Can art convey truth?  
A Reading of C.S. Lewis’s novel *Till We Have Faces*  
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Had he read Democritus, he might have discovered, in philosophy’s first collection of ethical precepts, among portents of atheism, and the vision of his own soul composed of round, smooth, especially mobile atoms, that it is the unexpected which occurs.


But the loss of the gods is far from excluding religiosity. Rather, it is on its account that the relation to the gods is transformed into religious experience [Erleben]. When this happens, the gods have fled. The resulting void is filled by the historical and psychological investigation of myth. – Heidegger


I hope that by the end of this essay the relation of the two epigraphs to each other will be apparent to the reader. It might be hinted by way of introduction that the connection has to do with the nature of self-reflection; and, indeed, self-reflection is at the core of
this essay, both in theme and in structure. The essay brings together a set of otherwise disparate topics—among them therapy, irony, suffering and love—to suggest something of the possibility of art to convey truth.

What the essay does principally is to consider how C. S. Lewis psychologizes the myth of Cupid and Psyche in his 1956 novel *Till We Have Faces*. That novel epitomizes Lewis’s life-long preoccupation with the notion of imaginative experience as verisimilar to lived experience. This is one way that art can convey some sort of vision, yet it may be easily objected that the apprehension of truth must go beyond the pure subjectivity of an interior experience. Therefore I want to confine the sort of truth meant here to the category of self-knowledge. Imaginative experience needs to move a person to action, in order to render the moment of personal transformation into some kind of expression. It might be described as an act of metanoia, one that signals a decisive transmission of meaning from artwork to person. Insofar as this must be an act of self-reflexion—or recursion—my giving this essay a recursive structure could hardly be avoided.

The discussion here is framed around this idea of metanoia. As I am using it, the term is meant to encompass various, related types of personal transformative actions that produce therapeutic results. When art provokes a response, the therapeutic valency of that response can be a metric of truthfulness. In arguing this thesis I am following the philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear, who claims that “wisdom is about health . . . wisdom can be won from illness, not simply in the sense that pathology lends insight into health, but that it gives us direct and immediate insight into who and what we are.”

To show this, I would like to consider three different instances of metanoia, or revision: one literary, one psychoanalytic, and one spiritual. These three instances represent an interlocking mise en abyme, or a text in which the theme of the whole is reflected in each of its distinct parts. So one theme here is self-reflection, and a self-referential irony which is not cynical but rather therapeutic. Another theme is the relation of the rational part of our nature to that part which is in touch with the primordial and the chthonic.

The instance of literary revision is, of course, C.S. Lewis’s adaptation of Cupid and Psyche. Lewis’s novel is a radical reimagining that renders the tale in dark tones of psychological realism. Lewis ruminated on this story for decades, having always been dissatisfied with the version he knew from Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*. In revising the myth he incorporates into the plot the sort of recursion I have been alluding to. That is, Lewis expresses his revisionary motive not only through the work as a whole but more precisely through a kind of literary ineschaton: the protagonist of Lewis’s novel is affronted by the very Apuleian myth that the young Lewis found repellent, and she resolves in her indignation to write the “true” version, thereby reflecting Lewis’s own authorial motivation.

In the instance of psychoanalytic revision, Jonathan Lear gives a post-Freudian interpretation of irony as an act of imagination capable of jolting a person out of some static self-identity. Lear is both a philosopher and a psychoanalyst, and he wants to synthesize his two fields in order to understand the same kind of personal transformation that animates Lewis’s novel. The principle of Lear’s work is perhaps best summed up by the famous quote from Kierkegaard (paraphrasing Socrates): “To become human or to learn what it means to become human does not come that easily.” We find in Lear’s project of making psychoanalysis philosophical yet another instance of revision. Lear is an open-minded and wide-ranging thinker, but for the present purposes I want to focus on his argument for the therapeutic potential of ironic experience. There is a parallel between the power of the ironic moment to disrupt a static self-identity, and the power of imaginative experience to reveal hitherto hidden resources of self-knowledge.

