

## DEEP MAGIC AND MODERN MAGIC

TEODORA GHIVIRIGĂ  
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași

### Abstract

The paper discusses C. S. Lewis' position on, and criticism of, magic vs. wisdom and the type of “fast” magic that the (post-)modern world has fallen prey to and ends by returning to the alternative that Lewis—and other writers such as his friend and contemporary J. R. R. Tolkien and more recent ones such as Terry Pratchett —suggest as a more propitious alternative.

**Keywords:** *deep magic, modern magic, science, wisdom*

The present paper does not aim at being a piece of genuine C. S. Lewis scholarship, but rather a way of pointing, in a more systematic manner, at his intuitive prophetic foresighted approach to science in general and to what seems to develop at present as post modernist science in many—most—fields. The idea of this presentation came to me when, annoyed and worried at seeing my three year-old-nephew watching TV—educational cartoons nonetheless, but still—I searched for scientific arguments to make my point against it. I saw a TED presentation which dealt with the effect of TV watching on the toddler's brain and psyche. One of the pernicious and unfortunately long lasting effects was that “Prolonged exposure to rapid image change as in cartoons fed to three years olds—during critical periods of brain development precondition the mind to expect high levels of stimulation” which eventually leads to attention deficiency, or inattention. In the pediatrician's words, “When you go to a farm as a school age child it's boring: it's too slow [...] why do I have to walk from here to there?” and concludes “You're conditioning the mind to that reality, which doesn't actually exist.” And this set me thinking, what happens when the human is faced with the frustration of living in a reality which he finds “boring”, “slow”, “unsatisfactory” in every respect? A reality in which he has no interest, or experience, or discipline to exert himself? He searches for a solution—and the solution at hand is MAGIC.

Under heavy use—and probably under inappropriate use—often words tend to be eroded: one such word is *magic / magical*. Magic is pervasive and seductive in today's world and comes in many shapes and sizes to the ignorant

or the unsuspecting mind: electronic gadgets, fast painkillers, fast bank loans, fast cars, fast food, fast academic degrees... Magic, in its multifarious forms, is tempting and really quite difficult to resist. It is this temptation at work when people hope to avoid pain and be cured using chemicals that corrode more than they treat, forgetting that what they need is healing; when people, who find reality “boring” and “slow”, want to use a car to achieve transportation from one place to the next, forgetting that the gain is in the going, not in the arriving. And then there is the blessed computer, with its wondrous power to UNDO and DELETE and RESET, which means that what you have done bears no consequences, that everything can be conveniently UNDONE to a blank slate, that you can start everything from scratch. Excuse comes in yet another form of seduction, that of *saving*: things that people want to save and are advised to save, when they should just stop to consider if these things are truly worth saving, that is, saving at *all costs*: money, time, effort. I have found myself tempted and often giving in, sometimes with a pang of guilt or regret, but giving in nevertheless: it’s fast and it’s easy.

It is here, I think, where science and magic meet in the modern—and post-modern—world. It is here where science works its magic as a temptress. And it is here where C.S. Lewis spotted the danger and the connection between science and magic—and expressed it in powerful prophetic terms, for half a century was yet to pass before the full depth of his prophecy would become obvious: of modern science he says—

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique. (*The Abolition of Man*, 2001:77)

It is true to say that Lewis himself used magic as a fictional engine and instrument in his Narnia chronicles: it is the fantastic element shared with mythologies of every description—the fairy or folk tales (witches and talking beasts), the ancient myths, Latin and Greek and Germanic (fauns, and centaurs, naiads and dryads, dwarves and dragons). It is true that in the stories the characters resort to magical objects, such as rings, swords bows or silver chairs and indeed have magic or supernatural or superhuman powers. It is this, as recently revealed on the Internet, which apparently drives some overzealous Christian American parents to forbid their children to read Lewis or to withdraw them for drama clubs where the Narnia stories are dramatized. It is true that Christianity considers magic as contrary to its spirit and explicitly prohibits any activity of this type, from astrology to the use of spells or fortunetelling. What is found in Lewis’ books does not, however, have anything to do with such forms

of the occult and is as remote from the “supernatural” in productions of the “Buffy the vampire slayer”, “Adventures of a teenage werewolf” or “The Highschool” type as one could imagine.

I should like at this point to evoke two already existing classifications of magic. On the one hand, there is the more obvious classification of fictional magic, such as that used in fantasy works, to engender and advance the plot, for example in Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels, vs “real” magic, which I have perhaps misleadingly called so, meaning that it is “real” inasmuch as those involved in it believe it to be “real” either as practitioners or beneficiaries: an obvious example is Wicca, but I think Romanians have seen their share of this kind of magic presented in the media scandals of the past few years.

