-killing. Stevens is basically a brain-in-a-vat. To say he's kept artificially alive is an understatement. All that's left is his head and torso, with an exposed brain case connected to a neurointerface. Is it right to keep him artificially alive against his will just to use him as a guinea pig? In the end, Capt. Goodwin euthanizes him.

v) I think Gyllenhaal performs well in the key lead role. I don't always care for Gyllenhaal. I think he looks a bit goofy. He was good in *Donnie Darko* and *October Sky*.

vi) Despite their incoherence, time-travel stories have an irresistible appeal. That's because they tap into our sense of longing and regret. "If I knew then what I know now, what would I do differently"? Of course, that isn't realistic. It's a secular substitute for redemption.

Likewise, Stevens is able to rewrite his life to give himself a happy ending. That's nice, but it's a kind of ersatz heaven. In real life we don't get to hit the replay button, erase, and record a new message. Although that's what makes time-travel stories so appealing, that's also what makes them

hollow and ultimately unsatisfying. In the long run, only the Gospel gives us real hope.

The Ninth Gate

Because we're coming up on Halloween, there are lots of horror films on TV this month. I watched most of *The Ninth Gate* last night, although I bailed before the end. I've seen it before.

Polanski is a talented director, so it's a quality film with some masterful brushstrokes. Excellent cast. Classy settings. That said, the film is something of a dud. It begins somewhat promisingly, but never catches on, and the ending is anticlimactic. Maybe Polanski has lost his touch. It's certainly no match for *Rosemary's Baby*.

The basic premise of the plot involves the pursuit of a book (actually, three editions of the same book) that's ghostwritten by the devil. To the one who owns a copy and can decrypt the message, the book promises worldly success. A variant on the Faustian bargain.

Although the basic idea has some dramatic potential, there'd be a more interesting way to develop that theme. Say there's a book "inspired" by the devil. Throughout the centuries, power-hungry men and women pursue the book. They travel to far-flung places to track it down. They murder to steal the book. All because the book promises its owner worldly success.

Only there's a catch. You will go mad if you read the book. The book passes through many hands. Each owner was widely successful and powerful. Yet each owner became insane as his mind was drawn into the labyrinth of the book's fiendish symbolism and numerology. Owners lose their way, and lose their minds, in their effort to break the code. The code is a trap. A lure.

Although *The Ninth Gate* is fictional, there are real candidates for books inspired by the devil. Automatic writing is a prima facie case. It's possible that automatic writing as a natural psychological explanation. But given how it typically takes place in an occult setting, that certainly invites a demonic interpretation.

Swedenborg is another example. Swedenborg was a notable apostate: the son of a Lutheran bishop. Swedenborg himself was a brilliant man of polymathic interests.

However, in his early fifties, he says he engaged in astral travel to heaven and hell, where he communicated with angels, demons, and ghosts. He wrote voluminously about his encounters.

I don't know if he was possessed, mentally ill, or both. Certainly possession results in mental illness. If he was possessed, then this would be another case of diabolically inspired literature.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a New Age blockbuster by Richard Bach, is another example.

To take a final example, in his **Occult ABC**, Lutheran exorcist Kurt Koch has a section on the apocryphal *Sixth and Seven Book of Moses*. To judge by his description, this is a book containing magic imprecations. How to curse your enemy. According to him, the spells work. But, of course, the owner pays a terrible price, for he himself comes under a terrible spell.

I notice that in googling the title, there are copies floating around the internet. Needless to say, I never read it, since

it's reputedly a very dangerous book to read. I mention this as a warning to the curious. Even though *The Ninth Gate* is fictional, it has real-world counterparts. Literature "inspired" by the dark side, which–if you own it and read it–will have disastrous effects on you and those around you.

Tron 2

I recently saw *Tron 2* (i.e. *Tron: The Legacy*). It's tempting for SF directors to make a film that's just a string of special effects. CGI set-pieces that lack continuity. That don't add up to anything.

To its credit, Tron 2 uses CGI to create a holistic, detailed alternate world. You're not just seeing special effects tacked onto an otherwise ordinary world. Rather, you see everything within the simulated world. The viewer is completely immersed in the spacious, variegated, digital world of the story. That's artistically satisfying. The film also has a good sound track.

But because the film does some things so well, that draws attention to what it does poorly. A magnificent framework without much filling. Why do SF directors invest so much in CGI, but so little in hiring a talented screenwriter?

In the film, Sam goes on the Grid to see if his father is still alive, and bring him back to the real world. That premise has a lot of dramatic potential–potential that's largely squandered in the course of the story. And that's because Sam is in a hurry to leave. He meets his dad early in the story. As soon as he meets his dad, he wants to get back to the real world. So most of the film is about trying to get away. Getting off the Grid.

But why does the director invest so much effort in enabling the audience to visualize the Grid, to be dazzled by what they see, if the rest of the film is about characters striving to put all that behind them as fast as they can? Why not linger? Look around? Play the tourist? Savor the moment?

Watching the film, I think of ways to rewrite the script which would make it better. It could be a futuristic Odyssey. Instead of Sam discovering his father so soon, it would be best to postpone the reunion. Give Sam time to explore the Grid. Get to know more characters. Have some adventures.

Of course, the premise of Sam searching for his father to bring him back home raises a persistent, irritating question: to bring him back assumes that Kevin's body is still alive somewhere, 20 years later. But that requires some explanation. Theoretically, Kevin could arrange to have his body put in stasis, or kept on life support. Have robots care for his body while he's on the Grid. That's kind of clunky, but that would make more sense.

On a related note, there's the problem of how digital characters like Quorra are able to cross over to the physical world. How can she survive off the grid? What platform supports her personality? Where did she get a flesh-and-blood body?

A more elegant solution would be for Sam to upload his consciousness into the program. That's a popular SF device. That way, he could survive even if his body died.

Of course, on that scenario, he could never go back. He has no body to return to.

But that has dramatic potential. Instead of having Sam trying to talk his father into leaving, you could have his father trying to persuade Sam to stay. Reverse it. It starts out one way, but flips around.

And Sam might be tempted to stay, not only to remain with his dad, but because he finds the Grid more appealing than real life.

That would also be a better way of handling the “portal.” On this version, the narrowing window of opportunity would represent the body of the user. It can only survive without water for a few days.

That would make the choice more momentous. Once you cross that line, there’s no going back. You can’t change your mind.

Also, because the sense of time’s passage is different on the Grid, Sam could spend weeks or months in virtual time exploring the Grid to find out if he wanted to stay there. And the audience could see it through his eyes.

We might also consider theological ways of developing the plot. Maybe Kevin originally intended to go home every night to be with his family, after spending hours on the Grid, but as a creator, he was seduced by his own creation. He became increasingly captivated by the world he made for himself on the Grid, where he was his own little god.

Or maybe he lost track of time. Because time passes at a different rate on the Grid, perhaps he got so wrapped up in the virtual world that he inadvertently let the exit close (i.e. his body expired). Then he was trapped inside against his will.

Or we could view it as a Faustian bargain. A choice between dying in this world, in the hope of Christian immortality–or trading that for virtual immortality, where you upload your consciousness into the program. As long as the hardware survives, you survive.

Or you could make Kevin a man who’s disillusioned with the real world, and tries to create a utopian alternative. Only he

discovers that his alternative is no escape. Because he’s a sinner in the real world, his sin infects the virtual world. The digital characters share his flaws. The Grid takes on a life of its own, with “fallen” AI characters. They need a Savior, but Kevin can’t save them, for he himself needs a Savior.

Tombstone

I saw *Tombstone* recently. I remember the trailers when it first came out, almost 20 years ago. It's a good Western, although I've seen better. It has an excellent cast, led by the ever-fine Kurt Russell. It's also nice to see the late great Charlton Heston in a cameo role.

The film got mixed reviews. But from what little I know about 19C American history, this is a fairly accurate film, with a build-up to the iconic Gunfight at O.K. Corral, followed by Wyatt Earp's remorseless vendetta.

Aside from the great casting, that accounts for the film's strengths and weaknesses. What makes it more interesting than many Westerns (or other films) is that this movie is based on a real event, involving real individuals. Indeed, a cast of characters who passed into American folklore.

As such, the director and screenwriters don't have the same unfettered artistic freedom they'd enjoy if this were fictitious. To a great extent they're constrained by what actually happened.

Hence, it lacks the artificially taut cohesion of some other films in the Western genre. But that's offset by reality. Most of the characters are based on men who really existed. Not imaginary characters, but men who lived and died, who came before us, just as others will come after us. So we're reconnecting with the past. Like us, they had their hopes and fears. Their moral choices and consequences. Like us, they were thrown into the maelstrom of a fallen world.

For instance, you have the doomed figure of Doc Holliday. He's dying of TB, and he knows it. So he doesn't take life

very seriously. He has nothing to gain and nothing to lose. Indeed, he died at 36. No doubt he hastened the process by heavy drinking.

A Christian parable of the damned. Someone with nothing to live for. Nothing to look forward to.

Was blind but now I see

Film critics typically downgrade a film if the main characters lack character development. Literary critics distinguish between round, flat, and stock characters. Stock characters and flat characters lack complexity, including a capacity to change and evolve.

Yet, as a practical matter, many people in real life are more like stock characters or flat characters than round characters. Many real people change little in the course of a lifetime. Their character traits are cast in bronze from an early age. They retain the same basic worldview throughout life. They are static characters rather than dynamic characters.

So why are filmmakers faulted for realistic characters? If that's the way most people are, then why do film critics demand unrealistic characterization?

Well, aside from the fact that it's more dramatically interesting, I wonder if this doesn't reflect a redemptive motif which even secular film critics have unconsciously internalized from Christianity.

Take the parable of the prodigal son. Or the parable of the lost sheep. Take the life of David. Or Jacob. Or Joseph. Samson or Moses. We like stories where the protagonist has a transformative experience that makes him a better person. Stories that exemplify a lost and found or death and rebirth motif.

This often takes the form of a journey–the classic quest genre. But the quest can also be internalized. A journey of self-discovery–and redemption.

As I was channel surfing recently, I stumbled across *Have a Little Faith*, a film starring Laurence Fishburne–a recovering junkie who kicked the habit when he underwent a Christian conversion. He's now an inner city pastor, ministering to other hoods, junkies, and street people. I don't care for the film's ecumenical agenda, but the character of Pastor Covington is quite appealing. And there are endless films and TV dramas that exemplify a redemptive motif–even when that's secularized. Those who spurn the Gospel unwittingly recreate the Gospel.

Merlin

I've been watching the British TV series *Merlin*. While it's not great art, it has a certain gentle, good-natured, light-hearted quality that's fairly unusual in contemporary TV fare. It also has excellent ensemble acting.

The show makes no pretense of historical accuracy in reconstructing the 6C English setting in which the Arthurian legend is situated. And I don't expect that.

What's striking, but not surprising, given the ideological bias of the entertainment industry, is the way in which the series completely dechristianizes the Arthurian tradition. In the ostensibly medieval world of the series, there is no church, no Trinity, no Christ, no Bible, no angels or demons, priests or bishops, heaven or hell.

