Imagine that: Allegories of the Soul in C.S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces*

On a number of occasions Owen Barfield spoke of his liking for C.S. Lewis’s novel *Till We Have Faces*, calling it the best of all of Lewis’s fictional works. In 1965, for example, he described it as “the most muscular and powerful product of Lewis’s imagination” (*Barfield on Lewis* 29), and in 1987, in a conversation with G.B. Tennyson, he called it Lewis’s greatest literary achievement in fiction, asserting that in it Lewis “really rises to the fullness of the mythopoeic imagination” (*Barfield on Lewis* 146). Barfield’s key literary criterion in both instances is “imagination,” and especially “mythopoeic imagination” – that is, the kind of imagination that rises above mere Coleridgean fancy or the conventions of literary allegory to the level of original creation, the level of primal myth-making itself. Now, why Barfield would see this particular novel as an instance of mythopoeia is worth an essay in its own right. And, to an extent, I will be addressing this question in what follows, though my primary focus will be on how imagination functions within the novel itself as a vehicle of spiritual and moral growth for Orual, Lewis’s protagonist.

For the time being, with respect to the novel’s qualities of literary mythopoeia, I would simply point to the following issues. The first is that Lewis, in writing the novel, didn’t create out of whole cloth. He took an ancient myth, the story of Eros and Psyche, and re-imagined it. This raises the interesting question of how, to use Lewis’s own phrase from the novel’s title page, a “myth retold” can be a work of the mythopoeic imagination, something possessing originality in its own right. Barfield himself, of course, had done something similar years earlier in writing his verse play *Orpheus*. Clearly, then, whatever the mythopoeic imagination is, it isn’t necessarily equivalent to creating something never expressed before. This suggests that imagination of the sort Barfield is
extolling (and Lewis exercising) may draw on (in fact, perhaps must draw on) certain primal modes or patterns, at once personal and universal, and can do so (and this is critical) without becoming enslaved to them, without, in other words, merely reworking, however innovatively, what has already been done with them in the past. As Barfield himself points out at the end of his essay “The Harp and the Camera,” the great question for the literary artist of today is “the question of how we can learn to sign our own names to what we create, whether as myth or in other ways, but so nevertheless that what we sign as our own name will also be the name of Another – the name I would venture to say, without venturing to pronounce it, of the Author and the Lord of the archetypes themselves” (Rediscovery of Meaning 78). This idea of co-creation in consort with something higher than oneself is echoed in Saving the Appearances. The modern artist, Barfield argues there, rather than simply expressing his own personality, needs to recognize that in the unfathomable depths behind this “poor temporal personality” stands the Divine Name: “And if I strive to produce a work of art, I cannot then do otherwise than strive humbly to create more nearly as that creates, and not as my idiosyncrasy wills” (132). It seems clear, then, that he found Till We Have Faces to be the literary work where Lewis came closest to this ideal of spiritual co-creation, or what one might call, using a key term from Saving the Appearances, “literary final participation.”

While continuing to explore this issue of Lewis’s literary mythopoeia, I’m going to try to build a bridge to the idea that imagination, its nature and uses, also serves as the key to understanding the novel thematically. The basis for linking these two things lies in something Lewis himself said about his conception of the work – something that also further confirms the mythopoeic nature of the novel. As he points out in his “Note” following the end of the novel, the critical revision he made to the original myth consisted of “making Psyche’s palace invisible to normal, mortal eyes – if ‘making’ is not the wrong word for something which forced itself upon me, almost at my first reading of the story, as the way the thing must have been” (313). In thinking of
the mythopoeic nature of the novel (and Barfield’s subsequent estimation of it in the Lewis canon),
one can’t underestimate the importance of Lewis’s wording here. The key change, as Lewis notes,  
“forced itself upon [him].” The implication is that something latent in the original story itself, but  
also, I would argue, necessarily latent within Lewis himself, made itself known, giving direction to  
his re-telling of the story even as (and also because) it freed his imagination to make that story his  
own (sign his own name to it, in Barfield’s terms).

In doing so, he ended up creating an instance of what Barfield might call “transformed  
allegory,” a term he introduces in his essay “Imagination and Inspiration.” This new kind of allegory,  
Barfield suggests, would possess meanings that are “reasonably identifiable and repeatable,” but  
would be, he says, “‘soft-focus’ meanings” (Rediscovery of Meaning 129). In other words, this new  
kind of allegory would lack, to turn now to Poetic Diction, “the more or less conscious hypostatization  
of ideas” (201) characteristic of the traditional allegory of the last few hundred years. Without  
explicitly using the term “mythopoeia,” Barfield goes on in Poetic Diction to give what I consider to  
be one of the best explanations of what that form of creative activity would involve and how it  
differs from the creation of traditional allegory: “The modern poet has created a new myth or made  
a true use of an old one, according as the myth in question is the direct embodiment of concrete  
experience and not of his idea of that experience – in which case he has only invented an allegory, or  
made an allegorical use of a myth, as the case may be” (201). One could argue that Lewis’s comment  
about the revision in the myth forcing itself upon him is at least prima facie evidence for his having  
had what Barfield calls a “concrete experience” of a mythic archetype. As a result, instead of simply  
working from his ideas about the Eros and Psyche story, he was able to make “true use” of it in his  
retelling.

In Lewis’s hands the traditional story of Eros and Psyche becomes a wholly realized and  
realistic human drama, while at the same time symbolically portraying the transformation of the
human soul as it journeys toward a new stage of consciousness and an understanding of the mystery and redemptive power of selfless love, the caritas or agape that is central to Christianity. Lewis handles this Christianizing of the classical myth with great delicacy, certainly more delicacy than one finds, for example, in his Narnia Chronicles, where Aslan seems anything but an example of “soft-focus” Christian allegory. One comes away from Till We Have Faces feeling as if Lewis has taken something from the classical tradition and refocused it both dramatically and theologically, making of it something wholly new yet nonetheless familiar; that he has, in other words, entered into the myth and it into him, and that the novel is the creative outcome of a “concrete” relationship to the same archetypes that originally gave birth to the story centuries ago.