Another traditional classification is “white” and “black”. In his book, *A History of White Magic*, Gareth Knight (2011:17) suggests the moral criterion as the basis of this taxonomy; he says: “...techniques in themselves are neither good nor bad....All techniques, like all technologies, can be put to good use or bad, and ... this constitutes a division of the subject into White Magic and Black. The former is a use of techniques of the imagination to expand consciousness and improve the common good; the latter is their use for selfish or squalid ends. In the former the people are healed or helped, in the latter they may be cheated, dominated or degraded.” And he continues: “As long as good uses outweigh the abuses there is no good cause for banning a technology”. Then, “white” magic is supposed to be quintessentially good as it is meant to help, heal, protect, while “black” magic is evil and used to harm, manipulate or deceive others and it does so by resorting to dark demonic forces. What this taxonomy would have us believe then is that the “white” type resorts to other types of forces, angelic it would be claimed. In a different variant, that of a leading practitioner, MacGregor Mathers, there is nothing other than human to magic: it is merely the “science of the control of the secret forces of nature” (2010:xxv). This can be read in two ways: on the one hand, untapped resources lie in every human being and it is in the power of each person to access them and exert and exercise what is innate—a deceptively flattering view of man as a reservoir of power awaiting to be used: the moral question remains.

A second reading would take us back to Lewis’ quote: there are forces in nature that are yet to be discovered and the role of science is precisely to harness them to – presumably—the benefit of man. As science supposedly evolved from magic: chemistry from alchemy, astronomy from astrology and so on, the traditional view opposes the former to the latter in terms of both method and purpose. Speaking of Francis Bacon, Lewis interprets his enthusiastic plea for the “new” science, which would advance mankind and relieve it from its miseries and needs in the following way:

[his] true object is to extend Man's power to the performance of all things possible. He rejects magic because it does not work; but his goal is that of the magician. In Paracelsus the characters of magician and scientist are combined. [No doubt those who really founded modern science were usually those whose love of truth exceeded their love of power; in every mixed movement the efficacy comes from the good elements not from the bad. But the presence of the bad elements is not irrelevant to the direction the efficacy takes.] (*The Abolition of Man*, 2010:78)

which makes him conclude:

It might be going too far to say that the modern scientific movement was tainted from its birth: but I think it would be true to say that it was born in an unhealthy neighbourhood and at an inauspicious hour. (*The Abolition of Man*, 2010:78)

It is worth noting that Lewis' friend and co-Inkling J. R. R. Tolkien expressed the same view: discussing magic in its technological aspect, he equals one with the other, referring to it as "the Machine", and associating it with an insatiable desire for Power. In the occultist Aleister Crowley's definition, magic is "the science and art of causing change to occur in conformity with will." But not just any change, we may surmise, for change can also be brought about by means other than magic, but expedited change, which both circumvents the lapse of time implied in any natural process and eliminates the effort required to bring about the said change. In a draft letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien states:

The basic motive for magia—quite apart from any philosophic consideration of how it would work—is **immediacy** (added emphasis): speed, reduction of labour, and reduction also to a minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect. (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Letter 155 (draft) 25 September 1954, 1981:215)

The moral question is raised again, as Tolkien points out in the following quote, for the will can be corrupt and corrupted. In Letter 131 to Milton Waldman, the author of *The Hobbit* writes:

Both of these [here he refers to Fall and Mortality] will lead to the desire for Power, for making the will more quickly effective,—and so to the Machine (or Magic). By the last I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents—or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The Machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognised. (1981:168)

In *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, Lewis went along the same line when he said:

In the Walking on the Water we see the relations of spirit and Nature so altered that Nature can be made to do whatever spirit pleases. This new obedience of Nature is, of course, not to be separated even in thought from the spirit's own obedience to the Father of Spirits. Apart from that proviso such obedience ...would result in chaos: the evil dream of Magic arises from finite spirit's longing to get that power without paying that price. The evil reality of lawless applied science (which is Magic's son and heir) is actually reducing large tracts of Nature to disorder and sterility at this very moment. (2009:245)

Tolkien long dwelt on the issue of magic in relation to domination and power on the one hand, with issues of creation on the other, and his writings display a more sophisticated system, where other categories emerge: "art", as performed by the Elves, who were directly taught by the Valar and thus did not use their powers to manipulative purposes, moreover, they could put love and care and a yearning for beauty in everything they wrought; in his words, "Their 'magic' is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations". Then there is the "lore", which is the ancient knowledge reverently preserved in tradition, (though, to complicate matters further, there is also Sauron's lore with the aid of which the Rings of Power were wrought).