There's something called the "Old Religion," but there doesn't seem to be anything supernatural about the "Old Religion." In *Merlin*, magic is just a way of channeling the forces of nature.

The worldview of *Merlin* is a world apart from the worldview of the Arthurian tradition, which was awash in Medieval Catholicism.

In the Arthurian tradition, King Arthur is a Christian knight. The *Fidei Defensor*. His kingdom represents an outpost of Christendom, supplanting the heathen faith with the Christian faith. That's a central theme: the battle–quite literally–between Catholicism and paganism. Chivalric Christianity.

In the Arthurian legend, Merlin is a half-breed: his mother was a nun while his “father” was an incubus. His paranormal powers are occult powers.

Of course, this is “history” written by medieval monks. Hagiographa. Still, it’s instructive to contrast the traditional Arthurian legend with the thoroughly secularized TV series.

Inception

I finally got around to seeing *Inception*. It's one of those "thinking man's" SF flicks. I'm not quite as enthusiastic about the film as many reviewers. I think it's better at raising questions than answering questions. And some of the ideas are more intriguing than the execution.

On the plus side, it has a number of things going for it. Like Dante, this is the type of story in which form is content. It's rare to have a story where plot, characters, and setting are so tightly integrated.

The plot has a concentric structure, like boxes within boxes– which mirrors the dreamscape. And this, in turn, generates parallel action between different dreamscapes, with alternating scenes between what's happening in one dreamscape and another. That also makes it more interesting than the average film.

The emotional center of the film involves the ill-fated romance between Cobb and his late wife. They had a whole life together in "limbo," where, as godlike "architects," they made a vast, detailed world for themselves. Where they even had virtual children.

But Cobb became dissatisfied with the unreality of it. Wanted to wake up, and take his wife with him. The only way to wake up in a lucid dream is to kill yourself in the dream. He planted that idea in her mind. But having killed herself in the dream world, she later killed herself in the real world, which she mistook for the dream world.

At least that's what happened from Cobb's viewpoint. But that's one of the ambiguities of the film. Whose viewpoint is

real: Mal's–or Cobb's?

Maybe Cobb is deluded and Mal is right. At the end of the story, why do his kids look just the same in the "real world" as they did in "limbo"? And can one phone call from Saito really make the authorities drop the murder charges? Or is that wishful thinking on Cobb's part–because Cobb is still trapped inside a dream?

There are some other nice touches, like falling from a great height to make yourself wake up. I myself have sometimes used that technique when I wanted to wake up from a dream I didn't like.

Likewise, the use of "totems" to distinguish the dream from reality. In some of my lucid dreams I see a lunar eclipse. Somehow that signals to me that I'm dreaming. That's the symbolic trigger.

The film raises the perennial question of how we distinguish between appearance and reality. If a dream is a mental construct, there's a sense in which our waking state is no less a mental construct. We perceive a world outside ourselves. Yet all that we immediately perceive are mental depictions of the external world. My felt experience of the solid, tangible, world is a mental phenomenon. The apparently objective, 3D world I perceive is, to that extent, a psychological projection. It's all happening on the inside.

Both the waking state and the dream state make use of sensory input. When dreaming, remembered input. When awake, live input.

Yes, there's an underlying reality which produces, and thereby grounds the dream state as well as the waking state alike. But I lack direct access to the underlying reality

in either state. External stimuli feed into the mind, but what the mind actually perceives is simulated stimuli. A reconstructed reality.

There's a sense in which the waking world occupies public time and space. Essentially the same for everyone. That's our common point of reference.

Yet even that is somewhat deceptive. Although we are in the public world, and not vice versa, the public world as observers individually perceive it is still a private, intransmissible experience.

So what is the real world *really* like? Short of divine revelation, there's no way to tell.

And the blurring of appearance and reality is exacerbated by the story, for there one is not merely dealing with dreams, but designer dreams–where the perception of reality is systematically and deliberately manipulated. That makes it all the more difficult, if not impossible, to know where fantasy ends and reality begins. Everything is artificial. Even the "totem" may be a plant.

However, the film suffers from a number of flaws:

The relationship between Mal and Cobb is unequal, for DiCaprio lacks the expressive range of the actress who plays his wife. So there's a basic mismatch. DiCaprio can't adequately reciprocate her pathos or passion.

Moreover, Mal plays the role of the avenging fury. And that makes her less sympathetic.

Furthermore, we are told, at least from Cobb's viewpoint, that Mal is just a psychological projection. Cobb's

imaginative memory of Mal. But if that's true, then Cobb is only talking to himself.

On the other hand, this is one of the studied ambiguities of the film. After all, we never get to see where Cobb comes into the dream.

The world they create for themselves is oddly imposing and impersonal. It resembles an expanded, somewhat futuristic vision of Manhattan. But why would a couple create a sprawling, towering but utterly deserted metropolis to live in? It's not very imaginative, and it's not very domestic. Huge, empty, lonely, sterile, and dull. Miles of depopulated streets and skyscrapers, isolating and dwarfing our couple.

The dreamscapes are causally interconnected. When the van is in freefall, that creates a zero-gravity environment in another dreamscape. But why would one simulated environment impact another simulated environment?

By the same token, the different dreamscapes are synchronized. By why would the passage of time in one dreamscape track the passage of time in another dreamscape? Wouldn't each dreamscape be fairly self-contained?

There's a scene early in the film of a city replicating itself, then folding in on itself. At that point I thought the film would resemble a 3D version of something from M. C. Escher's optical illusions. What hell would be like if hell were designed by Escher rather than Dante.

But unfortunately, that promising premise went largely unrealized. There's a bit of surreal action in the film, but for the most part the dreamscapes aren't very dreamy. I was

hoping for a cross between M. C. Escher and Salvador Dali. But what we get instead is largely and pretty quotidian.

And I don't know why that is. Perhaps Nolan felt the dreamscape had to be realistic to trick Fischer into thinking this was real. If so, that misses the paradox of dreaming. However bizarre, however unrealistic, a dream seems real to the dreamer.

Although Cobb's team are lucid dreamers, Fischer is not. So there's no obvious reason why Nolan failed to take advantage of the CGI to create a more dreamlike setting, in time and space. Instead, we get several action sequences that seem to walk straight out of the James Bond franchise. It's kind of a letdown.

For that matter, I think the whole corporate espionage subplot was expendable. It would be more interesting to explore the life that Mal and Cobb made for themselves in "limbo."

No doubt the film merits repeated viewing. But it's one of those films where I say to myself, If I were the director, I'd do this instead of that.

Rubicon

Rubicon may be the best TV show since *La Femme Nikita* (1997-2001). Both shows focused on counterterrorism. *La Femme Nikita* was paradoxical. Section One epitomized the self-contradiction in pure utilitarian ethics: saving humanity by inhuman means. The paradox was underscored by the hard-bitten atheism of Operations and Madeline. Their fanatical devotion to achieving the goal in a world without any ultimate significance.

Rubicon lacks that razor edge. Instead, *Rubicon* is reminiscent of those Cold War thrillers by John le Carré: *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, and *Smiley's People*–with their attention to the cannibalistic world of spycraft.

Watching *Rubicon* is like reading a novel. Something you have to give your undivided attention. Not everybody likes reading novels.

It has a novelistic eye for the mundane details of life. Art frequently edits out the mundane details of life to highlight The Big Picture. But in *Rubicon*, the camera will sometimes pause to show the quirky little things that people do when they're all alone in a room or elevator. A patient, appreciative eye for the small, quiet, private moments in life. The empty in-between moments in life.

Rubicon suffers somewhat from the liberal fixation with gov't conspiracies. Yet the world of political intrigue is one-dimensional world that only fascinates and captivates the big gov't liberal. And it also betrays the emotional quandary of the liberal. For the liberal, gov't can never be too expansive or intrusive, yet liberals are also consumed with

foreboding about a vast gov’t conspiracy. They create the phantom they fear.

Rubicon centers on counterintelligence. The protagonist, Will Travers, has the brilliant mind of a codebreaker. A man with a knack for divining subtle, elusive patterns. And he works with two other brilliant colleagues.

But brilliant men and women are apt to be somewhat unstable to begin with, and “connecting the dots” can push them over the edge. Instead of cracking the code, the code cracks the man. The obsessive, single-minded pursuit of the codebreaker can break the codebreaker rather than the code. He may go so far into the labyrinth that he can’t retrace his steps.

It generates a dilemma. If you’re sure that something contains a hidden clue, then you’re apt to find what you expect to find. The very process of looking for hidden patterns can project illusory patterns. You end up watching your own mind at play. You lose yourself in a maze of your own imagining. Is it detection, or reflection? A complex web of deception–or self-deception?

At the same time, the world really is chalk-full of patterns. Concentric or interconnected patterns. So it can be tricky to distinguish the intentional patterns from the coincidental patterns.

Yet this can also work in reverse. Due to tunnel vision, you can miss a “hidden” pattern that’s really there because you has a preconception of what the pattern should look like. You're so busy looking that you overlook what's right there.

What if the pattern isn’t embedded in the details. What if everything is the pattern? You can miss the pattern that's

been staring you in the face because you expect the pattern to be hidden rather than overt. You're peeling away the actual pattern as you search for an underlying pattern beneath the presumptive layers of misdirection. But what if the entire phenomenon, through-and-through, exemplifies the pattern? Put another way, what if the pattern isn't too small to make-out, but too large to make-out?

I'm reminded of debates over the "hiddenness" of God. Debates over specified complexity. Theistic proofs that try to isolate telltale clues left in the vapor trail of God's passing. Pulling out a flashlight to glean trace evidence in the dark.

Yet this runs the risk of tunnel vision. Treating the world like a code to be decrypted, rather than seeing the pattern everywhere you look. But is it a question of where to find the pattern? Or is it a question of where, if anywhere, the pattern is *not* to be found? What if everything is equally patterned? There's nothing to *discover*. It's all there, all the time. We are squinting in broad daylight.

Into the Wild

I recently saw the film *Into the Wild*. It's an adaptation of a "true story."

Part of the movie's magnetism lies in the perennial appeal of a road movie. This taps into the profound and universal metaphor of life as a journey through time and space. OT history and typology plays on this metaphor. Adam and Eve banished from Eden. The nomadic life of the patriarchs. Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, on its way to the Promised Land. Israel's exile and return.

This also plays out in the life of Christ. His boyhood as a fugitive. His public ministry as a journey to the Cross. At a cosmic level, his coming to earth, return to heaven, and second coming.

This also represents the pilgrim motif in NT theology (Acts 7; Heb 11). That's why we call the Christian life a "walk" of faith. Paul "ran the race." The dialectic of exile and homecoming.

I suspect that God has programmed this metaphor into the psyche of the human race. A subliminal "homing" instinct.

The genre allows us to meet a cross-section of humanity as well as a cross-section of geography. So the film benefits from a powerful collusion of intrinsically compelling features. An early example of this genre was the TV series *Route 66*.

The film also triggers a related motif–the loner, the drifter.

Up to a point it’s only natural for many young men to have an adventurous streak. A hankering to see the world. Revel in their boundless energy and freedom of movement. Test themselves against nature.