By re-envisioning the myth, Lewis neatly altered its emphasis. Instead of the relationship between Eros and Psyche being paramount, the focus shifts to Orual, the oldest of Psyche’s half-sisters. Her moral and spiritual evolution over the course of the story hinges on her capacity for developing new powers of self-knowledge and perception (the two things being, as I will argue, inseparable). This is where Lewis’s alteration of the myth comes to be so significant. Her initial failure to see Psyche’s palace (which is also, not incidentally, the palace of the god Eros) marks her as one who is morally and spiritually limited. These limitations lead to consequences that are initially negative and destructive for both her and Psyche, but which, in the long run, forge the crucible that will transform her into someone capable of new ways of seeing and thus new capacities for love. This transformation, in turn, is shown to be intimately linked to Psyche’s own growth toward a fully realized humanity.

I suspect Barfield’s liking for the novel had as much to do with these questions of perception and moral-spiritual development, and their implicit relation to his views of the evolutionary dimensions of the Christian mythos, as with Lewis’s talent for mythopoeic creation (though perhaps the two can’t really be separated). The novel, more than anything else Lewis wrote,
develops the theme of the evolution of consciousness, both collective and individual, a theme that, as we know, was Barfield’s lifelong subject. Orual’s growth in the novel clearly indicates that how one perceives the world and the spiritual realities that inform it is related to one’s level of consciousness -- moral and spiritual. At the heart of this evolution of consciousness is the changing relationship in the fictional kingdom of Glome between the gods and humanity – in the novel’s terms, the movement from the worship of Ungit, as imaged by the temple where the priest resides, to the recognition and acceptance of the god who lives on the Grey Mountain, imaged by the palace where Psyche goes to live, and to which she and Orual eventually return after their time in exile and the completion of their trials (an exile precipitated by their mutual betrayal of the god). To see this god – to meet him “face to face” – ultimately requires becoming a new kind of person. In imagining the world of Glome, Lewis posits this changing relationship between the human and divine realms as the central feature of Glome’s history, a history microcosmically embodied in Orual’s painful struggle to come to terms with the nature and reality of the gods, a struggle ultimately shown to be inseparable from her journey toward self-knowledge. In Lewis’s Christianizing of the myth, these complementary themes simultaneously inform the novel’s “soft-focus” allegorical dimension, which has to do with Orual gradually establishing the proper relationship and balance among three elements: herself (i.e., the finite human), Psyche (i.e., the soul), and the spiritual world (i.e., Eros or divine love).

Although other critics have noted the importance of the theme of imagination in the novel,¹ no one so far as I know has placed that theme within an evolutionary perspective. My particular inspiration for doing so emerged from a re-reading of Barfield’s essay "Speech, Reason And Imagination" in *Romanticism Comes of Age*. In that essay Barfield describes the nature and significance of that stage of evolution Rudolf Steiner labeled the Consciousness Soul, and of the necessary movement from the Consciousness Soul to what Barfield, following Steiner, calls the Imaginative
Soul. At the risk of distorting the subtlety of Barfield’s argument, I need to first summarize his main points before applying them to the novel.

In Barfield’s words, “The Consciousness Soul indicates the maximum point of self-consciousness, the point at which the individual feels himself to be entirely cut off from the surrounding cosmos and is for that reason fully conscious of himself as an individual. He has attained complete self-consciousness – at the cost of practically everything else” (72). The “everything else” to which Barfield refers would include any experience of the natural world as imbued with inherent meaning (this experience of a world emptied of meaning is an essential element of that condition he calls idolatry in *Saving the Appearances*), as well as any deep seated conviction that one’s thoughts and words are objectively valid or are an essential part of who one really is. One is, in short, cut-off from meaning and from a sense of belonging to anything beyond one’s own isolated ego. The dominant mood, in those moments when one has the courage to admit it, is one of loneliness and despair. In Barfield’s words, “the Ego has reached rock bottom. It feels itself to be alone, on an island, cut off from all sense and objective meaning. This is the full price of self-consciousness” (74). To use the term popularized by the existentialist philosophers, this state of mind constitutes the experience of the absurd. Both Barfield and, in their own way, the existentialists have pointed to Hamlet, with his uncertainties, isolation, whirling word play, chameleon-like personality, self-absorption, masquerading, and preoccupation with death as a representative figure of this stage of consciousness.

But Hamlet, as most readers would agree, may also be seen as containing a kind of marvelous potential, if only he can find a way – the will and the imagination -- to unfold it. Barfield describes the Consciousness Soul in similar terms. The key to unlocking this potential is recognizing that the abstract, logistic thinking characteristic of the Consciousness Soul is preceded by (devolved from) another, higher form of thinking, “a kind of thinking which is itself beyond words, which
precedes them, in the sense that ideas, words, sentences, propositions, are only subsequently drawn out of it. This is that concrete thinking which is the source of all such ideas and propositions, the source of all meaning whatsoever" (*Romanticism* 77). The necessary impulse of the Consciousness Soul must be to find its way back to a connection with this concrete thinking, but without losing the gift of self-consciousness (and the attendant moral and creative freedom) that has resulted from the evolution of consciousness. A more detailed presentation of this evolutionary model can be found, of course, in *Saving the Appearances*.

