“A Long Defeat? C.S. Lewis’ Apocalypse of the Imagination”

Of all the things that C.S. Lewis never actually said, I am most grateful to him for this moment of wisdom:

> “You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.”

This particular version of the quote is brought to you by “a place to be mom”—an organization that I’m pretty sure C.S. Lewis did not found. That this non-quote by C.S. Lewis is one of his most famous words of Internet wisdom tells us that, at least,

> “You are never too old to make a new quote or to meme a new meme”

While I understand the intention of this meme is to encourage, enlighten, and embolden, it leaves me somewhat depressed about the future of humanity—at least in terms of the imaginative capacity our species. With random yellow splotches of a 1990s font, the meme is not beautiful. Neither is it true to how we feel as our dreams lay dying, when all the dreams in our chest remain unfulfilled.

No, as I look at this falsely inspirational quote by someone pretending to be C.S. Lewis, I do not see a lover of beauty watching a sunset, I see the senility of our race awaiting the apocalypse of imagination.

I think you can see it too, the clouds swirling in the distance as the sun sets for the last time on the poetic possibilities of the planet….

This is how the world ends: broken dreams and bad memes.

Well, it is perhaps time to turn to something that C.S. Lewis *actually* wrote—though probably something unseen even by the greatest friend of Narnia.

Within the Bodleian archive is a file called “Letters of C.S. Lewis.” This scrapbook includes 65 pages of Lewis’ first attempt to write a novel. “The Quest of Bleheris” is a chivalric romance where the young Sir Bleheris pricks forth to adventure in the North, seeking the STRIVER in the mountainous wastes and wilds far from his sleepy, seaside world.

It is an epistolary tale, written by a 17-year-old Lewis to his closest friend, Arthur Greeves—a pianist and painter whom he dubs “my Galahad” in the text, a moniker invited by Arthur’s chaste piety. Indeed, the somewhat Bunyanesque pilgrimage of self-discovery contains much of Lewis’ cutting anti-theism of the period—for which he must occasionally apologize to Arthur.

But we have this century-old tale because *his best friend Arthur kept it*. Lewis hoped in sending Arthur a chapter a week throughout 1916 that Arthur would illustrate the material. The collaboration was unfinished—much like Lewis’ teenage piece, *Loki Bound*, a project they planned together in 1914. Each week, Lewis faithfully wrote a chapter of “Bleheris” on paper stolen from his roommate’s desk, until he lost his heart for Bleheris’ adventure.

Even unfinished, “Bleheris” remains an intriguing expression of one of the themes that run through Lewis’ imaginative works, what I call the Apocalypse of the Imagination.

As “The Quest of Bleheris” opens, we are in a world that has faded twice from brilliance. Lewis writes to Galahad of “the old days, when this world was still young and full of wonders.” Having immersed himself in medieval and romantic texts in his teen year, Lewis is reaching back to “old books” and “old tales,” times of friendship and bravery and adventure.

As Lewis looks with longing to the time of Bleheris, intriguingly, the young hero of our tale is also looking back with longing to another time and place where “Here Be Dragons” paints the edges of every map. Bleheris’ culture has all the *forms* of chivalry, but heroes no longer venture forth in quests. Instead, young knights turn from writing “bransles and ballades” to their Lady to settling down with an *actual* wife and home and pension plan. Restless, Bleheris looks Northward:

> … and his eyes fell of a sudden upon the Great Mountains: and he saw how stark and grim and baleful they lay in the pale moonlight, so that perforce there came flooding on him a host of memories of all the old tales concerning them – of the hideous passes among them, of wizard cities and evil places in their gloomy woods and of brave knights‘ adventurings there and in the unheard-of lands beyond, away to the North. And as he thought thereon, the dull, sober world in which he lived waxed ever more and more irksome to him: for he too had had his dreams, and thought that surely he should do great things in the world, and fight and love as mightily as the heroes of old song. But now it seemed that his life was but a short space, a thing little worth: that he should marry and live at ease, and beget sons to live also at ease, as others did before him, and at the latter end to wax old and die, with all his dreams yet hidden neath a soft jerkin that none might know him from another.