What lies behind Lear’s idea of irony is the attempt to describe the vital expressivity that undergirds human personhood. Here, Lear is prevailing against reductionistic models. He asks, “Are we to continue to be creatures who take responsibility for shaping who we are via a self-conscious grasp of who we might become? . . . It is a contingent question whether the human mind, as we have come to know it, will continue to exist.” In Lear’s view, any model a person might apply to his or her own self-identity must be fundamentally incomplete. “We do not fit without remainder into socially available practical identities.”

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In the third instance of metanoia, the spiritual, I want to consider the protagonist in *Till We Have Faces* more closely. She perfectly embodies the fundamental problem of psychology, as Lear describes it: “A human being is fundamentally out of touch with her own subjectivity.” Her metanoia is triggered by a moment of ironic disruption approximate to the Learian idea. Having been tutored in Greek philosophy as a young girl, she makes sense of her world through an Attic rationalism but gradually finds that this fails to account for her own experiences. She is eventually driven towards a confessional speech act that grants her a cognizance of her own wretchedness and thereby arrives at a humility consonant with spiritual repentance. Here the topic of suffering becomes salient. The experience of suffering signals an expansion of personal possibilities. This final instance of metanoia ties together the preceding two, and completes the *mise en abyme*.

So it is the metanoiac or therapeutic aspect of imagination that means art has the capacity to convey truth. But the imagination has this only in potential. Where the

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3. This quote is the epigraph to Lear, *Wisdom won from illness: The psychoanalytic grasp of human being*, and reference is made to the idea throughout Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony*, with a comment. by Cora Diamond et al. (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2011).
vitality of expression is lacking the imagination can become an engine of static projection. The myth becomes a stale formulation; personal health is compromised when one’s self-identity remains hewn to an obsolete self-understanding. Self-knowledge requires a distance from oneself, and therapeutic action requires the means to access new possibilities of being. To put it a different way, consider how Lear formulates the basic problem of psychoanalysis: “How can a conversation change the structure of a human soul? How can it do it in a way as to promote a person’s freedom?” This is much the same sort of inquiry that Lewis undertakes in exploring the salutary power of imaginative experience as conveyed through literature.

_Till We Have Faces_ is not a long novel, but it is dense with emotion and thematic complexity; there is not space here for anything like a full recapitulation. In brief, it is the story of a woman, a queen named Orual, who goes decades imagining herself to have been the victim of a fateful tragedy that culminates in the loss of her beloved sister, Istra. At her life’s end, while in a terminal decline, she realizes that it was she who had betrayed Istra and brought about their mutual downfall.

What happened to the sister? Some believed she had been wedded to a god and thereby herself became a goddess. The story of this transformation becomes a popular legend and a religious myth. But the account gets significantly altered. According to the myth, Istra’s sisters are shallow, spiteful and deeply envious, and they convince Istra to betray her mysterious husband. One day, Queen Orual hears this myth after happening upon a forest shrine dedicated to the goddess Istra. She is astounded to recognize the tale as a version of events from her own life; but her astonishment quickly gives way to indignation at how this telling of the story has terribly distorted her own role in it. She resolves to write the story as it actually happened.

The myth, of course, is that of Cupid and Psyche. Lewis transforms the vibrant pastoralism of Apuleius into something opaque and psychological. He does this in two ways: first, by turning one the original story’s minor antagonists into its first-person narrator; and second, by introducing a profound tension between naturalism and theism. Whereas the original story hinges on the great jealousy that Istra’s sisters feel when they visit Psyche’s magnificent palace, in Lewis’s version the tragedy depends on Orual’s inability to see the palace at all. As Lewis says:

The central alteration in my own version consists in 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.

11. C.S. Lewis, _Till We Have Faces_ (Glasgow: Collins, 1978), unpaginated frontmatter.
The tone is stark, the plot is complicated, the characters are morally flawed; ambiguity and nuance run through the whole. The novel challenges its readers to imaginatively visit a harsh and unforgiving world.

The story plainly fascinated Lewis, who first read it as a young man and produced his adaptation some thirty years later. One popular instance of the Apuleian version appears in Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*. Pater wished to draw upon the schoolboy prurience and sensual voyeurism of Apuleius to supplement his own parable of moral development:

the tale of Cupid and Psyche, full of brilliant, life-like situations, *speciosa locis*, and abounding in lovely visible imagery (one seemed to see and handle the golden hair, the fresh flowers, the precious works of art in it!) yet full also of a gentle idealism, so that you might take it, if you chose, for an allegory. With a concentration of all his finer literary gifts, Apuleius had gathered into it the floating star-matter of many a delightful old story.