In both that book and “Speech, Reason and Imagination,” Barfield points to the exercise of imagination as an important step in the Consciousness Soul’s re-acquisition of its connection to concrete or living thinking. As he says, between the dry, abstract thinking characteristic of the Consciousness Soul and that concrete, living thinking which stands behind it,

there is an intermediate stage, at which consciousness takes the form of pictures or images. In the history of mankind that intermediate stage contains the mystery of the Myth. It still contains to-day the mystery of Poetry, and with that the whole great mystery of Meaning. It is Imagination. Imagination is the marriage of spirit and sense. Therefore the Consciousness Soul, which is the Ego cut right off from sense by its abstract thoughts, will have, in its passage back to its home in the spirit, to pass through this intermediate state of Imaginative Consciousness. That is the peculiar relation of the Consciousness Soul to concrete thinking, or to the Word. The Consciousness Soul is cut off from knowledge. Does it wish to know again? Then it must become the Imaginative Soul (79).

For all of his resistance to Barfield’s interest in the work of Rudolf Steiner, and despite his life-long questioning of imagination as a valid form of knowledge,* C.S. Lewis, at least in *Tilt We Have Faces*, appears to have moved much closer to Barfield’s way of thinking than one would have expected.
predicted. Not only is imagination treated there as a revelatory mode of knowing, it’s also implicitly portrayed as a necessary stage in the evolution of human consciousness. Understanding the nature and power of imagination, then, is central to understanding his portrayal of Orual’s spiritual and moral journey. It is to her story that I will now finally turn.

Lewis’s fictional kingdom of Glome, as its name suggests, is a world filled with shadows. It is also, like its central character, a world in transition, slowly leaving behind the remnants of a more participatory form of spiritual life and evolving into a world characterized by greater freedom of thought, including a more rational and skeptical outlook on matters of religion and spirituality. It is, in short, a kingdom making the slow and painful transition to what one might loosely call the pre-modern world (perhaps roughly around the time of Aristotle and just after). The older world, including man’s relation to the gods, is imaged in terms of shadows and darkness. The emerging world is imaged in terms of light. Not until the end of the novel will Orual fully move out of the shadows into the light, though now it will be a different kind of light from that associated merely with emerging rationality and intellectual freedom. The novel, in its simplest form, can be said to dramatize the painful process of her birth out of one world (and stage of consciousness) into another. Through much of the novel, she appears as a woman in crisis – uncertain, angry, resentful, querulous, jealous, skeptical, possessive, blind, spiteful, alienated, manipulative, lacking self-knowledge, etc. These shortcomings, however, don’t mark her out as a “bad” person, and Lewis doesn’t treat her as such. They simply reveal her as being all too human – as being, I might add, one of us. And, as the arc of the novel suggests, this crisis of being human is absolutely essential to her eventual rebirth and recovery. Only by passing through it, and by finally confronting herself as she really is, is she able to emerge from the shadows and establish a new relationship with both herself and the spiritual world.
It becomes clear by the end of the novel that the kingdom Orual has entered and become aware of shortly before her death is one far removed from what the name Glome implies. In fact, her inner growth has been paralleled by changes, at once political and religious, within Glome itself. Just as she and Psyche have gone through their transformations, so, too, has Glome. The old Ungit religion, which has been gradually losing power during the course of the story, has been implicitly replaced by that of Ungit’s son, the being whom Orual refers to at the end, when he appears to her and Psyche, as “The most dreadful, the most beautiful, the only dread and beauty there is . . . .” In keeping with the novel’s pervasive imagery of light and dark, at the moment of his appearance Orual describes how “The air [grew] brighter and brighter about us; as if something had set it on fire” (307). This image is in sharp contrast to Orual’s description of the Ungit temple early in the novel: “In the furthest recess of her house where she sits it is so dark that you cannot see her well, but in summer enough light may come down from the smoke-holes in the roof to show her a little. She is a black stone without head or hands or face, and a very strong goddess” (4). The transition from dark to light is obvious, as well as the transition from the shadowy amorphousness of Ungit to the more defined and radiant beauty of her son. That Orual is capable of seeing the latter, at least imaginatively, by the end of the novel is the specific indicator of her spiritual progress. But I am getting ahead of myself.

For Orual to arrive where she arrives in the course of the novel, she must learn how to see – in short, develop new powers of perception, directed both toward herself and toward the world around her. And this capacity to see is the meaning of imagination, with its ability to apprehend a more fluid and complex version of reality – specifically, one that is spiritually informed. As is stated more than once in the novel, the gods flow in and out of one another, and in and out of humanity and nature as well. Only imagination has the ability to grasp this interpenetrative and metamorphic dimension of the spiritual-physical world. Strict Aristotelian logic, for example, the logic of either-or,
cannot fathom or grasp this more dynamic dimension of reality. A different form of consciousness is required. As Barfield points out in his essay “Lewis, Truth, and Imagination,” imagination is more than just a form of cognitive recreation; it is, in fact, “the human faculty through which the world around us may acquire, or recover, its true nature as a theophany . . . .” (Owen Barfield on C.S. Lewis 97). In addition, as he goes on to say, imagination concerns itself

with the resemblance between one shape or pattern and another . . . . Moreover, the shapes and patterns are not fixed. They are apt to change into each other by a process of development. Their syntax, so to speak, is one of metamorphosis, rather than of sequence and aggregation. This is very noticeable in the case of myths, which I suppose are the archetypal instances of imaginal statement (99 Barfield on Lewis).

It seems clear to me that Lewis, despite his intellectual resistance to the logical indeterminacy (one might call it logical messiness) of imagination, nonetheless found himself in writing Till We Have Faces looking at the world through eyes that accepted a more dynamic, metamorphic, and fluid vision of reality. It’s as if the myth of Eros and Psyche, to which he felt so powerfully drawn, exercised its power on him, leading him to create, in imaginative if not discursive terms, a mythopoeic brief for the necessity of exercising imagination as a way of knowing oneself and the world.

Orual, like the kingdom of Glome, is caught between two ways of knowing, neither of which is sufficient when it comes to comprehending the world in its spiritual fullness. On the one hand, there is the religion of Ungit, the older participatory form of religion whose spiritual force Orual is unable to deny, even as she resists it, both morally and logically. When the priest of Ungit comes to inform the King, Orual’s father, of the need to sacrifice someone to banish the plague from Glome, Orual recognizes that the priest is no charlatan, that he is no
mere schemer and . . . politic man who put into the mouth of Ungit whatever might most increase his own power and lands or most harm his enemies. I saw it was not so. He was sure of Ungit. Looking at him as he sat with the dagger pricking him and his blind eyes unwinking, fixed on the King, and his face like an eagle’s face, I was sure, too. Our real enemy was not a mortal. The room was full of spirits, and the horror of holiness (54).

It is no accident, however, that Lewis portrays the priest as blind, with all of its implications of an ancient spirituality operating in a less conscious manner in the human being (Barfield’s original participation, as described in Saving the Appearances). Given her state of consciousness, Orual cannot give her allegiance to this older form of spiritual awareness (she will not, in other words, return to original participation), but this doesn’t mean she doesn’t suffer from her own kind of blindness (as is suggested by the veil that she wears for much of her life). Blindness of a different sort from that of the priest will be associated with both Orual and Psyche in the course of the novel.

In contrast to the priest of Ungit is the Fox, the Greek slave who serves the King and is Orual’s mentor and father figure. He represents the forces of reason and logic, as well as the beginnings of what today we would call the scientific mindset. That one of his nicknames is the “king’s lantern” points to his role as a bringer of light into the kingdom of Glome, though his rational light, as mentioned earlier, will be superseded in the end of the novel by the greater spiritual light of Ungit’s son, the god of the Grey Mountain. As a rationalist, the Fox’s inclination is to explain what happens in the world as the result of “natural causes.” He therefore refuses to see the ancient myths as anything more than the “lies of poets.” Although he refers to the gods and can be seen as a theist (he often refers, for example, to the “Divine Nature”), thereby representing a stage Lewis describes himself going through in his own spiritual development (see Surprised By Joy), his spirituality is more linguistic and philosophical than actual. The idea of the myths referring to actual gods and goddesses, or the corollary idea that he lives in a purposive universe, is not part of his
intellectual make-up. Ultimately, in the course of the novel, his perspective, like that of the priest of Ungit, will be revealed as limited (and he himself will adopt a more informed spiritual perspective), but it is also clear that Lewis sees his outlook as necessary in evolutionary terms, a perspective that Barfield obviously shares. It is no accident that his Greek name, Lysias, means “ransomer.” In devoting himself to Orual, and refusing to return to Greece when given the opportunity, he performs a kind of sacrifice. Without him, she would not be capable of the kind of questioning of herself, the world, and the gods that is representative of the Consciousness Soul, and that ultimately serves as the catalyst to her spiritual transformation. Without the Fox, in other words, she would not be capable of freeing herself from the religion of Ungit, the stage of consciousness Barfield calls original participation, and thus moving towards imagination, the first stage of final participation.

Orual, then, can be seen as caught between two worldviews, two states of consciousness, two ontologies. As she herself says, “But I could not find out whether the doctrines of Glome or the wisdom of Greece were right. I was the child of Glome and the pupil of the Fox; I saw that for years my life had been lived in two halves, never fitted together”(151). Her uncertainty about the gods, about what to believe, and even about who she is (I will develop the question of identity in more detail later) marks her as one experiencing the world and herself from the perspective of the Consciousness Soul. Uncertainty, we may recall, is the chief feature of Hamlet’s experience of the world as well. Orual’s development in the novel involves moving beyond this radical uncertainty. Fundamental to this project is the possibility of reconciling the apparent ontological opposites that confront her, a moving past their seeming either-or duality into a new kind of spiritual awareness. Rather than fall back into the participatory consciousness of the Ungit religion or become stuck in the discursive rationalism of the Fox, Orual must find a way to embrace the cognitive clarity and freedom of the latter while regaining the spiritual power and insight of the former. As I hope to
show, the novel points to imagination as the mode of consciousness capable of effecting this resolution of opposites.

The other central figure in Orual’s spiritual development is her half-sister Psyche. Psyche represents the possibility of a new form of consciousness (spiritual awareness) but one that must be brought into proper relation to the everyday world. She must move beyond her early, and generally unconscious, spiritual intuition and longing to a more mature, self-aware state of consciousness, one that will allow her to live fully in the world rather than cut off from it. She cannot, in other words, naively live in the palace of the god forever. The soul, allegorically speaking, must incarnate. That she is forbidden to look upon the face of the god during her time in the Palace – a key element in both the original myth and Lewis’s re-telling – indicates her relative spiritual immaturity (or blindness). Her disobedience, fall, and subsequent exile from the world of the Grey Mountain can be seen as her necessary entry into the realm of the human -- the sense perceptible world of everyday human experience, including the social and political arenas, the world, in short, of human pain and suffering. Only within this world can she gain the autonomy and awakened, self-aware consciousness needed if she is to perceive the face of the god.