The nicest scene in the movie is watching the protagonist (Christopher McCandless) paddle down the Colorado River in his kayak, in the glowing waters, surrounded by canyons. The film also profits from some good folk music.

In one of his encounters he befriends an aging hippie couple. To some extent they represent an older version of himself. Rebellious. Living on the edges of civilization.

However, they also reflect the disillusionment with their chosen lifestyle. While it may be fun to be a twenty-something hippie, it’s not so fun to be an over-the-hill hippie.

He also befriends a widowed veteran. This sets up a classic interplay between youth and age. The young are risk-takers. Living for the day. At their age they can blow one opportunity, while having another opportunity just around the corner. Time is on their side.

By contrast, the old man has the far-sighted wisdom of painful hindsight. He is cautious. Sedentary. And lonely.

The character is played by Hal Holbrook in the twilight of his career. A seasoned actor who infuses every word and gesture with a lifetime of personal and professional experience.

McCandless finally reaches his destination–the Alaskan bush–after crossing the Teklanika River during the dry season. For the first few weeks he’s ecstatic. Living out his

dream. Awed by the rugged beauty and solitude of the Alaskan wilderness, as well as his unfettered freedom.

However, pride is his undoing. He prides himself on his ability to wing it. To coast through life. Live by his wits. Take each day as it comes. Improvise on the spot.

Yet he's survived up until now on the kindness of strangers. He's not as independent as he imagines. But in the Alaskan bush, there are no kindly strangers to rush to his aid. In large part we create civilization to insulate us from the dangers of the natural world. But in the wilderness, there is no buffer zone. A single misstep may be fatal.

McCandless sought out nature as a sphere of absolute freedom. But far from being free, he existed at the whim of an indifferent and inhospitable environment. No reprieve. A land of law, not gospel.

If the Colorado River epitomized his freedom, then the Teklanika River epitomized his captivity. The now-swollen river barred his exit. He died of starvation–alone and lonely.

The fate of McCandless is a parable of the unbeliever. It's easy to live off the fat of the land in the spring and summer months. But when the winter of life overtakes you, unprepared, it is too late to stock up and hunker down.

Like McCandless, the unbeliever is rootless. Homeless. Fatherless. A desert saint without a calling. He treks into the wilderness, never to return.

"Too late!" The saddest words in the lexicon. Don't wait until midnight to check your provisions. Be a wise virgin, not a foolish virgin.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God

I thought last Friday's second season episode ("Human") of SGU was the best episode since "Air" (Part 3), and "Light," from the first season. It has a number of nice things going for it:

i) Because Rush was in a lucid coma, he could choose which memories he wanted to reenact. Not simply remember them in the usual faded sense, but reenact them in all the vivid detail of the original experience.

And that raises some provocative questions. What are your favorite memories? What makes them your favorite memories? Do you have the same favorite memories, or do your favorites change over time? If you could reenact a favorite memory (or two or three), which one would it be?

Autobiographical memory is a key feature of personal identity. Which of our memories are defining memories?

ii) The episode also had some evocative, bittersweet musical accompaniment which paralleled and complemented the shifting moods of the narrative.

iii) There was a Biblical motif involving numerology and Psalm 46. Life has a hidden, providential pattern. Coincidental events which are too coincidental to be merely coincidental.

Of course, that was in the dream world rather than the real world, but it's an apt emblem for the real world.

And a reading of Psalm 46 in a church service is not your average SF fare.

iv) It gave Robert Carlyle an opportunity to showcase his acting ability. In addition, SGU suffers from a lack of compelling female characters, but the actress who played Rush's wife is a cut above the rest.

Pandora

I finally got around to seeing *Avatar*. In a film like this, the plot is secondary. Not that *Avatar* couldn't benefit from a better plot. But, of course, the plot is largely an excuse to explore Cameron's stimulated fantasy world.

1. Cameron is one of these multiculturalists who doesn't really care about other cultures. The result is a patronizing patois of disparate elements which he cut-and-pasted from various cultures.

To take one example, the Na'vi exhibit a Jainist reverence for all living things. Yet the Na'vi are clearly a warrior culture.

2. Cameron is a nature-lover as only an urbanite can be a nature-lover. Nature in the loving gaze of a city slicker. It's easy to idolize nature if you don't have to live off the land. Back-to-nature from the comfort of a Bel Air mansion. A deceptively domesticated wilderness–at the end of a handheld remote.

3. Some Christian movie reviewers interpret Pandora as a new Eden. However, Pandora is very different from Eden. Unlike the Garden of Eden, the Pandoran forest is full of dangerous animals. And the Na'vi form a fierce warrior tribe.

4. I've read about some moviegoers who were so entranced by Cameron's simulated fantasy world that they undergo withdrawal symptoms when they have to return to the real world. Here I'll make a few observations:

i) Since the real world is a fallen world, it is obviously less than ideal. So it's only natural to hanker for something better.

ii) Cameron's imaginary world is, indeed, a kaleidoscope of awesome visuals–as it was meant to be. And it creates the illusion of inexhaustible depth. But is it more beautiful than the real world?

The basic reason that Pandora makes such wonderful eye candy is that Cameron isn't constrained by physics. He can cherry-pick all the prettiest scenes on earth and throw them together in glorious incoherence. Pandora is basically a rainforest. But at night he makes it look like a seascape with weightless, phosphorescent, underwater creatures. That's a lovely effect, but it's lovely in part because it's physically impossible–like some of Escher's optical illusions.

Or we have the floating mountains, which defy gravity. Sky-borne mountains with cascading waterfalls which have no source of water. Water that magically appears out of nowhere to wow the viewer.

So Pandora is a celluloid dreamscape. In Pandora, things are surreally beautiful because they've been emancipated from functional necessities. Nothing has to work. It's all a waxy surface, with nothing under the hood.

But in our world, the real world, natural beauty is functional beauty. A large part of natural beauty lies in the subtle feats of engineering. Both micro and macroengineering. Everything has to work, and what is more, everything has to work with everything else.

Consider the flight of a bird. Or a flock of birds in formation flight. That's a beauty to behold, but the beauty goes

beyond mere visuals. It's a marvel of engineering.

iii) It's also interesting to compare Cameron's ideal world with the ideal world in Rev 20-22. The new world in Revelation combines the new Eden with the New Jerusalem. It isn't strictly urban or strictly rural. Rather, it combines the best of town and country. Both urban design and garden design in one grand package.

iv) And this goes to a paradoxical contrast between a secular view of nature and a Christian view of nature.

In one sense, an atheist has a higher view of nature, for nature represents the apex. There's nothing above and beyond the natural world. So nature takes the place of God. Faux environmentalists like Cameron view "unspoiled" nature as the ideal.

In another sense, a Christian has a higher view of nature, for nature is not the aimless byproduct of a mindless process, but the handiwork of God.

At the same time, there's also a sense in which God has left some room for improvement. Nature supplies the raw materials for human cultivation. We tame nature. Harness nature.

A wilderness is not a garden. A landscape garden can be more pleasing than nature in the wild. Not to mention such cultural artifacts as art, music, dance, literature, and architecture.

Indeed, Pandora is a form of landscape engineering. A view of nature that does not and cannot exist in a state of nature. Nothing could be more artificial than Cameron's computer simulated paean to natural beauty. A hitech stage

set, richly furnished with handsome, nonfunctional stage props.

v) Pandora is a sensational, alien world–but a limitation to that aesthetic experience is that once the spectacle becomes familiar, the extraordinary becomes ordinary. Our first impressions were the best impressions. The most intense. Over time it ceases to evoke the same awestruck feelings. It may even become a little dull. If everything is big, then bigness might as well be small.

Human beings need a certain variety. Discovery and continuity.

Where the Wild Things Are

I got around to watching *Where the Wild Things Are*. It's not your usual Hollywood fare.

Some authors write children's books, not for kids, but for their fellow adults. They find the genre of a children's book a more conducive medium to explore the meaning of life, assuming that it has any meaning. Although the Sendak book may be written for kids, the film adaptation is not.

The plot, in both the book and the film, exemplifies the quest genre, with the classic arc–as the hero leaves the safety and familiarity of home to embark on a perilous journey into the unknown, where he must overcome various ordeals–after which he returns home somewhat transformed by his experience. A refining experience. A maturing experience.

In the film, Max is an angry young boy. Abandoned by his sister. Abandoned by his father. He has no friends his own age. His sister, with whom he used to be inseparable, has deserted him for older boys–leaving him seething with jealous rage. His misses his father, whom he lost in the divorce.

To some extent he even feels abandoned by his mother. Yes, she loves him--–but he must now share her affections with the new boyfriend. That, too, leaves him in a jealous rage. He feels betrayed by his nearest and dearest. So he escapes to the island of the wild things.

And that is where the film, although this is a story about children, is not a story for children. At this point it is not

about childhood as seen through the eyes of a child. Rather, it's about childhood as seen through the eyes of an adult.

The island represents the loss of childhood. The loss of innocence. Disillusionment with the world.

The wild things only have each other. They want each other. Need each other. Yet they hurt each other. They need more from each other than they can give each other.

They have nothing to live for. No purpose in life. They simply exist on this rugged, isolated island. Imprisoned by the sea.

This isn't a tropical paradise. Rather, it's more like hell. Eternal futility. Longing without belonging.

The wild things are monsters. Existing on the dusky outskirts of a nightmare.

Here is a world without any safety protocols. A world where anything can happen to you. A godless world. A godforsaken world. A world without a savior.

The wild things constitute a family of sorts, but it's like a family get-together of Chicago mobsters. The loud, boisterous aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws, and pater familias. They can be effusive one moment, but turn on you the next.

True to the quest genre, the plot has a resolution of sorts, as Max returns home to the open embrace of his mother. But even if that's a resolution for Max, it's not a resolution for the story as a whole.

For Max must leave the wild things behind–trapped on the island. Imprisoned in their brokenness. There is no resolution for the wild things–standing on the shore, watching him sail away.

Knowing

I got around to watching the film *Knowing* recently. Except for Roger Ebert, most of the critics despised the film. In one or two respects I can understand their reaction, although I think that's an overreaction.

I think, for example, it was a mistake to cast Nicolas Cage as the protagonist. It's a sympathetic role, which requires a more sympathetic actor. Cage isn't very likable. He's annoying to watch. Of course, that's subjective. Thankfully, the child actor who plays his son is far more appealing.

I also understand why critics found the plot confusing. Yet I also think that's largely the fault of the critics. They're ignorant of the literary allusions. If, however, you view the movie as, in some measure, a religious allegory, with subtle illusions to the Bible, then the plot makes more sense. What's driving the plot is a biblical subplot.

But that, in turn, raises the question of how much subtext we should discern. It's possible to either overinterpret or underinterpret a film like *Knowing*. Only the director and screenwriters are privy to their ulterior intentions.

There is, though, some reason to expect that *Knowing* goes deeper than the average SF flick. The original screenplay was penned by a professional SF novelist and Roman Catholic. The director is a sophisticated, thoughtful director. And there were several other screenwriters whose precise contribution to the final product is indetectable. And least one of the screenwriters is a Christian (Stuart Hazeldine)–or so I've been told.