Lewis’s revision wished to elaborate the dark psychology that Pater merely hinted at.

What troubled Lewis about the version he found in Apuleius was its one-dimensional depiction of motivation. There was no sense of the unconscious, no cognizance of the basic problem that a human being is not transparent to herself. On this point, Orual’s reaction to the story at the forest shrine is Lewis’s reaction to the Apuleian version:

...it’s a story belonging to a different world, a world in which the gods show themselves clearly and don’t torment men with glimpses, nor unveil to one what they hide from another, nor ask you to believe what contradicts your eyes and ears and nose and tongue and fingers.

In other words, Lewis wants to introduce an unconscious element into what drives the protagonist onward. Lewis was drawing not only upon Freud and Jung, but also upon Rudolf Otto and the notion of the holy as wholly other. Lewis interiorizes the “wholly other” that Otto described as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This is an idea of the holy, of God, as primarily mysterious and at the same time both terrifying and fascinating. It is by ascribing these qualities to the unconscious that Lewis constructs that central tension between naturalism and theism. It is never quite clear whether Orual has actually encountered a supernatural reality; her sense of epistemological certainty erodes over the novel’s course. There is a kind of synthesis here which depicts Lewis’s

13. Ibid. 64.
own literary and intellectual interests: he manages to join the medieval romance, the pure allegory for spiritual progression, together with the modern device of the unreliable narrator.

The self-reflexive nature of the story appears in its bipartite structure. Part I is the finished version of the account that Orual resolved to write after she encountered the Apuleian version. But Part II is an addendum that she writes after reflecting upon the final version of Part I! Between Part I and Part II she is wholly transformed. The confessional act of writing causes her to reconsider all she had once taken for granted. “While I related my first years, when I wrote how Redival and I built mud houses in the garden, a thousand other things came back into my mind” [16]. Thus, it becomes clear that Orual herself never had the kind of grip on reality suggested by her tough, self-sufficient character. Through a certain kind of expression her own unconscious began to be revealed to her.

Because Orual is revealed to be an unreliable narrator, the reader is invited to decide for herself whether the events should be interpreted in naturalistic or theistic terms. So Lewis is playing with the reader’s imagination, and elaborating the theme of seeing that begins with Orual’s inability to see Psyche’s palace. What does it mean to discern an object clearly? Lewis is tilting against the kind of sensibility we saw earlier in Walter Pater, which seeks in the aesthetic an ethical category that is nonetheless capable of remaining monological. Lewis’s rejection of this possibility has to do with his understanding of literature, and the function of imaginative experience:

It is not a question of knowing … at all. It is connaître not savoir; it is erleben; we become these other selves. Not only nor chiefly 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 [17].

So for Lewis the sort of imaginative experience accessible through literature appears in the aspect of self-critique. The individual requires some means to step outside of a fixed self-identity. This begins to look somewhat like psychoanalysis. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear revisits Freud from an anti-scientistic point of view. This is part of an historical reevaluation which locates Freud as the culmination of the tradition of Continental philosophy that is normally thought to have begun with Kant and ended with Nietzsche [18]. Of course, Freud understood his own work in naturalistic terms. But as Lear observes, “Freud was a revolutionary. He unleashed a set of ideas … that changed the world. There must, then, be a deep sense in which he did not know what he was doing.” [19]. This whole programme is both a revision and a deepening of

16. Lewis, Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold, 263.
17. C.S. Lewis, An Experiment in Criticism (Cambridge University Press, 1961), 139.
Freud. For Lear the boundaries of expressive personality are set only by the limits of the imagination.

So Lear wants to locate the philosophical warrants for psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice. If we accept that a person is, by nature, out of touch with her own subjectivity, then the agenda of a normative ethics gets set in part by the problem of determining the content of unconscious motivation. In Apuleius, the power of love between Cupid and Psyche allows them to overcome tremendous obstacles in order to be reunited. But with Lewis, the fundamental motivating force of love is not so straightforward. Orual believes that she loved Istra, but comes to understand how craven and self-concerned that love had actually been.