Orual serves, albeit unintentionally, as the catalyst for this further stage of Psyche’s journey. The half-sisters are obviously alter egos of one another, with Psyche representing the spiritual side and Orual representing the all-too-human and worldly side, with all the limitations – moral and spiritual – that go along with being human. On the positive side, however, she possesses the practical wisdom, the rationality, and the social and political skills required to do the hard work of managing the affairs of the Kingdom following the death of her father. It is also Orual who, in the final chapters of the novel, will undertake and complete the earthly tasks required for both her and Psyche to be redeemed from their spiritual exile. Together the two of them represent the human being evolving towards a new form of spiritual awareness and wholeness.
If Psyche, as her name suggests, represents the human soul, and if her longing for the Grey Mountain and the palace of the god represents the soul’s longing for its true spiritual home (or, in the novel’s schema, the next stage of its spiritual evolution), then Orual’s task must be to find a way to bring herself into proper relationship with Psyche, and thus with the god who inhabits the palace. This, in turn, will facilitate Psyche’s growth as well. It’s abundantly clear that one of Lewis’s primary concerns in the novel is the nature of love (a theme that would be hard to avoid given his reliance on the myth of Eros and Psyche). Before Orual can achieve her true selfhood, she must learn to let go of her need to possess and control Psyche. In other words, she must learn how to love freely, with no taint of personal desire or control (the type of selfless love that Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, designated as *caritas*). The soul’s needs, as the novel indicates, are other than (though not necessarily abrogative of) our conventional human needs and aspirations, and only by learning to establish the proper relationship between the two can we expect, in Lewis’s version of the myth, to enter the palace of the god as autonomous, wakeful, whole human beings.

The critical moment for Orual with respect to the theme of perception occurs during her first trip up the mountain some weeks after Psyche has been sacrificially offered to Ungit and to Ungit’s son, the supposed Shadowbrute. A kind of double-vision characterizes the narrative at this point. Whereas Psyche perceives herself to be clothed in a beautiful robe and standing at the entry to the palace of the god, Orual sees only the rugged natural landscape and Psyche dressed in rags. When Psyche offers her honeycakes and wine (obvious communion imagery), Orual perceives only berries in a green leaf and water. The scene is reminiscent of two children playing at having a meal together, but in this case only one of them is able to enter fully/imaginatively into the game. Orual is unable to suspend her disbelief and see the alternate reality that Psyche inhabits. To her Psyche’s behavior is evidence of madness (or so her anger and jealousy over Psyche’s choice of the god over her would have her believe). She understands that a gulf exists between them now that she can’t
overcome, at least in her current state: “For the world had broken in pieces and Psyche and I were not in the same piece. Seas, mountains, madness, death itself, could not have removed her from me to such a helpless distance as this” (120). To overcome the rift between them, between their two worlds, will require new ways of seeing. As Psyche says near the end of their meeting, “‘And perhaps, Maia, you too will learn how to see. I will beg and implore him [the god] to make you able’” (121).

Psyche’s wish comes true the following morning, but the experience only serves to make Orual more adamant in her refusal to trust the ways of the gods. The vision itself is marvelous:

. . . when I lifted my head and looked once more into the mist across the water, I saw that which brought my heart into my throat. There stood the palace, grey – as all things were grey in that hour and place – but solid and motionless, wall within wall, pillar and arch and architrave, acres of it, a labyrinthine beauty . . . . Pinnacles and buttresses leaped up . . . unbelievably tall and slender, pointed and prickly as if stone were shooting out into branch and flower (132).

As quickly as the vision appears, however, it fades, leaving Orual susceptible to doubt. She treats the ephemeral quality of the vision as a sign of its unreliability, rather than as a sign from another world, one that she might become capable of entering more fully and continuously if she developed the requisite powers of perception. By refusing to accept the vision for what it is, as a true sign from the gods, she begins the process that will eventually conclude with both her and Psyche being banished from the palace of the god. Her failure here is a failure of imagination. The consequences are disastrous, at least in the short run.

This is obviously a critical moment in Orual’s life and sharply differentiates her from her sister. Psyche is able to behold (and inhabit) the palace and to partake of the bounties that are part of this new realm of being. And, though forbidden to look upon the face of the god, she is able in all
other ways to perceive him and be with him. To Orual, all of this appears as pure nonsense. She is unable to move beyond her literalistic, either-or (in Barfieldian terms, idolatrous) vision of the world, unable to see this other dimension of reality. It will take imagination for her to do so. Psyche is clearly possessed of this new form of vision already, though, as noted earlier, the fact that she is forbidden to look directly upon the god suggests that she is still spiritually immature in ways; she still lacks full consciousness when it comes to this new spiritual realm and its relationship to the world beyond the confines of the palace. Although more advanced than Orual (as befits her parallel allegorical status as the human soul), she, too, needs to develop her full and autonomous powers of vision.

Orual subsequently undertakes a second trip to the Grey Mountain, determined to free Psyche from what she believes is her imprisonment in the palace (though jealousy and possessiveness are the real forces driving her actions). After she emotionally manipulates Psyche into agreeing to look upon the face of the god, Psyche indicts her for her moral failures when it comes to love:

“You are indeed teaching me about kinds of love I did not know. It is like looking into a deep pit. I am not sure whether I like your kind better than hatred. O, Orual – to take my love for you, because you know it goes down to my very roots and cannot be diminished by any other newer love, and then to make of it a tool, a weapon, a thing of policy and mastery, an instrument of torture – I begin to think I never knew you. Whatever comes after, something that was between us dies here” (165).

Orual’s failure to act out of a higher form of love than merely human love, with all of its attendant flaws (“need love” rather than “gift love” in Lewis’s terms), can be seen as the result of her spiritual immaturity. The ability to love truly and freely, without personal need, requires moral imagination, the ability to enter into the being and condition of the other. Orual clearly lacks the capacity for
caritas at this point in the novel. Her failure, as Psyche says, causes an irreparable change in their relationship. Yet this change can ultimately be seen as the necessary prelude to the new and higher kind of relationship they will achieve in the end.