Wow, yes, perhaps if Bleheris had had Instagram, he would have known that “You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.” Instead, the narrator scorns Bleheris: how easy it is for

> “they that have no sorrow … [to] yet make themselves griefs from the fabrick of their own dreams.”

How much of your sorrow and grief comes from your own unfulfilled dreams? I have buried mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, and friends, and still the dreams hidden in my chest bring great sorrow to me.

Without the benefit of ill-made memes, Sir Bleheris must work out his own vision for his life. Looking Northward, he finds his resolution:

> But even as thus he pondered those dark moonlit hills with all their wonders … weaving a spell about him: so anon a new thought, as it had been a gust of sweet, cold morning-wind, smote upon the dungeon of his soul, that he almost laughed for joy. “Now body-a-mine,” he cried “Of a truth I will Not do thus! By God’s wounds, in this hour do I understand what ails me: all my days have I done naught. For three and twenty years have I tilted with my fellows, and ridden on hunting and made ballads, forsooth. But now my deeds shall be the song I make…. I am not shackled as an ox, that I must abide where I am set. Nay, I will go hence as the knights adventurous did & seek great deeds out there, beyond the Cloudy Pass.”

“my deeds shall be the song I make”—is there anything greater than that? A statement of haunting truth from the pen of a teenager awaiting his own adventure of war—a war that left the dreams of so many poets inside their crushed chests.

This looking back and back in “The Quest of Bleheris” reveals a sense of fading. Bleheris’ culture has had an Apocalypse of the Imagination, so that all that was once good and beautiful and true is now insipid and empty, only the form of wondrous things remaining.

“Where are all the wonders?” the Hebrew hero Gideon asks the angel as he threshes grain in enemy-occupied winepresses under the cloak of darkness.

“We are the hollow men,” T.S. Eliot tells us, and

> This is the way the world ends
> Not with a bang but a whimper”

And we … are we hollow men, standing in a wasteland of empty memes and broken dreams, in a disenchanted world after the Apocalypse of the Imagination?

As Lewis was writing Bleheris, the war that would break the world had not yet called for him and Tolkien’s masterpiece was still a secret vice—the dreams hidden in his own mythopoeic chest. And yet, in this apocalyptic whimper of the imagination in Lewis’ works, we can almost hear the Lady Galadriel speaking of the fading of her own world in her vision:

> “together through ages of the world we have fought the long defeat.”

“You and I,” Tolkien writes to Christopher during the second 30-year war of 1914-1945, “you and I belong to the ever-defeated never altogether subdued side.”

Lewis and Tolkien and a few other poets survived the trenches of the Great War, though the imaginations of Tennyson and Morris were buried there in the death of chivalric innocence. In this way, Eliot’s “Waste Land” is an elegy for imagination and meaning, a cultural moment almost truer than the poetry, like Beowulf’s death by dragon or *Richard III*’s “winter of our discontent” or Werther’s suicide—or Kurt Cobain’s.

As a young poet, Lewis’ “arrow was shot from the North.” He symbolized the Apocalypse of the Imagination with images of Ragnarök, where the fate of the gods is a twilight fading, the sorrow of the Edda, Götterdämmerung.

In Lewis’ tragic poem, *Loki Bound*, the intellectual rebel-hero, Loki perceives suffering and, ultimately, the Twilight of the Gods—a fading from light to dark, a whimper not a bang, a gloaming hue to the long defeat.

And then in his collection of WWI poetry, edited while convalescing in a military hospital, Lewis begins *Spirits in Bondage* with “Satan Speaks:”

> I am Nature, the Mighty Mother,
> I am the law: ye have none other.
>
> I am the flower and the dewdrop fresh,
> I am the lust in your itching flesh.

I am the battle's filth and strain,
I am the widow's empty pain.

I am the sea to smother your breath,
I am the bomb, the falling death.

I am the fact and the crushing reason
To thwart your fantasy's new-born treason.