Is there, indeed, any sense in which the unconscious is knowable? There would seem to be no predetermined heuristic for arriving at the content of what is, by definition, beyond rational self-reflection. Therefore, what if we simply guess? In fact, it is Lear’s hypothesis that what comes out in the moment of free expression will provide useful clues for how to re-orient the self-identity towards healthfulness. This is a sort of selection by random assortment that just happens to describe, also, how imagination tends to work. We can direct the attention towards a certain idea, but the figures that occur to us elude reliable prediction. We can train ourselves to move in such a way that seems conducive to the appearance in the mind of fresh and viable figures; or alternatively we can disguise, to varying degrees of cleverness, what is really a method of rote expression. What occurs when one attempts to direct the attention back on itself is a movement of the imagination. This means that the individual imaginatively embodies some radically new possibility for being, or is confronted by an image of herself which she feels to be intrinsically false.

This is what happened to Orual when she heard the myth of Cupid and Psyche at the forest shrine, and recognized it as a distorted version of a tragedy from her own life. “I was wide awake and I felt the blood rush into my face. He was telling it wrong; hideously and stupidly wrong. First of all, he made it that both Psyche’s sisters had visited her in the secret palace of the god (to think of Redival going there!)”

One way of describing this is to say that Orual was struck by an intense sensation of irony.

Jonathan Lear has developed a certain notion, in line with his philosophical orientation towards psychoanalysis, of irony as a therapeutic resource. The idea of irony as conducive to healthfulness might seem counter-intuitive. By its common interpretation, irony is an attitude of detachment, or even cynicism. Lear cites Richard Rorty’s formulation of irony as an example of this view. This is the ataraxic, or anaesthetic attitude of “someone who remains metaphysically detached as she investigates the myriad cultural forms in which others have found a path to commitment.”

Lear’s idea is different, and owes much to Kierkegaard—or more precisely to Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous Climacus. Kierkegaard wrote a dissertation on irony, but
Lear takes Kierkegaard as having intended to repudiate the jejune views of his youth in his pseudonymous publications. In other words, the later, pseudonymous writings should be taken as Kierkegaard’s final word on the topic. “Thus instead of later academic work in which he revises his earlier views on irony, we have the creation of pseudonymous authors who go on to write (or edit) their own ironic and humorous texts. The aim of these texts is not to explain irony, but to instil it.”

How is a text capable of instilling irony?

This idea of irony relies on a distinction between two kinds of personal pretense. One is pretense in the pejorative sense, the other non-perjorative. The pejorative sense is familiar enough: this is pretense as show, as false self-advertisement. But in the non-pejorative sense of pretense it is just an ordinary part of normal self-identity. So for example, we say that a person has a pretense of being a student, or a university professor, or whatever. But a person’s non-pejorative pretense is an ideal that she is trying to live up to, and she is almost always falling short. This goes back to Kierkegaard and the quintessential question of his pseudonymous Climacus: “in all of Christendom is there a Christian?” In the ironic moment, one experiences a disjunction between the ideal and the true state; or, between one’s pretense in the non-pejorative sense and his pretense in the pejorative sense. So, for instance, I am going along in my pretense of being a student, writing my essay—when I am suddenly struck by how I have merely been engaging in a formal exercise. Perhaps in fulfilling my role of being a learner I have been merely posing arguments that correspond to an idea about marking criteria, and not particularly preoccupied with real learning at all. My pretense of being a student in the non-pejorative sense suddenly appears to be pretense in the pejorative sense.

This feeling, that one’s possibilities of being have been expanded towards a particular result, is what Lear calls “would-be directedness”. This sort of apprehension describes Orual’s encounter with the priest of the forest-shrine. And it is an autobiographical reflection of the “would-be directedness” that the Apuleian version of the myth instilled in Lewis. Orual is struck by the ironic disjunction between the version of herself presented in the tale, on the one hand, and her own interiorized self-identity on the other. Until that point she nurtured a certain idea of herself: an innocent girl hardened by mistreatment into a figure of regal dignity and martial severity. “For it had somehow settled in my mind from the very beginning that I was the pitiable and ill-used one.” In the moment of Learian irony there is a violent disruption of the normative self-understanding. Orual would be open to the possibility of radically reevaluating the story she had cherished and suffered over for a lifetime. Where she was once the young woman who risked everything for a beloved sibling, and lost it all by a cruel trick of the gods, now she is the spiteful ingénue of the Apuleian version.