The film is ambiguous. It could either be given a secular gloss or a Christian gloss.

The secular gloss would involve a ufological interpretation of the Biblical allusions, a la Erich von Däniken. On this reading, the Strangers are really aliens.

Or you could view it in reverse: the Strangers are really angels. The alien paraphernalia is a cultural accommodation to the human observers. (e.g. Heb 13:1-2).

Some of the biblical allusions or Scriptural parallels are explicit. In other cases, it may just be coincidental.

For the sake of argument, let's exhaust all the possible, literary allusions. This may result in overinterpreting the film, but it's an interesting exercise to see how far you can push it.

1. Koestler is the son of a clergyman. Ezekiel is the son of a clergyman (Ezk 1:3).

2. Koestler is a widower. Ezekiel is a widower (Ezk 24:15-18).

3. Lucinda's envelope contains oracles of doom. Ezekiel's scroll contains oracles of doom (Ezk 2:9-10).

4. Koestler tries to warn his contemporaries of impending disaster, yet his warnings are ignored. Ezekiel tries to warn his contemporaries of impending disaster, yet his warnings are ignored (Ezk 2:3-7; 3:7).

5. In both cases, the oracles of doom are inexorable.

6. In *Knowing*, the earth is incinerated. In the oracles against Gog and Magog, Ezekiel also describes the eschatological judgment in the imagery of a cosmic conflagration (Ezk 38:17-23; 39:6).

7. In *Knowing*, only a chosen remnant are able to hear and heed the Strangers. In Ezekiel, only a chosen remnant are able to hear and heed the voice of God (Ezk 11:19-20; 36:26-27).

8. In *Knowing*, only a chosen remnant survive the catastrophe. In Ezekiel, only a chosen remnant survive the catastrophe (Ezk 11:15-20; 39:25-29).

9. In *Knowing*, the "spacecraft" which rescues the chosen remnant has a set of wheels within wheels. In Ezekiel, the divine chariot has a set of wheels within wheels (Ezk 1:15-21). In Jewish tradition, this gave rise to the "Ophanim."

10. In *Knowing*, the chosen remnant are transported to an Edenic paradise with a tree of life. In Ezekiel, the Consummation envisions an Edenic paradise with a tree of life (Ezk 47:7,12).

Strictly speaking, the film doesn't identify the tree as the tree of life, but in the history of Western art, the iconography is unmistakable.

11. In *Knowing*, the name of Koestler's son, a member of the chosen remnant who will be transported to the new

Eden, is Caleb. In the Pentateuch, Caleb is one of just two survivors of the Exodus generation who will enter the Promised Land.

12. In *Knowing*, the Strangers emit a nimbic aura. In Ezekiel, the angels emit a nimbic aura (Ezk 1:7; 40:3).

13. The boy and the girl, with two rabbits, as they are swept to safety, are reminiscent of Noah's ark.

14. In one scene we have an explicit reference to 1 Cor 12.

15. Ascending to the heavens (as the "ship" whisks the children away) is a stock metaphor for going to heaven (e.g. 1 Thes 4:17).

16. The stones may be an allusion to Gen 2:10-12– another Edenic motif which is carried over into Ezekiel (cf. Ezk 28:13-14,16).

17. The use of numerology in *Knowing* would dovetail with Biblical numerology, such as we encounter in the Book of Revelation.

18. Caleb is hearing-impaired, but he can hear the Strangers. This dovetails with the Biblical distinction between natural and spiritual perception. Some people can have keen sight and hearing, yet be spiritually blind or deaf, while other people can be blind or deaf, but have keen spiritual discernment. Only the sheep know the voice of the Shepherd.

19. Caleb and his dad use a bit of sign-language with each other. Ezekiel also used sign-language (Ezk 4-5).

20. *Knowing* has 4 Strangers. Ezkekiel has 4 angels (Ezk 1:5).

21. The Strangers have wings. The angels have wings (Ezk 1:6).

On a broader note:

22. The film includes a conversion experience, where Koestler goes from being a bitter atheist to a believer or revert. Koestler is a backslider who, at the end, returns to his former faith.

23. There's a predestinarian undercurrent to the film. This is inevitable, since the film deals with prophecy, and the future can only be foreknown in case the future is foreordained. On a related note, there's a line of demarcation between the elect and the reprobate.

24. There's a scene at Caleb's school where the kids sing "This little light of mine," a classic Christian children's song, based on Mt 5:14-16.

25. *Knowing* contains an extrabiblical, literary allusion to Arthur Koestler, the science writer who took an interest in telepathy, synchronicity, and Johannes Kepler (among other things).

I don't know how many of these apparent parallels are deliberate. But the degree to which, without having to strain, you can view the film as an allegory of Ezekiel (and other Scriptural motifs) is certainly striking. Some of these

themes could also be lifted from the Book of Revelation–which is partially indebted to the Book of Ezekiel.

Of course, many Hollywood films ransack Biblical eschatology. But in this case the level of specificity is fairly intriguing.

The zombie apocalypse

i) Do you, or should you, keep on living when you have nothing left to live for? Does the survival instinct prevail, or does loss of hope result in losing the will to live?

What would happen if you suddenly lost everyone who made life worthwhile? What would happen if your future was utterly bleak?

Losing the will to live doesn't mean you die. Short of suicide, the body may keep you alive for years, even if you're just going through the motions.

ii) Speaking of suicide, that's an issue in zombie drama. If it's just a matter of time before the zombies get you, is it preferable to take your own life? It's one narrow escape after another. Sooner or later your luck will run out.

iii) It's also a study in how people cope, and disintegrate, under constant fear. You're never safe. You can never let your guard down. The danger is unrelenting. You never again enjoy a good night's sleep. You're wakeful. You have nightmares.

Of course, human beings can't maintain a state of heightened alertness. It wears you down.

iv) In addition, it's a study in how the survivors get along. Total strangers are thrown together. Do they bond, or do they turn on each other from the unbearable strain?

This is fictitious, but there are real-world counterparts, like POW camps.

v) Finally, a zombie drama can also model those pragmatic dilemmas that ethicists like to toy with. Do you risk the few for the many, or do you risk the many for the few?

Let Me In

I saw *Let Me In* recently. As Vampire flicks go, it's one of the best of the genre. A twisted love story.

Owen is an adolescent boy whose parents are separated. Indeed, going through a divorce. He's staying with his mom in a slummy apartment complex.

He's very bright, but small and vulnerable. He's one of those kids who has a "pick-on-me" bull's-eye painted on his back. He attends a vicious inner city school where he's bullied by some older, bigger students. His loneliness is accentuated by fact that his world is walled in by ice and snowdrifts.

His mom seems to be a genuinely caring, conscientious parent. But she's distracted by divorce proceedings and working a job to support herself and her son as a single parent. And she's naïve about what he's facing at school every day.

His mom is a professing Christian. The film doesn't mock her piety, unlike the mother in *Carrie*. She's not a fanatic or a hypocrite.

Her piety may be conventional rather than deep, but it gives Owen a moral framework. It makes him morally conflicted about his new "girlfriend."

Owen needs his father, but his father isn't there. Moreover, his dad is a poor listener. The father is too mad at the mother to tune into his son's concerns. He misses a key opportunity to make the difference.

Enter Abby. She's a girl, but not a girl. She was turned at the age of 12, so she's a paradox. Because her maturation was frozen in time at the age of 12, she still has the emotional make-up of an adolescent girl.

But she's been 13 for decades, if not longer. So in another sense, she's very mature for her age. Worldly. Sophisticated. Not to mention the awkward little fact that she's a (literally) bloodthirsty serial killer.

She's constantly on the move to elude the authorities. Like Owen, she's adrift. If he's lonely, so is she.

Mysterious and pretty, she takes an interest in Owen. Naturally he forms an instant crush. But she can oscillate between sweetness and savagery in the blink of an eye.

Because, psychologically, she's still an adolescent girl, the puppy love goes both ways. If Owen is smitten by Abby, she has a boy crazy streak which reciprocates his passion.

But there's a rival in the picture. Her "father," who isn't really her father. Thomas is jealous of Owen because Thomas *was* Owen. Thomas is getting over the hill. So the cycle repeats itself. He's on the way out, while the new kid is on the way in.

Abby is protective of Owen, which is one reason he falls for her. But it's not purely disinterested on her part. They will end up protecting each other in different ways. She will use him and cast him aside when he becomes a liability. Although she has real feelings for him, survival takes precedence. He's not the first, and he won't be the last.

Unlike the Twilight saga (of which I only saw the first installment), this film doesn't glamorize vampirism. It's a

very dark romance. A jarring mix of beauty and brutality. And the title illustrates the fact that vampirism is a metaphor for demonic possession.

The Hunger

I recently saw *The Hunger* (1983). Admittedly, this was largely an excuse to see Catherine Deneuve.

The film was generally panned by Roger Ebert and other critics. And I understand why they dislike it.

The Hunger tries too hard to be artistic. True artistry isn't that self-conscious. True artistry conceals its own artistry. The film also suffers from a ludicrous ending.

I could also do without the lesbian theme, or some of the language. On the other hand, I don't expect vampires to be paragons of virtue, so in that respect, why wouldn't they be bisexual?

The Hunger has a very spare plot and little narrative momentum. But in that regard it's rather like the better works of David Lynch (*Mulholland Drive*, *Twin Peaks*). Not that Lynch is above criticism, by any means.

It's not so much about telling a linear story–like a journey, with a beginning, middle, and end–as it is about exploring an idea. Lingering on a central idea, from different angles, like a still-life, or series of still lives (e.g. Monet's lilies) rather than a trip with a well-defined route and a well-defined destination.

And in that respect the treatment suits the theme. Although vampires are immortal, they have no purpose in life. No hope. No fulfillment. No direction. They live to kill and kill to live.

Having outlived their parents and grandparents, spouses and friends, they have lived beyond their time. They don't belong here anymore. They simply adapt. Outwardly they may blend in, but inwardly they remain rootless, restless drifters. Miriam's townhouse is chock-full of museum pieces, and she, herself, is a museum piece. Timeless, flawless, and dead.

To some extent *The Hunger* is a vampiric twist on the old Greek myth of Aurora and Tithonus. Miriam's paramours live for a few centuries, but in the end the price they pay is immorality without eternal youth.

Miriam's vaguely Egyptian ancestry, underlined by Deneuve's iconic looks, reminds me of Nefertiti. Deneuve was about 40 when she made the film. Unlike some movie stars, she apparently forsook cosmetic surgery. So her fabled beauty is a bit worn. Still arresting, but not quite what it was in her Chanel No. 5 ads. Yet that, too, suits the world-weariness of the character.

The Hunger is a merciless and unblinking study in the fear of death and dying, as well as the curse of mere immortality–which is no true alternative to death and dying.

A memorable film. An uneven film. An artistic failure, yet more significant and satisfying, in its way, than many by-the-numbers productions which don't suffer from its evident flaws, but also lack its flashes of greatness.