As a result of Orual’s emotional coercion, Psyche takes her lamp and looks upon the face of the god while he is sleeping, resulting in her banishment from the palace. The paradox, of course, as in the ancient story of Eden, is that in losing the god she has gained knowledge. And, more importantly, she will eventually, through her exile and trials, gain the ability to love the god in full consciousness rather than blindly. Her fall, like that of Adam and Eve, is a fortunate one.

The same holds true for Orual. At the moment of Psyche’s banishment and the destruction of the palace,* Orual is given a vision that challenges her limited notions of reality and simultaneously indicts her for her moral failings. In the midst of the chaotic storm that has ensued following Psyche’s act of disobedience, Orual attempts to cross the stream that separates her from Psyche and the palace of the god. Before she can cross it, however, she finds herself standing in the midst of a preternatural light and confronted by the god of the mountain. Her description of this encounter reveals both the falsehood of her previous views of Psyche’s situation and the nature of the spiritual path that lies before her:

In the center of the light was something like a man . . . . Though this light stood motionless, my glimpse of the face was as swift as a true flash of lightning. I could not bear it for longer. Not my eyes only, but my heart and blood and very brain were too weak for that. A monster – the Shadowbrute that I and all Glome had imagined – would have subdued me less than the beauty this face wore. . . . He rejected, denied, answered, and (worst of all) he knew, all I had thought, done or been. . . . He made it to be as if from the beginning, I had known that

* It’s worth noting that the palace will be reconstituted by the end of the novel, but no longer localized on the mountain. The one that Orual and Psyche enter at the end is one now present at every point of space and time to those possessed of the requisite level of consciousness and accompanying powers of vision.
Psyche’s lover was a god, and as if all my doubtings, fears, guessings, debatings, questionings of Bardia, questionings of the Fox, all the rummage and business of it, had been trumped up foolery, dust blown in my eyes by myself (172-173).

The encounter ends with the god telling her of Psyche’s banishment and the hard road that lies ahead for her. But he also gives Orual a prophecy: “You, woman, shall know yourself and your work. You also shall be Psyche” (174).

I would note a number of things about this turning point in the novel. The first is that Orual sees the god for the first time, and sees that he is beautiful, not the fearful Shadowbrute spoken of in the Ungit religion. For all of his beauty, however, he is also stern and forbidding as he passes judgment on Orual. He is clearly functioning at this moment as a kind of Guardian of the Threshold, forbidding Orual, in her spiritual and moral immaturity, from crossing the river and entering into the Palace. Equally important, it is another visionary moment, similar to her first glimpse of the palace, and it thus points ahead to the more fully developed vision that Orual must begin to acquire – the ability to look upon the god face to face. The third thing is the emphasis on self-knowledge, which, I would argue, is inseparable from the other two. Only by undertaking the painful quest to know herself, in all of her virtues and shortcomings, only, in short, by revealing her true face, will Orual (and thus inevitably Psyche as well) attain a more conscious relationship with (vision of) the spiritual world. Indeed, she can only become Psyche -- in other words, the rightful bride of the god -- by coming to know herself.

In a curious and paradoxical way, the very process whereby she moves toward this self-knowledge is itself an act of imagination. That is, by exercising imagination, however imperfectly, in attempting to tell her story (her “complaint” against the gods, which, in turn, is the primary substance of the novel), she helps clear the way for the emergence of the higher form of imagination she experiences in the final pages of the novel. As she herself says at the beginning of Part II,
What began the change was the writing itself. Let no one lightly set about such a work. Memory, once waked, will play the tyrant. I found I must set down (for I was speaking as before judges and must not lie) passions and thoughts of my own which I had clean forgotten. The past which I wrote down was not the past that I thought I had (all these years) been remembering. . . . The change which the writing wrought in me (and of which I did not write) was only a beginning – only to prepare me for the gods’ surgery. They used my pen to probe my wound (254).

The wound she refers to is her sense of having been deceived and mistreated by the gods, especially her sense of their having taken Psyche from her. What is especially important in the passage is her recognition that more than memory has been at work in the creation of her book. Memory has been only the starting point; her unconscious (or the gods as she says) has played its role as well, transforming the images of memory mythopoeically into a more profoundly revealing picture of what lies in the depths of her soul, as well as in the spiritual depths of the world.

Critical to this theme of self-knowledge (the acquiring of one’s true face) is the imagery of the veil that Orual has worn for so many years. She puts the veil on permanently following her second trip to the Mountain to see Psyche. In the novel it functions symbolically in at least three ways: as an indication of her isolation (cut-offness) from the world around her (an image of the existential isolation characteristic of the Consciousness Soul); as an indicator of her occluded vision (she sees as through a glass darkly, to paraphrase St. Paul); and as an indication of her lack of a true face (like Ungit, her visage lacks definition). All three functions reveal her as one living out of the Consciousness Soul: she lacks a sense of connection to the spiritual, whether in herself or in the world, which means she lacks a sense of the world as genuinely meaningful; she lacks the imaginative vision required to grasp this kind of meaning; and she lacks a clear, individuated identity (one greater and more stable than her merely personal and fluxional ego).
The primary instance of her struggle to define her true self, one that links her in a way to Hamlet’s protean role-playing, is her taking on of the office of Queen. It’s not merely an act of hereditary or political necessity, but the assumption of an identity, one that allows her to function within her world but not one that is essential to her being. In her words, “I was taking to queenship as a stricken man takes to the wine-pot . . . . It was an art that left you no time to mope. If Orual could vanish altogether into the Queen, the gods would almost be cheated” (201). The delusion in such role-playing is made clear in her thought of cheating the gods. Orual, at this stage of her development, is many things to many people. The veil, besides masking her face, serves to heighten the sense of mystery surrounding her. This, in turn, gives her added power in her office as queen. All of this is useful in political terms, Orual is an effective and respected ruler, but playing the role of Queen allows her to hide from the need to come to terms with who she really is behind the mask. Although characteristic of the Consciousness Soul, and thus not to be judged in morally absolute terms, assuming an identity in this manner can only be seen as a provisional stop along the path of one’s spiritual evolution.