I am the spider making her net,
I am the beast with jaws blood-wet.

I am a wolf that follows the sun
And I will catch him ere day be done

In this vision of the universe, there are no confederates for the mortal, who is betrayed by God, beauty, nature, sex, love, technology, war, myth, and reason. In a poetic version of the heat death of the universe, Sköll finally devours Sól, winking the world out into night. Ragnarök.

In "French Nocturne," the treacherous Sköll of WWI leads to the death of dreams:

The jaws of a sacked village, stark and grim,
Out on the ridge have swallowed up the sun

And while the trench-soldier's eye is drawn upward into divine visions, he is betrayed.

"False, mocking fancy! Once I too could dream"

And then defeat:

"What call have I to dream of anything?"

For dreams have died in the apocalyptic war of weariness.

In "Victory," one of the more profound poems, Lewis shows what the world kills in its rush to violence:

Roland is dead, Cuchulain's crest is low,
The battered war-gear wastes and turns to rust,
And Helen's eyes and Iseult's lips are dust
And dust the shoulders and the breasts of snow.

The faerie people from our woods are gone,
No Dryads have I found in all our trees.
No Triton blows his horn about our seas
And Arthur sleeps far hence in Avalon.

The ancient songs they wither as the grass
And waste as doth a garment waxen old,
All poets have been fools who thought to mould
A monument more durable than brass.

For these decay…

Legends, myths, heroes, poetry, and the land of faërie—all are laid waste and Arthur does not wake. As much as the war is the great catastrophe, it is decay that is the enemy: the waste land here is of rust and dust, withered grass, faded garments of imagination. We are men whose chests are hollowed out by war, dreams lost in the long defeat, the twilight of our imaginations.

"April is the cruellest month," "The Waste Land" tells us. In April 1922, T.S. Eliot was working on his last draft of "The Waste Land" as C.S. Lewis began his long narrative poem, *Dymer. Dymer* continues a lifelong fascination with dystopia begun in "Loki Bound" and shot through Narnia. "You need no greater prophets to destroy," the poem tells us.

The hero, *Dymer*, is a lazy, insolent, nihilistic rebel who awakes from a joyless and sorrowless slumber to casually murder the teacher in his utopian community. He then flees naked into the wilderness where he begets a monster in the darkness. In the last scene, Dymer faces his destiny as his monstrous son looms up before him. He has already been told by a goddess that he will die in the encounter.

His fate is sealed, it is his Ragnarök, all is lost, and so Dymer, with his back to the wall of destiny, takes his spear and launches himself at the monster he made of his life.

Peculiarly, almost perversely considering Lewis' strident anti-theism, in this deed of desperate but courageous self-sacrifice, Dymer undergoes a death and resurrection akin to the Christ story. It is in death that the defeated Dymer's "body brimmed with life." There is a trumpet sound—not of apocalyptic finality but of a resurging back of the great story into the present:

> And from the distant corner of day's birth
> He heard clear trumpets blowing and bells ring,
> A noise of great good coming into earth
> And such a music as the dumb would sing
> If Balder had led back the blameless spring
> With victory, with the voice of charging spears,
> And in white lands long-lost Saturnian years.

The age of war *is* a Saturnine age, not a Martial one. All things fade, decay, rust, rot, and slip away to meaninglessness and twilight.

And yet, there is in this misery a verdant element of hope.

This strange double reality of fatalistic death and poetic hope is part of Lewis' own story of awakening. As a teenager, Lewis read these words from Tegner's *Drapa* that forever changed him:

> I heard a voice that cried,
> Balder the beautiful
> Is dead, is dead—

"I knew nothing about Balder," Lewis would write in his memoir,

> "but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described…."

Lewis' memoir of spiritual rebirth is rooted, intriguingly, in the tragic and beautiful death of Balder. Thus, it is significant that Dymer's own rebirth is imaged as Balder's return with light to the twilit lands of Ragnarök.