If we make allowance for the film's deficiencies, I think *The Hunger* is actually one of the best films of the genre. Stylish, noirish, and despairing. What is damnation if not eternal life without the giver of life?

Wolves, werewolves, and demons

To my knowledge, there's a very short list of superior werewolf movies, and even those aren't truly great movies. Mind you, there may be additional examples I'm not aware of.

Unless I've overlooked something, directors have failed to develop the dramatic potential of the werewolf character. It alternates between mundane human and savage instinctive animal.

The problem is a failure to creatively explore and exploit lupine intelligence. To take a comparison, cats are interesting to watch in motion. How they move. Feline reflexes and feline stalking patterns. But in my observation, there just isn't a whole lot going on behind the eyes.

By contrast, wolves strike me as being far smarter than cats. I don't just mean domestic cats but lions, leopards, and tigers. Wolves remind me of psychopaths. Amoral, pitiless malevolence. Of course, wolves lack the higher intelligence to be evil. But there's a certain analogy.

By the same token, wolves project a kind of inhuman diabolical cunning. Again, that's just an analogy.

There's just something about lupine intelligence that seems to operate on a higher wavelength. When we look into the eyes of a wolf, it connects with the human viewer–almost like it understands us. Something we recognize in ourselves, but chilling. Like looking in a mirror, where what you see looking back at you is both familiar and alien. More akin to human intelligence than, yet inhumane in way similar to a psychopath: he has a human IQ but lacks

natural empathy for fellow humans. Something is fatally missing. It's not surprising that heathen Indians felt a particular affinity for wolves.

If directors, especially Christian directors, had greater imagination, the werewolf would be a good way to model demonic psychology. Or even the fall of angels, like the shift from werewolves in their human state to their lupine state– which parallels the change that fallen angels underwent. They remain angelic, but twisted.

Vampirism, original sin, and redemption

There's an interesting parallel between vampirism, original sin, and redemption. In vampire lore, vampires have a genealogical identity. They turn humans into vampires by biting them. Vampirism spreads from one vampire to the next. So there are family trees of vampires.

In addition, a vampire killer doesn't have to destroy every vampire individually. If he can track down the master vampire and destroy him, all his descendants instantly revert to human. So he doesn't have to destroy any of the descendants. He can save them from the curse of vampirism at one stroke by destroying the master vampire.

The name itself (Dracula) seems to trade on the draconian aspect of the Devil (Rev 12). The vampire is an Antichrist figure because he offers eternal life to his victims and disciples. Vampiric bloodletting is an upended parody of the Cross. Christ saved his people by shedding his blood, whereas the vampire saves his people by shedding their blood. Vampirism is a diabolic Eucharist.

Of course, vampires are fictional characters, and they make no scientific sense. At best, they only make sense as creatures of the occult. But the parallels between vampirism and Christian theology are striking.

Evolution of the vampire mythos

The BBC did a 1977 production starring Louis Jourdan. Jourdan is surprisingly good in part. His Dracula is, by turns, imperious and amoral. A commanding figure, but hollow.

This is also the most Catholic adaptation I've seen. Frank Findlay plays van Helsing as a devout Catholic. That's another way to pull it off.

In his own production, Francis Ford Coppola also accentuates the religious angle, but restores the Rumanian background. Historically, Vlad was Rumanian Orthodox, but the default religious setting of vampiric movies tends to be Roman Catholic—in large part because Western filmmakers, to the extent that they're familiar with any religious tradition, only know Catholicism.

Coppola makes the interesting move of turning Dracula into an apostate. When his wife commits suicide, and the Church refuses to give her Christian burial, he renounces the faith and goes over to the dark side. God then curses him by transforming him into a vampire.

There is also a scene in which, in an act of revenge, Dracula essentially damns a character (Lucy) to living death.

Dracula's blood is an anti-Eucharist. A damnatory chalice.

Coppola picks up on another theme—and that's the cost of vampiric immortality. A vampire outlives all his loved ones.

At this point, Coppola introduces a Hindu motif. Dracula's long dead wife has apparently been reincarnated as

Harker's fiancé. Coppola is nothing if not the syncretist.

This presents Dracula with a dilemma. He doesn't want to lose her again. But if he turns her, he will destroy the very thing he loves. She will become like him. Another accursed, God-forsaken creature.

In the end, Coppola allows Dracula to undergo a deathbed conversion. Cheap grace. Salvation—Hollywood style.

Nosferatu the Vampyre had two source of inspiration. It was, in part, an adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel, but it was also a remake of the 1922 German silent classic.

Unlike Coppola's production, which relies on sumptuous sets and special effects, Herzog's product makes use of evocative natural scenery—as well as the canals of Delft. I think Vermeer's sensitivity to light is due to the reflected light of the canals.

In its way, Kinski's assumption of the Count is just as talented as Oldman's. But Kinski stresses the vampire's loss of humanity. A vampire retains its human memories, but it's basically a predator with a human I.Q.

In that respect, a vampire is a metaphor for the damned. They retain their memories, but with the loss of common grace, we wouldn't recognize them as the men and women we knew in this life.

In most vampiric flicks, the women are nothing more than victims. But in Nosferatu, Lucy (Harker's wife) is the heroine. In a sense, she reprises the role of van Helsing, but in a distinctively feminine manner. She can't overpower Dracula. She can only destroy him by going on a suicide

mission. She lures him into her bedroom and distracts him until the dawn. The rising sun does the rest.

Most of the better vampiric movies—and there aren't many—adapt Bram Stoker's novel, to one degree or another. An exception is *Near Dark*.

The character of the vampire can be romantic on either (or both) of two different levels. He can be treated as a rival to normal men, with their wives or girlfriends. An "alternate" lifestyle.

Or he can be a Romantic figure in the sense that enemies of the faith like Byron, Blake, and Shelley recast Satan as the antihero. Dracula is an Antichrist figure. A proxy for the devil.

Near Dark uses the Western genre as a vehicle to retell the vampiric myth. And it goes out of its way to deglamorize the vampire.

At the same time, the movie has a redemptive blood motif. It's striking how often secular filmmakers raid the Christian cupboard to set the table.

The film is R rated for gore and bad language. I could do without either. However, it does have a dramatic function in this film. And it also benefits from strong casting all around.

Forever Knight was a TV show with an interesting premise. Being a typical TV show, the producers and screenwriters lacked the imagination to develop the premise, so it degenerated into just another schlockfest.

But the basic premise of the show is that Nicholas de Brabant is a one-time Crusader who was attacked by a

vampire and “turned” on his way to the Holy Land. That sets up an interesting tension.

At one level is the psychological tension. He was a medieval Christian on a quest to defend the Church. But in the very course of his quest, he is forcibly conscripted into the army of darkness. Against his will, he becomes the antithesis of what he set out to be.

In the TV show, he tries to redeem himself by good works, but that’s the wrong framework. The correct framework, especially in the setting of medieval Catholicism, would involve ritual purity and impurity.

Crusaders felt that the Holy Land, and especially Jerusalem, was sanctified by the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ. That’s what makes it the “Holy Land.” Cultic holiness.

Monsters

It's my impression that the most popular monsters in supernatural horror films are werewolves, vampires, and zombies. There are countless trashy horror films, but I have in mind the more "upscale" examples. Excluding comedies, the more upscale representatives include:

Vampires

30 Days of Night (2007)

Bram Stoker's Dracula (1992)

Count Dracula (BBC, 1977)

Let Me In (2010)

Near Dark (1987)

Nosferatu (1922)

Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979)

The Hunger (1983)

Werewolves

Dog Soldiers (2002)

Skinwalkers (2007)

The Howling (1981)

Wolfen (1981)

ZOMBIES

28 Days Later (2002)

28 Weeks Later (2007)

I Am Legend (2007)

The Walking Dead (2010-)

1. These monsters share certain things in common:

i) Vampires, werewolves, and zombies were originally human.

ii) Vampires, werewolves, and zombies are cannibalistic, feeding on humans.

iii) Vampires, werewolves, and zombies are contagious. They propagate by biting the victim. In the case of werewolves, a scratch will suffice.

iv) Vampires and werewolves are creatures of the night. If you can fend them off until sunrise, werewolves revert to human form while vampires retreat into windowless buildings to avoid cumbustion. *I Am Legend* combines the zombie mythos with the vampire mythos regarding the aversion to sunlight.

v) Vampires and zombies are cadaverous. Functional corpses. The Undead. The Nosferatu variant gives vampires a more famished, cadaverous appearance (e.g. *Daybreakers* [2010]; *Nosferatu* [1922] *Nosferatu the Vampyre* [1979]).

vi) Both vampires and werewolves have a special kinship with wolves.

vii) Both vampires and werewolves are shapeshifters.

2. Insofar as the vampire, werewolf, and zombie genres originated independently of each others, it's an interesting question why they have so many things in common. Is this due to subsequent cross-pollination? Or do they reflect a common point of origin in a subliminal Ur-mythos? Is the human imagination wired to generate variations on this theme?

3. These three genres are revealing from a theological and sociological standpoint. In the past, death was all around us. Natural mortality was high, amplified by famine, warfare, siege warfare, epidemics, and pandemics. Heaps of human corpses in public view. Famine and siege warfare also resulted in cannibalism. Although less dramatic, open-casket funerals used to be the norm. But nowadays, due to cremation, modern medicine, and peacetime conditions in many parts of the world, the ugly face of death is easier to hide. And that, in turn, makes it easier for the natural fear of death to recede from consciousness.

By the same token, travel by car, electrical lighting, and the elimination of wild predators has made the fear of darkness recede from consciousness, although it remains close to the surface. Consider a child's instinctive fear of dark. Or walking in back alleys at night. Or your car breaking down on a deserted country road at night.

So why do we create movies and frequent movies that evoke these primal fears? Perhaps because what's consciously suppressible remains subconsciously

irrepressible. Even though modernity makes it easier to push these primal fears to the back of our minds, they remain firmly embedded in the human imagination. The world of nightmares.

We enjoy scaring ourselves in a safe, controlled environment. And perhaps we feel that spooking ourselves in fantasy exorcises or inoculates us from genuine terrors.

These genres reflect a throwback to the haunted imagination of the middle ages. They have a number of literal or analogical parallels in the medieval experience, viz. fear of death, fear of the dark, contagion, cannibalism, witchcraft. It's interesting that *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) combines the vampire mythos with plague rats.

I Am Legend

The most interesting aspect of the film is the providential motif. That's unusual in a SF film. In practice, if not in principle, the SF genre is militantly secular. We can argue whether the SF genre is inherently secular. Some SF writers were Christian, or wrote on Christian themes, and James Jordan happens to think the SF worldview is inherently Christian rather than secular.

But, as a matter of practice, early writers like H. G. Wells were militantly secular in their outlook, and that cast the die.

Not that *I Am Legend* is overtly Christian by any means. But it is religious. There are a number of conveniently coincidental events in I Am Legend, and while this would ordinarily be too good to be true, they are integral to the text and subtext.