To be behind the veil might also suggest something akin to being within a womb, or, given the traditional association of Psyche with the butterfly, existing within a chrysalis (a further image of amorphous identity). Orual’s encompassing task, then, is to be born – to die to her old self and be reborn as her higher self, or Psyche, the rightful bride of the god. To do this, as already noted, requires confronting herself and the emptiness (at one point she speaks of a “gap”) at the center of her being. She must, in short, strip away all of her assumed and worldly identities and enter fully (i.e., nakedly) into the experience of the Consciousness Soul. To use Barfield’s words once again, her ego needs to reach “rock bottom” (Romanticism 74). It is difficult to conceive of a more imaginatively vivid and psychologically acute portrayal of this experience than the one Lewis constructs in the next to last chapter of the novel. In delivering her complaint against the gods, hoping thereby to have its
worthiness judged, Orual is forced to stand naked on “a pillar of rock in a cave [literally and
figuratively, “rock bottom”] so great that I could see neither the sides nor the roof of it” (288).
Isolated in the midst of this darkness, Orual senses herself surrounded by “a great assembly, all
staring upon me . . . There were tens of thousands of them, all silent, every face watching me.”
Among these figures is the “judge. Male or female, who could say? Its face was veiled” (289). She is
utterly isolated and alone, she and the pillar on which she stands apt symbols for the human “I” in
the age of the Consciousness Soul -- stranded as if “on an island, cut off,” as Barfield says, “from all
sense and objective meaning” (Romanticism 74). That her judge is veiled points, yet again, to her need
for spiritual growth if she is to finally look upon the god face to face. Yet, even at this moment of
extreme isolation, as the imagery suggests, the ego has the potential to connect once again with the
spiritual world (a “great assembly,” including the judge, surrounds her in the darkness). What is
required, as previously noted, is self-knowledge, the acquisition, as Orual notes at the end of the
chapter, of one’s “real voice” (292).

By uncovering and acknowledging her true self, she becomes capable of entering into a
conscious relationship with the gods. As she says at the beginning of the final chapter, in a passage
that contains the title of the novel,

> When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the
speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time,
idiot-like, been saying over and over, you’ll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the
gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why
should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till
we have faces? (294).

By speaking honestly and thereby recognizing the truth that lies in her soul, however distorted its
picture of the world and the gods may be, she has come to know herself. The writing of the book
has served as a kind of mirror (a prevalent motif in the novel) in whose surface she can discern her true nature. Correlatively, the writing has functioned to strip away the psychic veil she has worn for so many years, thereby leaving her true self revealed. The acquisition of self-knowledge, as the novel indicates, is a slow and painful process, but in the end it brings about new capacities for seeing, which, in turn, lead one out of exile back to the palace of the god. When she has finished reading and re-reading her book before the underground court of the gods, the judge asks her if she has been answered, and she answers “‘Yes’” (293). She has, in short, answered herself. Only by coming to this moment of brutal self-recognition, only by seeing her true face in the mirror, is Orual able to take the next step in her spiritual initiation and the development of the Imaginative Soul.

The relation between writing the book, the acquisition of self-knowledge, the development of imagination (or new ways of seeing), and the recovery of meaning for self and world is made evident in the final chapters of the novel. Both before and after she delivers her complaint against the gods (itself a visionary experience), she has a number of visions, each of which can be seen as precipitated by the writing. In her words, the gods “drenched me with seeings” (276). A particularly significant one, and one that echoes and anticipates her climactic underground reading of the complaint, occurs when her dead father, the former King of Glome, appears to her and takes her deep into the earth, far from her usual sources of identity – “‘There’s no Fox to help you here,’” the King says (275) -- and forces her to look in a mirror. What she comes to see in that moment is that she is no other than Ungit: “That ruinous face was mine” (276). This is the negative side of Ungit – spiritually powerful, yet jealous and demanding, a devourer of people’s lives, lacking the kind of selfless love that can guide one morally. But the identification of Orual with Ungit points in a more positive direction as well. It is Ungit who can give birth to Ungit’s son, identified in the novel with Eros (love), the god of the mountain.
As the Fox tells her near the end of the novel, “‘All, even Psyche, are born into the house of Ungit. And all must get free from her. Or say that Ungit in each must bear Ungit’s son and die in childbirth – or change’” (301). In a curious paradox, then, Orual is at once Psyche, Ungit, and Ungit’s son. The Fox points to this truth as well: “‘We’re all limbs and parts of one Whole. Hence of each other. Men, and gods, flow in and out and mingle’” (300-301). In its simplest terms, Orual’s journey in the novel has been to acknowledge and acquire this visionary and interpenetrative wholeness of self and world, thereby moving beyond the isolation and limited vision of the Consciousness Soul.

The numerous visions that “drench” Orual further confirm this idea of a multi-dimensional wholeness. The majority of the visions concern the trials Psyche has been condemned to perform because of her disobedience of the god, but in each case Orual either plays a critical role in enabling Psyche (and thus herself) to complete them or comes to see the ways in which she had been an obstacle in Psyche’s path of spiritual growth (and thus in her own as well). In the end, we are meant to understand that she and Psyche together have undertaken the tasks, that in completing them they have “borne one another’s burdens” (one hears echoes of Charles Williams in this part of the novel), thereby engaging in *caritas*, or selfless love. The sequence of visionary trials Orual and Psyche undergo is an obvious path of spiritual initiation, one that awakens both of them to a higher and more wakeful form of consciousness and, simultaneously and inseparably, to a higher form of unity and love.

Appropriately enough given the theme of initiation and the pervasive imagery of death and rebirth, Psyche’s final task is to undertake a journey “‘to get beauty in a casket from the Queen of the Deadlands, from death herself; and bring it back to give it to Ungit so that Ungit [and thus Orual] will become beautiful’” (301). When Psyche succeeds in her quest, the final step in Orual’s (and obviously Psyche’s) spiritual and moral transformation becomes possible. Orual, along with Psyche, experiences the presence of the god, but this time with beatific joy rather than as a form of
divine judgment (or perhaps one can say that if she is judged, and the language points to this, it now feels like a blessing to be judged rather than a moral condemnation). She is also reunited with Psyche, but now through genuine love rather than the need to possess and control her. She has, in fact, died to her old self and become her new self; she has become Psyche, as the god had predicted. In other words, she has become spiritually and existentially whole. One might also say that this identity as Psyche has come about only because she has become capable of truly seeing Psyche, an act of vision co-existent and co-incident with her ability to see herself (her true being) for the first time. She has moved beyond the isolation and idolatry of the Consciousness Soul to the vision and unity of the Imaginative Soul.

The final scene of the novel appears to take place in the courtyard of a palace, suggesting, as I noted earlier, that what was destroyed at the time of Psyche’s disobedience, has been reconstituted, but now no longer localized in a particular place. The god’s dominion and habitation are everywhere, subject only to one’s capacity for seeing. When Orual gazes into the pool at the center of the courtyard, she sees not the face of the god, or even what appears to be her own face, but reflections of two Psyches. I think three things are being suggested here. The first is an extension of the identity theme at the heart of the novel: Orual has undergone a final spiritual metamorphosis, thereby attaining the perfection of her true face, and she is now capable of seeing and acknowledging it for the first time. The second is that Psyche, or the soul, has now become fully embodied, brought into proper relationship with the human world (Orual being the representative). The third is that the reflections in the pool are simultaneously images of the god in whose presence they stand; looking into this final mirror, Orual now beholds the spiritual world as it is mirrored back to us in our souls. Orual, I would argue, is now fully seeing, in Barfield’s terms, with the eyes of imagination -- seeing, in other words, with the two-fold vision that marries spirit and sense. The immediate consequence of such seeing is the recognition that she (and all of us, at least potentially) is made in the image of
the god. Psyche, or our soul, is, at bottom (at least potentially), the face of the god within. It is, in other words, the image in which we were originally made. Orual, through her trials has begun to recover that which was lost in the ancient Fall from Paradise.

At this point, it’s worth reprising something I quoted from Barfield earlier: “. . . the Consciousness Soul . . . will have, in its passage back to its home in the spirit, to pass through this intermediate stage of Imaginative Consciousness. That is the peculiar relation of the Consciousness Soul to concrete thinking, or to the Word. The Consciousness Soul is cut off from knowledge. Does it wish to know again? Then it must become the Imaginative Soul” (79 Romanticism). Lewis, as I’ve argued throughout, appears to intuitively understand this process of spiritual development.

Imagination as a way of seeing is also a way of knowing. When the god speaks in this final scene (the Word speaking to Orual’s awakened consciousness), it is to impart knowledge. What had earlier been spoken as judgment now is spoken as revelation: “‘You also are Psyche’ . . . . (308). For all of his demurrals when it came to imagination as a form of knowledge, Lewis’s creative self was perhaps wiser than his rational self. Till We Have Faces, more than any other work of Lewis’s, is not only a work of mythopoeic imagination but a work that dramatizes the necessary role of imagination as part of the human being’s long and difficult path of spiritual development.
NOTES

1 Peter Schakel, in particular, has written perceptively on this theme. As he says in *Reason and Imagination in C.S. Lewis: A Study of Till We Have Faces*, “Not only is *Till We Have Faces* Lewis’s finest imaginative work, but it also explores the tension between reason and the imagination as a central theme. Furthermore, *Till We Have Faces* is the culmination of efforts Lewis made in a number of works throughout his life to use similar images and imaginative structures to resolve that tension” (x). Schakel also notes the influence of Owen Barfield on Lewis’s thinking about imagination, consciousness, and perception. However, his approach doesn’t locate Orual’s development and spiritual crises within the larger framework of an evolution of consciousness (in Barfield’s terms, "the peculiar relation of the Consciousness Soul to concrete thinking, or to the Word").

WORKS CITED


CS Lewis has a way of getting the best out of his readers which for an author is an incredible feat. I found this helpful. liscarey.

Till We Have Faces is a retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. I read it as such, and not as a theological text, though there's elements of that there if that's how you choose to approach it. I chose to approach it as a story, though, as a myth retelling -- and I suspect it's perfectly possible to do both at once. It's a beautifully told story, and one that feels real, psychologically and in terms of feeling like a real place, with real people. The basic details of the original story are that Psyche is very beautiful, and Aphrodite is jealous, and has her people sacrifice. This tale of two princesses - one beautiful and one unattractive - and of the struggle between sacred and profane love is Lewis's reworking of the myth of Cupid and Psyche and one of his most enduring works. List Chapter or Page: 1. PART ONE Chapter One. 2. PART ONE Chapter Two. 3. PART ONE Chapter Three. 4. PART ONE Chapter Four. 5. PART ONE Chapter Five. Till We Have Faces is heavily motivated by Lewis's longtime interest in the cupid/psyche myth, but now influenced by and filtered through his courtship and marriage to Joy Davidman and mature Christian faith, and interwoven with several complementary writing projects of the roughly same period (Surprised by Joy; The Four Loves; An Experiment in Criticism). It represents a nuanced spiritual conversion story vaguely autobiographical but also comprising the singular narrative of every journey from bondage to freedom, from cavelight to sunshine, both painful and telling, demanding and piercing. It