At this point, another classification suggests itself, emerging from Lewis' dissociation between Magic, which in his opinion, as shown above, is equated to machinery, and some other way of exercising power to achieve results, namely the "*development of the inherent inner powers or talents*" or the inherent nature of the inhabitants of the fictional worlds. There is that which is external and is performed by means of various objects empowered by magic: in Narnia, there are few instances, one example is the accursed chair to which Prince Rilian is tied in *The Silver Chair*; more examples, however, to be found, in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*: from the Ring itself, insidiously working its influence over any of its possessors, to the Palantiri, the crystal globes that allowed wireless long distance communication, so to speak. It is the entire industrial wasteland into which Saruman turns Isengard. These examples indicate an evil use of objects, precisely with the purpose of dominating and manipulating; magic as they might be in a mythical universe, they distort it and may interfere with its laws, even in such trifling matters as Bilbo's use of the ring to avoid intrusive relatives—which is, a very good example of the way modern man hurries to use his own brand of magic to escape minor inconveniences and responsibilities...

A counter example would be the magic gifts offered to the three Pevensy children during their first adventure in Narnia: the bow and arrows, the

cordial and the sword; they are providential when used at key moments and to a great extent they are equally symbolical of the nature of the children and their talents which start manifesting themselves during their feats, as well as a reflection of the nature of Aslan, the donor. The same, I think, applies, in the case of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to Galadriel's miraculous equipment that the members of the Fellowship of the Ring receive on their departure from Rivendell, cloaks in camouflage colour that helps them blend in with the environment and escape enemies, ropes that coil of their own will and never get tangled etc.

This relates to the opposite type, that magic which, in Tolkien's terms, arises from the inherent—evil or good—nature and talents of the user: they are manifestations of it, consequences, if you will. The Ents, the moving trees that help defeat Isengard, are magical inasmuch as what they do is conditioned by what—or who—they are; in *The horse and His Boy*, Bree, the great war stallion, in fact a Narnian talking horse, is special in the sense that it communicates with the boy Shasta and organizes the escape, which is not expected of an ordinary horse outside Narnia; there, it—or perhaps *he*—does not surprise anyone.

There is then a third type, which Lewis uses to complement or annihilate the other two: it is the Deep Magic from before the Dawn of time. This is how Aslan explains it to the children:

...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know: Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards. (1994:90)

This is not manipulative, nor is it coercive, and it belongs to Aslan only: it is the magic by which the world itself was created before there was any time, and is consubstantial to its creator: and the creator neither uses it, nor breaks it, for **it** is **HE**. This is how Lewis explained this subtle relation in *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*:

We speak for convenience of the doctor, or the dressing, healing a cut. But in another sense every cut heals itself: no cut can be healed in a corpse. ... And that energy proceeds from God in the first instance. All who are cured are cured by Him, not merely in the sense that His providence provides them with medical assistance and wholesome environments, but also in the sense that their very

tissues are repaired by the far-descended energy which, flowing from Him, energises the whole system of Nature. (2009:228)

Which brings us back to the quote used in the beginning: the relation between magic and science on the one hand, and knowledge on the other “For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue”. (*The Abolition of Man*, 2001:77)

In an age that encourages lack of discipline and often makes a ridicule of virtue, and knowledge is reduced to mere facts which can be twisted and interpreted statistically but are not the path to truth, post-modern man is pushed and shoved and coaxed and tempted to use magic to re-create a reality that would suit him, that would conform to his soul—flabby for want of exercise, impoverished and hungered for want of proper nurture: a man “without chest”. Magic, as Tolkien tried to explain in *Lord of the Rings*, is highly addictive: the more you use it, the more you depend on it until it ends up using you. What, then, of the use of the gifts and talents inherent in the human? That would require knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue...

It was not only Lewis, or Tolkien, who sensed this peril. I should like to end this incursion into the various forms of magic and its effects on people with a quote not from Lewis, but from the more recent Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld*, where magic, though fascinating and desirable, is seen as a toxic destructive substance: when used in indiscriminated amounts, it can rip through the fabric of the universe. In *Equal Rites*, Granny Weatherwax, an old witch, remarks curtly: “If using magic gives people what they want, then not using magic can give them what they need.” (1987:28) And here, I think, lies the contemporary reader’s choice.

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