In a flashback, Neville's wife prays for him. We also see a sign that says, "God still loves us." The sign has a picture of a butterfly. That ties into a butterfly motif. Neville's daughter was forming a butterfly with her hands. At one point, Neville's dog is chasing a butterfly in a cornfield.

Anna hears his radio signal, makes it safely to Manhattan, and rescues him from the hemocytes. She hears God. She talks about his plan. And she escapes safely to a colony in "Bethel" (note the Biblical allusion) Vermont, with the vaccine. Here we have a string of improbable events—made more improbable by their cumulative force.

Yet, at one point, Neville saw that Anna had a butterfly tattoo. So that's a sign from God. A fulfillment

foreshadowed by these earlier events. Anna is the antitype of these prefigural incidents.

One wonders if there's an allusion here, either to Anna the prophetess (Lk 2:36-38), or the legendary mother of the Virgin Mary.

In any case, there's a providential theme running through the film. Divine providence is the unifying theme.

Pumpkinhead

Pumpkinhead (1988) is a horror film. I saw some of it years ago on TV. I didn't see the beginning or ending, but I later read the plot.

It has elements of a B slasher film. But it has a mythic quality that transcends the execution. As Lewis observed:

> The pleasure of myth depends hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise… Sometimes, even from the first, there is hardly any narrative e element…The Hesperides, with their apple-tree and dragon, are already a potent myth, without bringing in Herakles to steal the apples.
> A man who first learns what is to him a great myth through a verbal account which is baldly or vulgarly or cacophonously written, discounts and ignores the bad writing and attends solely to the myth. He hardly minds about the writing. He is glad to have the myth on any terms…The value of myth is not a specifically literary value, or the appreciation of myth a specifically literary experience. He does not approach the words with the expectation or belief that they are good reading matter; they are merely information. their literary merits or faults do not count (for his main purpose) much more than those of a timetable or a cookery book. C. S. Lewis, **An Experiment in Criticism** (Canto 1992), 43-44,46.

In addition, it has a moral complexity that's rare in the genre of pop Hollywood horror flicks.

- A supernatural avenger

It's ironic that while progressive theologians expunge hell and OT holy war from Christian theology, secular directors reintroduce hell and retribution. This reflects a common grace instinct or haunted conscience. Humans can't shake the idea of just deserts, including supernatural recompense.

• Devil's pact

Creating a monster you can't control. In the story, the outraged father cuts a deal with the dark side to exact revenge for the wrongful death of his son. But there's collateral damage. Once evil is unleashed, it can't be contained. The avenger is unstoppable by any means. That makes him an effective avenger, but indiscriminate. Good Samaritans are marked for death.

• Revenge

The avenger is a surrogate for the father. The father sees the mayhem which the avenger wreaks through the eyes of the avenger, as if they have merged at a certain level. The avenger is a projection of the father's thirst for vengeance. The avenger empowers the impotent father's rage.

• Self-sacrifice

The only way to destroy the avenger is for the father, on whose behalf the monster was resurrected, to sacrifice his own life. Only that will break the cycle.

The film also benefits from the great Lance Henriksen in the lead.

There's a lot of coded theology in this film. It's striking that as mainline denominations become secularized and abandon "offensive" biblical theology, secular filmmakers keep returning to archetypal biblical themes. Even though they reject Christian theology, they are irresistibly drawn back to the symbolism of Christian theology. That's a bridge for Christian apologists and evangelists.

Tragicomedy

Sometimes, when we watch a movie, we can't tell ahead of time if the plot is tragic or comedic. To take a comparison:

For much of its running time, "*L.A. Confidential*" seems episodic–one sensational event after another, with no apparent connection...The plot, based on the novel by James Ellroy, can only be described as labyrinthine. For long periods, we're not even sure that it is a plot, and one of the film's pleasures is the way director Curtis Hanson and writer Brian Helgeland put all the pieces into place before we fully realize they're pieces. How could these people and events possibly be related? We don't much mind, so long as the pieces themselves are so intriguing...And when all of the threads are pulled together at the end, you really have to marvel at the way there was a plot after all, and it all makes sense, and it was all right there waiting for someone to discover it.

https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-la-confidential-1997

Many movies are slipshod. They have plot holes and loose-ends. That makes viewers cynical. Having seen so many poorly crafted movies, if the plot seems to be pointless, it probably is.

You've seen movies where, when you start, it could go either way. But there comes a point where it's too late for the movie to improve. You were hoping for the best, but you say to yourself, this isn't going to get any better, is it? The movie's a dud.

The Happening by M. Night Shyamalan has a very thin plot. Barely a plot. An idea rather than a plot. Not a rich enough idea to turn into a good story. It has some promising moments, yet never catches fire.

But sometimes the viewer is pleasantly surprised. In *Past Tense* (1994), the plot is initially and deliberately confounding. That's because the viewer sees events through the delirious eyes of a comatose patient. Only the viewer doesn't know that right away. It's only as the patient struggles to regain consciousness that the plot finally falls into place. As the protagonist becomes lucid, the plot becomes lucid. Because the story is shown through the eyes of one character, the viewer is captive to his blinkered outlook.

Commenting on another film, Ebert says:

> The movie is hypnotic; we're drawn along as if one thing leads to another–but nothing leads anywhere…"*Mulholland Drive*" is all dream. There is nothing that is intended to be a waking moment. Like real dreams, it does not explain, does not complete its sequences, lingers over what it finds fascinating, dismisses unpromising plotlines.

https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mulholland-drive-2001

What makes some women glorious?

> *but woman is the glory of man (1 Cor 11:7).*

1. In this post I'm not exegeting 1 Cor 11:7. I'm just using that verse as a launchpad to offer my personal interpretation of what makes some women glorious. Men think a lot about women, and there are many different ways to appreciate women. In a secular culture that degrades womanhood, as well as some religious cultures (e.g. Islam), I think it's useful to unpack the notion.

2. Some women are iconic. They project a feminine ideal even though they aren't virtuous women.

3. The cliche example of a feminine ideal is a visually beautiful woman. An optimal example of the female form.

It's interesting that Paul uses hair to illustrate the glory of women (1 Cor 11:15). He uses an aesthetic criterion rather than a spiritual criterion. That's because he trades on alternating literal and figurative connotations of headship, but it's still striking that he doesn't focus on sanctity to illustrate the glory of women, even though he undoubtedly rates that higher than hair.

4. Another example of feminine beauty is a vocal beauty. A woman with a beautiful singing voice. Men and boys can also have great singing voices, but a fine female voice has a an unmistakably feminine timbre. So that's another uniquely feminine ideal.

5. Some women are gifted writers. They write with eloquence and psychological insight. And they write with a uniquely feminine sensibility.

This may also be true of female directors. I haven't done a systematic comparison. And this may also be true of some female musicians (e.g. Alicia de Larrocha).

6. Some women embody natural character virtues that make them good wives and mothers.

7. Some women embody moral heroism. Ironically, it's possible for a woman to be morally heroic even though she's not a virtuous woman. Marlene Dietrich is a case in point. She turned down Hitler's offer to be the queen of the Nazi cinema. She sided with the Allies. And she entertained the troops on the frontlines, at risk of being killed or–even worse–captured alive. Imagine what the Nazis would have done to her if they caught up with her!

Yet she wasn't a good woman. She was a quintessentially decadent woman.

8. Some women embody spiritual virtues. They are saintly. Holy. Far advanced in sanctification.

Beowulf

I'm not a Tolkien scholar, so this post will reflect my limitations in that regard. I read LOTR once, as a teenager, to find out what all the hoopla was about. Once was enough. It's not a bad novel. It has a travelogue quality that appeals to a boyish sense of adventure, common to many men–myself included. It has a few memorable scenes and characters. But in general it's overrated. He's not a great storyteller like Homer (esp. The Odyssey)–much less the incomparable Dante. It lacks the primitive appeal and elemental simplicity of the Epic of Gilgamesh. In the past I have suggested that it reflects the medieval chivalric tradition. I found the movies enjoyable. Not the highest art, but they work at the level of the material.

One of the interpretive issues regarding LOTR is the relationship between the story and Tolkien's Catholicism. If it has a Catholic Christian subtext, that's very muted. Not only are the characters not Christian, but they don't seem to be very pious. There's no worship or prayer, that I recall, either individually or institutionally.

Tolkien wrote a seminary essay on **Beowulf**:

https://epistleofdude.wordpress.com/2019/02/11/beowulf-the-monsters-and-the-critics/

And one question is whether LOTR was partly modeled on **Beowulf**. There's an interesting tension between the worldview of the narrator and the worldview of the characters. The basic story is Viking legend. The product of

a warrior culture with pagan values. The Protagonist is something of a demigod, doing battle with monsters.

The outlook of the protagonist is essentially heathen. Similar to the honor-code of Homeric heroes. Mortality is inevitable, so what matters is to die a glorious death.

However, the narrator is a medieval Christian. So he's retelling the legend from the retrospective standpoint of a medieval Christian. The generates an interesting tension between the pagan, polytheistic viewpoint of the main character and the providential, monotheistic viewpoint of the narrator. The narrator attributes the hidden hand of providence to certain outcomes. There's nothing overtly Christian about the setting, plot, dialogue, or characters. Christian insight is supplied by the editorial asides of the narrator.

This is nicely explicated in a two-part lecture by Scott Masson:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bnuM-WkM50

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTEeBt16orA

So **Beowulf** reflects a transitional period from Norse paganism to Norse Christianity. Both forward-looking and backward looking.

There may be an residual element of that same unresolved tension in LOTR, between the Catholic viewpoint of the narrator (Tolkien) and the pre-Christian (?) viewpoint of the characters.

Of course, Middle Earth has a different history than our world, so there's a sense in which it couldn't be Christian in any direct respect. The Christian faith is the product of a particular world history. That can't be transferred or duplicated as is to a planet with a different world history. At best, Tolkien could create a variation on Christianity. Something analogous to Christianity, but with a different backstory.

It is striking, though, that Tolkien feels no duty to integrate LOTR into Catholicism. Perhaps that reflects a lay/clerical dichotomy, where he thinks it's the role of the clergy rather than laity to promote the Catholic faith–whereas the Anglican Lewis felt no such inhibition. Cf. A. Jacobs, **The Narnian** (HarperOne 2006), 199.

It may also go to the stereotypical difference between a cradle Catholic and an adult convert. Lewis had the evangelistic and apologetic zeal of a convert. The need to justify his conversion as well as the enthusiasm to share his discovery with the lost. What they are now, he used to be. He reaches back to bring others into the light.

I find **Beowulf** of some personal, autobiographical interest due to my own Viking ancestry (on my father's side). Of course, the Christianity of the medieval narrator is far removed from my Protestant theology. I'm standing at the end of that trajectory.

Interplanetary politics

1. From what I've read, **Perelandra** is the most popular entry in the Space Triology, although a few connoisseurs (e.g. Rowan Williams) prefer **That Hideous Strength**. **Perelandra**'s my personal favorite in the Space Trilogy.

Perelandra was initially Lewis's favorite until he wrote **Til We Have Faces**. Some literary critics agree that that's his best novel, but that may be because they think they're *supposed* to admire it and rank it higher than the others. For a couple of reasons, I think it's possible that Lewis himself overrated **Til We have Faces**. The myth of Cupid and Psyche had captivated him since he read it for the first time in 1916, when he was still a teenager. But there were many false starts. He tried to do a poetic version. He struggled with how to retell the myth for almost 40 years. His own worldview as well as the interpretation evolved over time. Cf. Peter Schakel's chapter (20) in **The Cambridge Companion to C. S. Lewis**.

In addition, the breakthrough moment came when he talked it over with his future wife:

> Jack has started a new fantasy–for grownups. His methods of work amaze me. One night he was lamenting that he couldn't get a good idea for a book. We kicked a few ideas around till one came to life. Then we had another whiskey each and bounced it back and forth between us. The next day, without

> further planning, he wrote the first chapter! I read it and made some criticisms…he did it over and went on with the next. D. King, ed. **Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman** (Eerdmans 2009), 242.

So he may have associated the book with his wife, which lends it a special poignancy for him.

2. Because for most readers, myself included, **That Hideous Strength** is a letdown after **Perelandra**, it raises the question of how or whether it could be better written. Another question is whether he should have ended with **Perelandra**. What do you do for an encore? If the final installment can't equal, must less surpass, the second entry, would it be wiser for Lewis to quit while he was ahead rather than end with an anticlimactic climax?

In fairness, it's not a bad book. It has some memorable scenes. Strokes of genius. It's prophetic. But it's not all of a piece.

3. As every commentator explains, **That Hideous Strength** marks an abrupt stylistic shift from the first two installments, due in part to the newer influence of Charles Williams and spent impact of Tolkien. Tolkien was no longer a creative stimulus for Lewis, in part because Lewis had outgrown Tolkien, who was a smaller talent, and due to irreconcilable artistic visions.

But over and above that, a change was inevitable. At a scenic level, **That Hideous Strength** can't compete with the extraterrestrial landscapes and seascapes of Venus and

Mars, or their species. That's exacerbated by the fact that Lewis makes no pretense of astronomical accuracy. They exist in his cosmological mythos. That frees him to indulge in surreal flights of fancy unconstrained by what's physically possible. By contrast, **That Hideous Strength** must have a more realistic setting. After all, his readers are earthlings.

4. One of the tensions in **Out of the Silent Planet** is Lewis attacking secular science and its counterpart in hard science fiction. In particular, the materialist notion that outer space is mostly deserted and dead. But as a matter of fact, that's the case. And even though Lewis didn't have the benefit contemporary astronomy, c. 2020, he must have known back in the 1930s that there was no presumption of other life in our solar system.

Of course, this is soft SF, not meant to be accurate, but then, what does his critique amount to in that respect? It works at the level of his fictional cosmology, but it's not a refutation of the hard SF view of the universe as mostly deserted and dead.

However, that's offset by the fact that soft SF is never obsolete, whereas the danger of futuristic hard SF is to become dated when overtaken by real events. It works if you have a dualistic view of reality, where there are spiritual agents behind the physical realm, who participate in the physical realm. Interaction between two different domains. Sacramental universe.

5. Despite the comedown, there is some justification in the third and final installment. All three share the common theme of a primordial angelic rebellion. Against his will, Ransom is drawn into the internal affairs of Mars. Then he is

summoned to Venus. The Martian guardian angel visits earth to facilitate the trip.

In terms of dramatic logic and closure, it makes sense that events come to a head on earth. Having decisively intervened on Venus, it's only fair that heavenly angels lend Ransom a hand for a critical battle with the dark side on earth. Especially since earth is the epicenter of the cosmic rebellion. That rounds out the dramatic arc of a story that began with Mars and proceeded through Venus.

6. In addition, it gives Lewis a pretext to reinterpret the King Arthur mythos–a theme many English poets and novelists find irresistible. Merlin fits into Lewis's philosophy of myth and magic. However, making Ransom a descendent of King Arthur is ad hoc. King Arthur has no useful role to play in a 20C setting. He's timebound in a way that Merlin is not.

The Wonderful Visit

1. Temptation and the Fall are recurrent themes in the fiction of C. S. Lewis. Demonic temptation is a pervasive theme in **The Screwtape Letters**. Satanic Temptation and a Fall averted is a pervasive theme of **Perelandra**. **The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe** narrates the temptation, downfall, and redemption of Edmund. **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader** narrates the temptation, downfall, and redemption of Eustace. In **The Magicians Nephew**, Lewis synchronizes creation with The fall when Jadis invades Narnia at the moment of creation. The same novel narrates the temptation of Digory in an Edenic/Hesperidian garden, only he successfully resists the temptation. For whatever reason, Lewis seems to be fascinated with these themes.

2. There's a related, potential theme in **Out of the Silent Planet**, only Lewis doesn't develop it in that direction. Mars underwent Satanic attack which left it physically damaged, but the three intelligent species remain unfallen. Ransom, a fallen agent, is interjected into that world. That generates contact between unfallen agents and a fallen agent. Yet Ransom, though fallen agent, is benign. He's not a malevolent agent like Jadis, or the Un-man in **Perelandra**.

Even so, this raises an interesting idea, although it's not developed in the novel. Although Ransom has no malicious intentions, yet because he is fallen, he can inadvertently

seed the unfallen species with evil notions. He's not wicked, but he's like a soldier fresh from the war zone, where you have to watch your back all the time. The kind of precautions and suspicions necessary to survive in a fallen world are foreign to the agents of an unfallen world. Simply by talking about his own experience, by comparing and contrasting his world with their world, he can unwittingly plant sinister ideas in their imagination that never occurred to them. Like a species with no resistance, much less immunity, to exotic diseases, a well-meaning fallen agent might infect unfallen agents. His presence could prove contagious even though he's not a tempter. That's assuming the aliens, while sinless, are not impeccable.

3. However, we can also develop the same idea in reverse: the effect of interjecting an unfallen agent into a fallen world. What would be the reaction? John Ruskin once remarked that if an angel was spotted in England, he'd be shot on sight. That prompted H. G. Wells to write **The Wonderful Visit**. Since Wells was an atheist, and the novel is social satire, the protagonist is not a conventional angel by orthodox standards. Rather, he represents a truly innocent, guileless being. He has no understanding of humans and they have no understanding of him. He provokes hostility by compassionate but clueless actions like freeing farm animals. Eventually, he returns to wherever he came from because his presence is intolerable.

Although that's fictional, it has realistic analogies. Take the persecution of Christians. The virtuous are hated in a world where the normal is vice. The supreme example is the

homicidal hostility to Jesus. Darkness fears and despises the light.

What makes the LOTR movies better than the Narnia movies?

Recently I was watching a roundtable discussion in which one of the participants tried to explain why he preferred the LOTR movies to the Narnia movies. It's an interesting question.

By way of disclaimer, it's been several years since I saw the movies, and decades since I read the fiction, so my recollections may be fuzzy, but here's how I'd answer the question:

1. One reason I think LOTR translates more easily into film is its travelogue quality. That naturally invites a cinematic adaptation.

The Middle Earth landscape is more down-to-earth than some of the Narnia books (e.g. **Voyage of the Dawn Treader**, **The Magician's Nephew**).

2. In addition, the LOTR movies had a bigger budget and better director. By the same token, they were filmed in New Zealand, to take advantage of the fabulous landscape. So the movies have a more wide-open feel to them.

By contrast, the world of the Narnia movies felt more cramped and artificial–like they were mostly filmed in studios or made more extensive use of CGI. Mind you, if they had a bigger budget, as well as a director who excels at simulated worlds (e.g. James Cameron, George Lucas), that wouldn't be an impediment.

3. Lewis generally uses characters as mouthpieces for his philosophical and theological musings. So they're apt to be one-dimensional, with stilted dialogue. Compared to so many other novelists, Lewis is aloof when it comes to characterization.

Lucy is an exception, but that's because she was inspired by a real girl Lewis was very fond of (June Flewett). The daughter he never had. Lucy comes alive in the way other characters don't because it has a real template, and Lewis found her delightful. Another exception is Digory, but that's because Lewis put a lot of himself into that character, from is own troubled upbringing.

By contrast, Tolkien didn't have nearly as many interesting ideas as Lewis, which makes the characters and their interaction more natural and realistic. Compared to many other gifted novelists, Lewis is rather weak on dialogue and characterization. Where he comes into his element and excels most other novelists is in the realm of ideas and the evocative, otherworldly settings. When it comes to fictional settings, he's more like Ray Bradbury and Cordwainer-Smith–although the latter is better at dialogue and characterization than Lewis.

4. Lewis has far higher peaks than Tolkien. Some of his fiction moves on a transcendent plane (**Perelandra**; **The Voyage of the Dawn Treader**; **The Magician's Nephew**) that Tolkien can't match. Indeed, Tolkien doesn't even aspire to such heights, and that would lie beyond his reach if he tried. Lewis uses his fiction to illustrate his sense of sehnsucht, and he has both the imagination and expressive prose to succeed.

That's more challenging to capture on film, without the distinctive and descriptive voice of Lewis as narrator. It would take a bigger budget and a more talented, imaginative director than Michael Apted to emulate that quality.

5. Finally, the film version of **THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER** isn't long enough to do justice to the narrative. It needs to linger more and savor the atmospherics.

Why Lewis wrote fiction

Why did C. S. Lewis write Christian fiction? He seemed to have several related motivations:

> "Any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it." (C. S. Lewis, 9 August 1939), **The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis**.

> I thought I saw how stories of this kind could steal past a certain inhibition which had paralysed much of my own religion in childhood. Why did one find it so hard to feel as one was told one ought to feel about God or the sufferings of Christ? I thought the chief reason was that one was told one ought to. An obligation to feel can freeze feelings. And reverence itself did harm. The whole subject was associated with lowered voices; almost as if it were something medical. But supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency? Could one not thus steal past those watchful dragons? I thought one could. "Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say Best What's to Be Said"

> And finally, though it may seem a sour paradox – we must sometimes get away from the Authorised Version, if for no other reason, simply because it is so beautiful and so solemn. Beauty exalts, but beauty also lulls. Early associations endear but they also confuse. Through that beautiful solemnity the transporting or

horrifying realities of which the book tells may come to us blunted and disarmed and we may only sigh with tranquil veneration when we ought to be burning with shame or struck dumb with terror or carried out of ourselves by ravishing throes and adoration. Does the word ‘scourged’ really come home to us like ‘flogged’? Does ‘mocked him’ sting like ‘jeered at him’? "Introduction to J.B. Phillips’ Letters to Young Churches: A Translation of the New Testament Epistles."

Our great danger at present is lest the church should continue to practice a merely missionary technique in what has become a missionary situation. A century ago our task was to edify those who had been brought up in the faith: our present task is chiefly to convert and instruct infidels. Great Britain is as much part of the mission field as China. Now if you were sent to the Bantus you would be taught their language and traditions. You need similar teaching about the language and mental habits of your own uneducated and unbelieving fellow countrymen. Many priests are quite ignorant on this subject. What I know about it I have learned from talking in R.A.F.8 camps. They were mostly inhabited by Englishmen and, therefore, some of what I shall say may be irrelevant to the situation in Wales. You will sift out what does not apply.

