XI

"CARNIVALS OF MASS-MURDER": THE FRAZERIAN ORIGINS OF
WYNDHAM LEWIS’S THE CHILDERMASS

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I

Whether The Childermass (1928) seems one of the most impressive or
the most baffling of Wyndham Lewis’s creations rather depends on how
this neglected modernist experiment is first encountered. Many years
ago it was my good fortune to be spellbound by a repeat of D. G.
Bridson’s radio dramatization for the BBC Third Programme (1951,
1955). Subsequently coming to read the trilogy (1955–6), I must confess
that, while I remained gripped by its often sublime sequels Monstre Gai
and Malign Fiesta, the first part of The Human Age left me, as others,
perplexed.1

Excited as one may well be by the initial vision of the unearthly scene
“Outside Heaven”, progressively a smokescreen of enigma envelops the
reader. What exactly is this oasis besieged by Satanic forces, incinerated
locusts falling like shrapnel; and that mysterious Magnetic City across
the river, is it really the “New Jerusalem” (p. 143)? As to the odd couple
haunting this weird shore, why does Pullman bear more than a passing
likeness to James Joyce (who in 1928 had thirteen years left to devote to
his epic punning)? Curious too that Pullman’s afterlife companion
Satterthwaite is the caricature of a public-school fag. More disturbingly,
memories of active service on the Western Front afflict them both.
“Satters” walks “with a shell-shock waggle” (p. 12); “these condensations
of the red dusty fog” seem “to the frightened wartime soul of the startled
Satters, angels of Mons . . . ghosts of battle” (p. 13); “He grovels before
Nurse Pullman . . . the victim of the devils of Humour, of war, pestilence
and famine” (p. 52). There, true enough, the Apocalypse does flickeringly
illuminate the No Man’s Land across which these traumatised veterans
pick their way back to camp. The static nature of trench-fighting in the
Great War meant that the front line literally faced the land of the dead:
over the devastated landscape of Flanders and France among the ruins
of homes not unlike their own were strewn the decaying corpses of

R. Fraser (ed.), Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination
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fellow combatants.

Other difficulties are less easily resolved. Especially puzzling is the look worn by both this Last Assize and its judge who decides the fate of the petitioners awaiting the ferry across the Styx. Although these posthumous sessions are held in a classical amphitheatre, the Judgement Seat takes the form of a puppeteer's booth, and when the justice arrives we quickly recognise the resemblance to an old childhood acquaintance— one who (we recall) vanquished both Death and the Devil. To what genre exactly does this work belong that, while casting a spell over the radio, proves so difficult to read? Why this atmosphere of Satumalnia, with a figure out of the Italian carnival? Why the series of judicial murders punctuated with grim jests about rebirth, alongside the parodies of "Mr Joys of Potluck . . . whom men called Crossword-Joys" (p. 172)? Why the debates concerning space–time and reality between a degraded Highlander and the substitute of a substitute? For presiding is no Judge of the Dead known to antiquity: neither Pluto nor Osiris, not even St Peter, but Mr Punch alias the Bailiff. The Childermass is mined with problems; therefore it is a relief to discover that an important set of clues lie hidden in The Golden Bough and its subsidiary growths—these clues facilitating some exploration of Lewis's formidable maze.

Elsewhere I have suggested that the supernatural oasis in Lewis's vision of the afterlife came from the religious imagination of Western Asia, the supernatural beliefs of the ancient Babylonians and Persians. The fact that in one of Lewis's libraries there was a copy of the abridged edition of Frazer's Folk-lore in the Old Testament (1923) indicates a probable way by which, in the British Museum Reading Room, Lewis became further acquainted with the Zoroastrian religion—and its heresies which feature so prominently a fearful time god. Reciprocally, an allusion to one of the greatest of the Waverley novels, in Frazer's account of the Flood, doubtless reminded Lewis of how these profound folktales of Western Asia could be used to reflect the follies and vices of modern Europe. In varying degrees, the Babylonian cosmogony fertilised the creeds of the surrounding peoples and their successors: Persian, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Muslim. These intricate patterns of acculturation are signposted by Frazer's scholarly apparatus, which, in the three-volume edition, conveys information in a scheme of increasing complexity. Amid a survey of the worldwide myths of a universal deluge, section 6 of chapter IV focuses on "Supposed Persian Stories of a Great Flood". There the eye is caught by a marginal gloss: