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Which Image Triggered C. S. Lewis's Enthusiasm for Wagner's *Ring* Cycle?

NORBERT FEINENDEGEN

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis recounts a seminal moment that occurred quite early in his life but had an enormous impact on his spiritual development. This encounter of art and imagination has become famous, and yet the image at the center of the story has remained a mystery.¹ Between January 1911 and July 1913, Lewis was educated at Cherbourg House, Malvern, a preparatory school southwest of Birmingham, England. At some point during these two and a half years, his eyes happened to fall on an advertisement in a literary magazine that promoted volume 2 of Arthur Rackham's illustrations of Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* cycle.² He saw one of Rackham's paintings and at the same time read the words *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*. This triggered an intense experience of Joy—the first since his childhood days—and established his lifelong fascination with Norse mythology.

Lewis gives two accounts of the event. The first is the well-known

¹ A slightly different version of this essay was published in April 2022 on Brenton Dickieson's *A Pilgrim in Narnia* blog. <https://apilgriminnarnia.com/2022/04/20/wagner>.

² Rackham's illustrations of *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods* were published in late October 1911, together with Margaret Armour's recent translation. <https://archive.org/details/siegfriedtwiligh00wagn/mode/2up>. Accessed 7 January 2023. The first volume, *The Rhinegold and The Valkyrie*, was published in 1910. Richard Wagner, *The Rhinegold and The Valkyrie*, trans. by Margaret Armour, illus. by Arthur Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1910); Richard Wagner, *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*, trans. by Margaret Armour, illus. by Arthur Rackham (London: Heinemann, 1911).

passage in Chapter 5 “Renaissance” of *Surprised by Joy*:

This long winter broke up in a single moment, fairly early in my time at Chartres. . . . Someone must have left in the schoolroom a literary periodical: The *Bookman*, perhaps, or the *Times Literary Supplement*. My eye fell upon a headline and a picture, carelessly, expecting nothing. A moment later, as the poet says, ‘The sky had turned round.’

What I had read was the words *Siegfried and the Twilight of the Gods*. What I had seen was one of Arthur Rackham’s illustrations to that volume. I had never heard of Wagner, nor of Siegfried. I thought the *Twilight of the Gods* meant the twilight in which the gods lived. How did I know, at once and beyond question, that this was no Celtic, or silvan, or terrestrial twilight? But so it was. Pure ‘Northernness’ engulfed me: a vision of huge, clear spaces hanging above the Atlantic in the endless twilight of Northern summer, remoteness, severity . . . and almost at the same moment I knew that I had met this before, long, long ago (it hardly seems longer now) in *Tegner’s Drapa*, that Siegfried (whatever it might be) belonged to the same world as Balder and the sunward-sailing cranes.³

The second account is a passage in “Early Prose Joy,” an autobiographical sketch Lewis wrote in late 1930/early 1931:

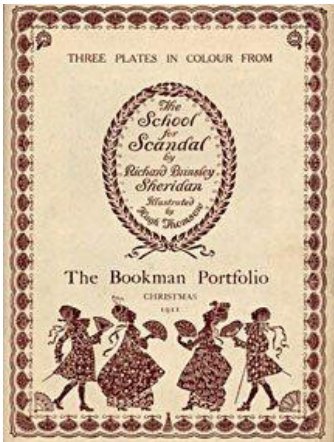
For two school years of busy and unprofitable boyhood, nothing befell me that concerns the subject of this book. Then all in a moment the frost broke up. I saw one day in a newspaper the reproduction of some picture that Arthur Rackham had drawn for Wagner’s *Ring*. I suppose that what I was looking at must have been a publisher’s advertisement, for my eyes, at the same moment, took in the words *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods* printed close beside the picture. I had never heard of Wagner, nor of Siegfried: and I thought that ‘the twilight of the gods’ meant the twilight in which the gods lived. It is a little remarkable that though I knew nothing of the Northern mythology till then, save what could be learned from Longfellow, I spontaneously set this twilight and these gods in a place quite apart either from the Celtic or from the Grecian stories. Perhaps the flavour of Rackham’s drawings is truly Germanic and guided me aright. Whatever the cause, those printed words flashed instantly upon

³ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), 72-3.

my mind a riot of imagery which later knowledge has shown to be surprisingly correct. I saw that twilight hanging pale and motionless over the Atlantic, slowly fading through the endless summer evening of the North: I saw those gods wheeling through it aloft on flying horses: I think (but of this I am uncertain) [that] even then, from some forgotten source, I supplied them with winged helmets.⁴

Lewis does not say in these two passages which of Rackham's illustrations he saw, but he assumes in *Surprised by Joy* that the advertisement appeared in *The Bookman* or *The Times Literary Supplement*. In both *Surprised by Joy* and "Early Prose Joy," Lewis emphasizes that he saw the illustration and read the words *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods* next to it—a fact that has received little attention until now.