This death-to-life crosscurrent is a feature of Lewis' Apocalypse of the Imagination. Returning to the "decay" in the poem "Victory," we see that there is death but also hope of resurrection:

> For these decay: but not for that decays
> The yearning, high, rebellious spirit of man
> That never rested yet since life began
> From striving with red Nature and her ways.
>
> Now in the filth of war, the baresark shout
> Of battle, it is vexed. And yet so oft
> Out of the deeps, of old, it rose aloft
> That they who watch the ages may not doubt.
>
> Though often bruised, oft broken by the rod,
> Yet, like the phoenix, from each fiery bed
> Higher the stricken spirit lifts its head
> And higher—till the beast become a god.

Rebels resisting decay, the phoenix rising from the ashes, hope of deification after death…. Perhaps not all dreams have died in the trenches.

I have no doubt that whatever else Bleheris might find on his journey, a finished tale would have revealed a vision of chivalric recovery: bravery, love, beauty, and honour. As "a gust of sweet, cold morning-wind, smote upon the dungeon of his soul," Bleheris cries out: "my deeds shall be the song I make," vowing to fight the long defeat against the apocalypse of the imagination, determining not simply "to wax old and die, with all his dreams yet hidden" in his chest.

We can see how Lewis is shaped by William Morris, the Arthuriad, traditions of tragedy and faërie and Nordic mythology. Just weeks before beginning "The Quest of Bleheris" in 1916, Lewis encountered George MacDonald's *Phantastes* at the Leatherhead Station. Like his numinous encounter with Balder, Lewis wrote that with *Phantastes*,

> "my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer."

Contrary to popular and critical imagination, Lewis does not mean "christened" here:

> [*Phantastes*] … had about it a sort of cool, morning innocence, and also, quite unmistakably, a certain quality of Death, good Death. What it actually did to me was to convert, even to baptize (that was where the Death came in) my imagination….

Something had to die in order for there to be new life. What Lewis called the "Macdonald conception of death" was critical to his ultimate conversion to Christianity. But this death and resurrection pattern is for Lewis where "the secret of secrets lies hid," a pattern that is "the very formula of reality." Whether it is art, literature, love, faith, ethics, or even his own identity

as a poet, for Lewis, we "must undergo some sort of death if [w]e would truly live." This is "a thing written all over the world," "the pattern of all … life," "a key principle…" to human experience, and "the great story on which the plot turns."

For Lewis, the cultural death of the Imagination was held in tandem with Imaginative awakening—a death that leads to resurrection.

So, how did Lewis fight the Long Defeat in his own life?

Much has been written about Lewis as someone who cuts down jungles of confusion, working as a cultural critic and apologist and literary controversialist. There certainly is a feistiness to Lewis' writings of the 1930s and 1940s: the biting self-satire of *Screwtape*, the humorous revolution of *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, a war of worldviews in the Ransom Cycle, his compelling voice on the BBC speaking about morality and faith.

However, when we want to know, for Lewis, what deeds will be the song he makes, Lewis saw his vocation, at least partly, as one who "awakens" his listeners from "slumber," "irrigating deserts" of the imagination as Dymer awakes, as Balder rises, as a phoenix stirs from the ashes, as Eustace loses his dragon form and is a new boy—ever himself but something more.

Even at the height of his work as an apologist, while he is speaking on the BBC and perhaps gaining some ground, there are countercurrents building in Lewis' work as a controversialist. Here is part of his "Apologist's Evening Prayer":

> From all my lame defeats and oh! much more
> From all the victories that I seemed to score;
> From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
> At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
> From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
> Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.

"Books! And cleverness!" Hermione confesses in a similar kind of self-derision. "There are more important things – friendship and bravery and…." Well, we have to read the whole story to know what else Hermione thinks is essential, but friendship and bravery and something else is a description that resonates in reading Lewis' fiction, and especially in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

There is still cultural critical energy in these works, but Lewis is no longer a battlefield warrior. Born from dreams of lions and images of a faun near a lamppost in a snowy wood, in Narnia, Lewis works to awaken the imagination by subverting and circumventing the gatekeepers of religion and culture. I am certain my mother would never have bought me the box set of Narnia had she known that Lewis was a practicing Christian. Even when we have no overt sense of biblical or theological motifs in Narnia—and Lewis keeps these pretty near the surface—I believe that Narnia has a greater power to awaken the spirit, invite imagination, and transform culture than almost anything in the Christian fiction section of the bookstore—even, and I know you'll find this shocking, even including Amish romances.