(1) I find that the uneducated Englishman is an almost total sceptic about history. I had expected he would disbelieve the Gospels because they contain miracles: but he really disbelieves them because they deal with things that happened two thousand years ago. He would disbelieve equally in the battle of Actium if he heard of it. To those who have had our kind of education, his state of mind is very difficult to realize.

To us the present has always appeared as one section in a huge continuous process.

In his mind the present occupies almost the whole field of vision. Beyond it, isolated from it, and quite unimportant, is something called "the old days"—a small, comic jungle in which highwaymen, Queen Elizabeth, knights-in-armor, etc. wander about. Then (strangest of all) beyond the old days comes a picture of "primitive man." He is "science," not "history," and is therefore felt to be much more real than the old days. In other words, the prehistoric is much more believed in than the historic.

(2) He has a distrust (very rational in the state of his knowledge) of ancient texts. Thus a man has sometimes said to me, "These records were written in the days before printing, weren't they? And you haven't got the original bit of paper, have you? So what it comes to is that someone wrote something and someone else copied it and someone else copied that and so on. Well, by the time it comes to us, it won't be in the least like the original." This is a difficult objection to deal with because one cannot, there and then, start teaching the whole science of textual criticism. But at this point their real religion (i.e. faith in "science") has come to my aid. The assurance that there is a "science" called "textual criticism" and that its results (not only as regards the New Testament, but as regards ancient texts in general) are generally accepted, will usually be received without objection. (I need hardly point out that the word "text" must not be used, since to your audience it means only "a scriptural quotation.")

> (3) A sense of sin is almost totally lacking. Our situation is thus very different from that of the Apostles. The Pagans (and still more the metuentes9) to whom they preached were haunted by a sense of guilt and to them the Gospel was, therefore, "good news." We address people who have been trained to believe that whatever goes wrong in the world is someone else's fault—the capitalists', the government's, the Nazis', the generals', etc. They approach God Himself as His judges. They want to know, not whether they can be acquitted for sin, but whether He can be acquitted for creating such a world. "Christian Apologetics"

To take stock, Lewis wrote Christian fiction because:

i) Many Englishmen of his generation were too illiterate to understand traditional Christian jargon.

ii) Many were skeptical about historical knowledge.

iii) Traditional English worship coated the Gospel in so much pious shellac that it made no impression.

iv) A good story, a story with mythic power, can steal past the censor.

How should we evaluate his motivations?

i) His evangelistic impulse is commendable.

ii) From a strictly artistic standpoint, the best way to write fiction is to have a good idea for a story, and not begin with an agenda, then create a story to illustrate the agenda. Mind you, some authors have the talent to pull that off, but for less talented authors it comes across as preachy and

stilted. Where the story is secondary to the agenda, where the story exists to make a point, and not because it has its own dramatic logic and appeal.

iii) Of course, it might be objected that evangelism should take precedence over artistic considerations, and in an ultimate sense that's true, but it's a false dichotomy. It's not as if you can only do one or the other. You can write fiction and do apologetics. Just keep them separate.

iv) In addition, when writing Christian fiction (or nonfiction devotional writing), the most authentic expression of Christian piety will come, not from beginning with an evangelist agenda, but from how the author finds Christian meaning in his own experience. How he makes sense of his own life and the world around him. Christian fiction should be one way for an author to internalize his faith. Life as interpretation and interpretation as life. That may have an evangelistic side-effect on the reader, and it will be more persuasive because it goes to the taproot of the author's lived-in faith.

v) A more serious problem with writing analogical Christian fiction is that the mythos of the storybook world may become a substitute for the original message it was designed to illustrate. When the author transmutes Christian theology into fictional analogies, do readers make the reverse transition? Or does that become an alternative to Christian theology? Does the mythos become their theological frame of reference?

vi) Apropos (v), the fiction of Lewis is more entertaining than the Bible. It avoids much that is dull, grubby, tawdry, and obscure in Scripture. Fiction is selective in a way that history is not. So it's easier for the reader to get his

theology from **The Space Trilogy**, **The Great Divorce**, **The Chronicles of Narnia**, and **The Screwtape Letters**, than the complex, emotionally and intellectually demanding anthology of Scripture. To be sure, a reader is as much at fault as the author when that happens.

In fairness, I hasten to add that **Perelandra** is a little different. It's not a recasting or reinterpretation of the biblical Fall, but an alternate history. What if the Tempter failed? In that regard, it doesn't replace Gen 3.

Films for boys

1. Some Christian parents have lists of books for kids to read. Classics which every boy or girl should read by the time they reach adulthood. Cliche examples include **The Chronicles of Narnia**.

However, I haven't seen comparable lists for movies. I mean, there are lists of "safe" movies for kids. Bubble-gummy G-rated fare. But I mean something more intelligent and grownup, parallel to serious literature.

Due to the overwhelming dominance of the cinematic artform in contemporary culture, it's useful to make a list. At the same time it's a daunting task due to the thousands of films. This post will focus on male-oriented movies because that's what I naturally relate to.

There are films by categories, like sports, horror, science fiction, Western, war. Sports movies about an underdog athlete or team that defies the odds are popular, and there are movies on that theme which represent different sports:

- *Friday Night Lights* (football)
- *Goal!* (soccer)
- *Miracle* (hockey)
- *Hoosiers* (basketball)
- *Vision Quest* (wrestling)

There are popular Westerns like the *Lonesome Dove* series.

Although it may not be a technical genre, wildness films set in the high country, Yukon, or safaris (African savanna, Amazon jungle) are naturally appealing to guys.

There's a large category of war films. This can include Arthurian tales which model the virtues of chivalry.

2. From the standpoint of Christian parenting, what interests me more than genre are memorable films that can provide a frame of reference to illustrate and stimulate thinking about philosophy, theology, and ethics.

3. There are films that explore the relationship between appearance or illusion and reality:

• *Harsh Realm*

• *The Matrix* (1999)

• *Dark City*

• *The Prisoner* (2009)

4. There are existential films that explore the meaning of life:

• *Last Holiday (1950)*

• *Tuck Everlasting*

5. Some films probe moral issues, like *Strangers on a Train*

6. *Final Destination* (2000) is a convenient illustration of fatalism.

7. There are time-travel/parallel universe films that compare and contrast tradeoffs involving alternate life choices:

• *Mr. Nobody*

• *The Butterfly Effect*

8. *October Sky* is good coming-of-age film

9. An important plot motif, that's not unique to any particular genre, is the story of "friends" or comrades who

are thrust into a group survival situation. This can take place in different settings: wilderness, battlefield, island, POW camp.

This becomes a test of friendship. Will they be altruistic? Will they takes risks for each other? Or will they turn on each other, double-cross one other, leave the sick and injured behind to die? Theme of loyalty, deception, betrayal, revenge, and/or reconciliation. A winnowing process.

That theme is sometimes explored in war films, wilderness films, and spring break teen films. I don't have any particular titles in mind.

Just as certain books like **The Pilgrim's Progress**, **The Chronicles of Narnia**, **Lord of the Flies**, and **Perelandra** can function as a lifelong frame of reference which grown children continue to reflect on and refer back to, it would be good for Christian parents to select a dozen or so films which can serve the same purpose. For instance, fathers and sons can watch the same film together, then talk about the significance of the film. Some films may raise important questions but lack the Christian resources to give good answers.

Kitschy flicks

1. It's often said that most Christian movies are kitsch. To be fair, I think that's usually directed at evangelical movies. Off the top of my head I can think of several excellent Catholic movies, viz. *Beckett, Brideshead Revisited, Diary of a Country Priest, In This House of Brede, A Man for All Seasons, The Nun's Story, The Scarlet and the Black, and Monsieur Quixote*. And there are undoubtedly others I'm unaware of.

In general, Catholic movies are better than evangelical movies. That may be because Catholicism generally puts greater emphasis on the fine arts than the Protestant faith (an exception are Dutch painters). Catholic worship is more visually oriented. Same is true for the Eastern Orthodox (and to some extent Anglican worship). In reviewing *The Passion of the Christ*, Roger Ebert insightfully noted that Gibson was inspired more by the stations of the cross than the Gospels.

In fairness, I've seen hardly any of the evangelical films on which the dismal reputation is based. One I did see which fits the trope is *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1970), although I thought Estrada acted fairly well, despite the material. But in general it was a cringe-worthy film. Which is a pity because it's based on a true story with lots of dramatic potential. It needed a better director.

Michael Landon Jr. is an evangelical director. I watched *Love's Enduring Promise* (2004), which was fairly good. The next installment, *Love's Long Journey* (2005) suffered from a replacement actress who wasn't as

charismatic as the original actress. However, I lost interest in the franchise.

The best evangelical movie might be *To End All Wars*, yet I confess that while I own it, I've never been in the right mood to watch it. But I did love the novel.

2. This goes to the underlying question, what makes a Christian story *Christian*? In his book **A Christian Guide to the Classics**, Leland Ryken draws a useful distinction:

> Some Christian literature takes specifically spiritual experience as its subject matter…In other Christian literature it is not the subject matter that is religious but the perspective that the author brings to bear on the subject (64).

i) To expand on his distinction, the content can be what makes a story Christian. A story with a distinctly Christian plot, characters, setting, dialogue. Stock examples include **Paradise Lost**, **The Divine Comedy**, **The Pilgrim's Progress**, and **Perelandra**.

ii) Or it can be the narrative viewpoint. That's more oblique. The plot, character, setting, and dialogue might not be distinctly Christian or churchly. It might involve mundane experiences common to believers and unbelievers alike. Yet that can still be oriented towards a Christian outlook, in terms of what is shown or implied to be ultimately important. Hopes and longings that can only be satisfied within a Christian framework. Redemptive motifs. The use of subtle Christian symbolism. The dawn of heaven casting shadows into this world's valley.

Of course, these aren't airtight dichotomies. A Christian story can have elements of each in varying degrees.

A weakness of many evangelical films may be overreliance on explicit Christian subject matter to convey the message. Mind you, that can be the basis of great Christian storytelling, but not if the execution is formulaic and heavy-handed. It requires originality and imagination.

Likewise, the failure of evangelical directors to project a Christian vision through a more mundane vehicle, by way of emblem and contrast. That could be due to limited talent or thin theology.

3. In my own fiction I oscillate between the two different methods of Christian storytelling, even though I don't set out to tell a story with that conscious distinction in mind. My fiction is Christian, not because I have an apologetic agenda, not because this is evangelism in a fictional garb (although there's nothing wrong with that motivation), but because that's what I care about. That's what centers my own life. I write the kind of fiction I do because it speaks to me, not the reader. Hopefully it speaks to the reader as well, but the best fiction is more organic. It is not in the first instance an apologetic or evangelistic goal, but the side-effect of the goal I'm personally aiming for in my own pilgrimage. When I do apologetics, I do it straight. That's a different genre. And my fiction isn't purposeful in that sense, but expressive of my journey. In that respect, my fiction lacks the apologetic thrust of C. S. Lewis.