It is crucial to see that irony only makes sense here because an expanded possibility of

23. Ibid., 3–71.
being is something that we instinctively resist. Lear’s moment of irony is only therapeutic insofar as the individual is compelled to take the consequences seriously. When I am struck for instance by the shallowness of my pretense of being a student, this might create a problem for me. Perhaps it is better ignored. This is perhaps why Lear’s notion of irony as therapeutic seems so counter-intuitive; irony seems negative, a mode of failed aspirations, and sort of a bummer, because it challenges us to consider the formal limitations of our practical identities.

If some motive force pushes us onward, however, then that sense of “would-be directedness” can become an expression of metanoia. And so we see that with Orual there is a movement from anaesthetic defiance to pathetic penitence. That sense of irony awakens Orual to the extent of her own wretchedness, and the magnitude of her suffering only becomes apparent once she can no longer maintain a palliative charade. The loss of Psyche was agonizing to Orual, yet she comes to see how that agony was rather one-dimensional. But the real development of Orual’s understanding begins only once she has finished writing her “true” version, which turns out to be filled with falsehoods. “The awareness that comes from writing her response to the story is the real beginning of [Orual’s] individuation.” There can only be movement once she has infused a static self-image with the power of the Word. “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 own pen to probe my wound.”

It is a moment of irony that provokes Orual to take a radical turn in her self-understanding. But what finally brings her to repentance is a cognizance of suffering, both an awareness of her own and a sensitivity to that of others. We might say suffering can take two forms: one is unreflective, cannibalistic, and ultimately destructive; the second sort in an immediate sense is more terrifying, but working through it can lead one back to a state of equanimity, humility, and therefore to health. It is as Orual says, “There must, whether the gods see it or not, be something great in the mortal soul. For suffering, it seems, is infinite, and our capacity without limit.” This is similar to a remark that Lewis makes in *A Grief Observed*:

I will not, if I can help it, shin up either the feathery or the prickly tree. Two widely different convictions press more and more on my mind. One is that the Eternal Vet is even more inexorable and the possible operations even more painful than our severest imaginings can forbode. But the other, that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

We come to see that Orual’s toughness is the false obduracy of an ignorant atheism, which would claim absurdly that invincibility derives from nescience. At the novel’s
opening we find her claiming defiantly that she has nothing to fear from the gods; at its close, as her own life is ending, she is pleading for their forgivenness. So too does Lear see the whole tradition of psychoanalysis as a response to suffering: “the analytic situation is, of its essence, therapeutic. There have been no interesting psychoanalytic observations of human nature that have not arisen out of an attempt to ease human suffering.”

We might go even further and suppose that the depths of one’s personhood can be plumbed only by the measure of suffering she can endure without perishing.

The word fallen into desuetude calcifies into image; and it is by the word that a repristination is possible. For the human person this describes a dialectic of the loss and expansion of the self which occurs through imaginative action:

This creative opening-up is constituted by self-consciously appropriating the creative powers of (hitherto unconscious) imagination. Creativity here is not simply the recognition of a new possibility; it is a creative manner of thinking that itself opens new possibilities for living. This is why the emerging wisdom is practical and poetical: it is the cause of what it understands.

This resonates strongly with a metaphor of therapy that Lewis uses to describe the imaginative experience derived from literature: “Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality.”

The artwork conveys a truth which resonates with the most fundamental part of the metaphysical project, which is love. With Orual, the various types of love are distorted: the filial, friendship, charity and the erotic, for her all become bent toward furthering her selfish ends. Corrective action required a kind of integrated expression:

The complaint was the answer. To have heard myself making it was to be answered . . . 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 face?

In one sense it was an insufficient portrayal of love by Apuleius that prompted Lewis to revise Cupid and Psyche; love as depicted in the original seemed to lack any dimension of the transcendent, and promised no movement out of oneself towards a higher reality. To whatever extent the artwork is able to resonant with our own innate sense of this transcendent love, it is capable of conveying truth.

32. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, 305.
References