For, when we think about it, what is Lewis *actually* trying to awaken in us with Narnia? Is it not, in Hermione's words, friendship and bravery and … well, something else? Isn't that why you read Narnia as a child and reread it today?

That something else, I believe, includes a capacity for imagination: to see clearly, to feel deeply, to act with courage. It should be no surprise that Lucy the Valiant is the greatest human hero and leader of the Chronicles—Lucy, whose name is "light," *lux*, who is always *lucid*, a seer and empath and healer long before she is an archer in Narnia's mobile infantry. In Lucy's insight—and in the courage of Eustace to move past priggery and Diggory to give the healing fruit to Aslan instead of his sick mother and Jill to forgive her own failures and on to a dozen more stories of transformation—there, in these beautiful moments of personal courage are Lewis' greatest acts of heroism. Though bravery and friendship and something else are also needed in the battlefield, the chivalrous Reepicheep, we must remember, casts away his sword at the end of the tale.

What links three of the great fantasy worlds of the last 70 years—Narnia, Middle-earth, and the Potterverse—is far greater than what separates them, I believe.

At the heart of each are bravery and friendship and something else—a capacity for imagination and an adventurous spirit combined with self-sacrificial love, which is the deeper magic that in each tale is the eucatastrophic moment of transformation.

It is true that Aslan, Harry, and Gandalf have much more literal deaths and resurrections than Lucy or Dumbledore's Army or the linked trio of Frodo, Sam, and Sméagol. But the pattern of self-giving love that, against all odds and expectations, will save the world, is at the heart of each tale.

Even in the Buffyverse, it is hard to miss the cruciform nature of Buffy's sacrifice to save Dawn—and, you know, avert another apocalypse and save the world. Dawn, we should remember, comes after twilight.

And this brings us to an intriguing connection.

I have suggested throughout that Lewis' quest to keep the imaginative world alive is akin to Tolkien's aptly misnamed idea of the "long defeat." It was the elegant argument by our own Kat Sas and Curtis Weyant that helped me see the ever-diverging and ever-converging lines of Tolkien's concept of "the long defeat." I say it is "aptly" misnamed because there is clearly a poetic value, a melancholic, autumnal, saturnine feeling to the phrase "the long defeat"—like the fading in Lewis' poem.

But there is greater depth to "the long defeat" as it contains Tolkien's twin-idea of being "ever-defeated yet never altogether subdued." Kat and Curtis helped me see that before and behind and within the great moments of heroism in *The Lord of the Rings,* there is an unwillingness to disentangle hope and hopelessness, victory and despair, joy and sorrow, eucatastrophe and dystcatastrophe, the undying will and the great defeat, so that even Tolkien's religious view is one of a "long defeat" with "glimpses of final victory."

As Curtis and Kat show, the long defeat is a backs-against-the-wall stance, not simply an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task or, for the Buffyverse, the meaninglessness of their actions, but a shared belief that all must struggle even in the face of ultimate defeat, for "hope and despair are akin."

Tolkien describes this dual aspect of the long defeat well in thinking of *Beowulf*'s world:

> "by all means esteem the old heroes: men caught in the chains of circumstance or of their own character, torn between duties equally sacred, dying with their backs to the wall"

The Twilight of the Gods descends, Ragnarök is near, but they will die fighting the long defeat. And in this—the fight, if not the victory—there is hope and honour.

These twilit stands are shot through our stories: The Battle of Hogwarts, the last march to the Black Gates, the final apocalypse of the Buffy series. Yet with bravery and friendship and something else, heroes great and small steal themselves to the last stand.

And in *The Last Battle*, Narnia's final day fading, the last loyal Narnians literally have their backs against a wall as they fight against the impossible power of the empire without and disloyal Narnians within. I can never forget Jill Pole, expert scout and marksman, who when the gentle talking horses of Narnia are slain for mere spite, must turn her face away from her bowstring so that the wet tears will not slacken her shot.

And dear, unfinished Bleheris, in a world of mummified respect for a long-dead era, cries out, "my deeds shall be the song I make."

This is the last stand of the "ever-defeated yet never altogether subdued,"
the death that leads to life,
a fight against everything that threatens to crush the dreams within our chests.

As readers and writers, as teachers and learners, we do not all share the hope that Tolkien and Lewis had or the existential certitude of Whedon.

Fandom is ecumenical, not uniform.

But I think that we as a community have imbibed the twin ideas of the long defeat. There is something dying, something being lost, a world that wants to replace imagination with any number of revolutions or returns: utility, efficiency, distraction, division, self-righteous bigotry, balkanizations of thought and ethics and story, even the temptation to reduce life to Instagram memes—these are the forces that could bring about our generation's apocalypse of imagination, for the world is ever-dying.

Knowing this, what did Lewis do? What did Tolkien do? What was their response to the apocalyptic Long Defeat?

Frankly, at the bottom of it all, they read well and deeply, and they told stories to awaken bravery and friendship and imaginative possibility, stories with the eucatastrophic death-and-resurrection pattern at their core where the honour is in the fight not in the victory.

So what do we do with all these dreams inside our chests?

In a world flirting with imaginative apocalypse, I think we should engage in the most revolutionary act that I know:

We should read well and deeply.
We should write well, with creativity and authenticity and courage.
We should write poetry—poetry!

In this age of technocratic efficiency!
The madness of it!

With our backs to the wall, knowing we cannot win against the heat death of the moral universe, we should tell stories and read them to our children and students.

We should steal past the watchful dragons of utilitarianism and conformity and marketing and digital trench warfare propaganda to read, write, draw, design, and include in our lives all that is good and beautiful and true.

"Why should your heart not dance?" Queen Orual asks herself in Lewis' great work of literary fiction, *Till We Have Faces*. Why should it not dance even in our grief and sorry? With all the imaginative and literary resources that we have, the great wealth of literature of our shared histories and the profound breadth of new and diverse voices filling our world with excellence and art today, in the greatest generation of fantasy and science fiction film in history, in this brilliant moment of imaginative possibilities, why should our hearts not dance?

I have no doubt we will lose the current war, whatever that is. But when it comes to the dreams in my chest, by God's wounds, I am not shackled as an ox, that I must abide where I am set. Nay, I will go hence as the knights adventurous did & seek great deeds out there in the unexplored lands beyond.

My deeds shall be the song I make.

If you will forgive the old language and some abridgement, as you have been kind enough to forgive so far, you can see that after thirteen novels and thirty other books and who knows how many thousands of lectures and letters and essays written to wake up slumbering readers, at the end of his life Lewis still has more to say in the fight against the long defeat of the imagination. In the closing words of his final work of literary theory, *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis gives this fight a profound depth of possibility and appreciation of diversity and otherness with these words:

> We want to see with other eyes, to imagine with other imaginations, to feel with other hearts, as well as with our own…. this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox: "he that loseth his life shall save it."
>
> [In reading, w]e therefore delight to enter into other men's beliefs … even though we think them untrue…. Not only nor chiefly in order to see what they are like but in order to see what they see, to occupy, for a while, their seat in the great theatre, to use their spectacles and be made free of whatever insights, joys, terrors, wonders or merriment those spectacles reveal….
>
> Those of us who have been true readers all our life seldom fully realise the enormous extension of our being which we owe to authors….
>
> [For] my own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others…. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented. Even the eyes of all humanity are not enough. I regret that the brutes cannot write books…

> Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality…. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.

And so we set our feet forward on the adventurous path of our souls, reading as an act of rebellion against the long defeat, the apocalypse of the imagination. In my experience, though, sitting with one's back against a wall is an excellent posture for reading.