According to Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, it was the Christmas edition of *The Bookman* (December 1911) that fell into Lewis's hands, which contained a supplement printed in color with several



Rackham illustrations of the *Ring*.⁵ However, this is not so. The *Christmas Double Number* of *The Bookman* (which is also the December issue) was accompanied by a 138-page *Christmas Supplement* in black and white, as well as a *Portfolio* with three color plates by Hugh Thomson (being illustrations for R. B. Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*; see image 1). Neither the 1911 Christmas edition nor the supplement contains any of Rackham's illustrations for *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*;⁶ the latter

⁴ C. S. Lewis, "Early Prose Joy": C. S. Lewis's Early Draft of an Autobiographical Manuscript" in VII: *An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 30 (2013), 16. This was published by Andrew Lazo. See Andrew Lazo, "Early Prose Joy": A Brief Introduction," in VII: *An Anglo-American Literary Review*, 30 (2013), 5-12.

⁵ Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 31. Alistair McGrath's and Harry Lee Poe's biographies make a similar claim but do not cite their sources or add further evidence. While Lewis speaks of only one image, all three (Green and Hooper too) seem to assume that Lewis saw a supplement with several illustrations.

⁶ The title page of the *Christmas Double Number* states that it has a cover plate by

does contain an advertisement for the volume on page 127, but it is not illustrated.⁷

While Lewis speaks of an *advertisement* for the Rackham volume, George Sayer in his 1988 biography *Jack*⁸ claims that Lewis got hold of a magazine which contained a *review* of the Rackham volume and featured an illustration: a painting of Siegfried looking down on the sleeping Brünnhilde in the light of the rising sun whose breast plate he has removed so that her naked breasts are visible (see right, plate 13/30 of Rackham's illustrations). However, Sayer cites no source for this assertion;⁹ on the contrary, he quotes the verses printed in Rackham's volume on the left-hand page (facing the illustration)¹⁰ and adds that these verses were presumably not reproduced in the review. It therefore appears that Sayer never saw the review himself, which he claims was the trigger for Lewis's experience.



The actual source of Lewis's teenage encounter with Northernness appears to have eluded biographers thus far. After an exhaustive search, I have only been able to find one issue of a contemporary literary journal

Edmund Dulac and contains other (unspecified) full-page plates with pictures by Arthur Rackham, Charles Robinson, Claude A. Shepperson and Willy Pogány. However, such plates are not part of the *Portfolio*, nor of the Christmas edition, nor of the *Supplement!* I have not yet been able to solve this mystery.

⁷ The U.S. magazine of the same name (*The Bookman*) in its 1911 Christmas issue ran a full-page reproduction of plate 1/30 (on page 383) but with the subtitle "SIEGFRIED BY ARTHUR RACKHAM."

⁸ George Sayer, *Jack: A Life of C. S. Lewis* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994), 76.

⁹ It is theoretically possible that Lewis told Sayer in a personal conversation that it was this painting he saw, but Sayer himself does not make this claim.

¹⁰ "Mystical rapture / Pierces my heart; / Burning with terror; / I reel, my heart faints and fails" (Wagner, *Siegfried and Twilight of the Gods*, 86). These are Siegfried's words when, after removing the breastplate, he realises that the person in front of him is not a man but a woman. This four-liner is repeated on the left-hand page opposite the illustration (which is otherwise blank).

that contains the combination of said illustration and the words *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*. In the popular U.S. magazine *The Literary Digest*, a reproduction of plate 29/30 from the Rackham volume appeared on 30 December 1911 with the caption *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*. The picture shows Brünnhilde in the evening light jumping her horse Grane onto the funeral pyre where the dead Siegfried is being burned.



SIEGFRIED AND THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS.
From a drawing by Arthur Rackham for this season's crop
of Christmas books.

Are there reasons to suppose that it was this illustration which Lewis saw? I think so—because of the memory of Balder which both Rackham's illustration and the words printed next to it triggered in him. In his poem "Tegnér's Drapa",¹¹ Longfellow says of the dead Balder:

They laid him in his ship,
With horse and harness,
As on a funeral pyre. . . .
They launched the burning ship!
It floated far away
Over the misty sea,
Till like the sun it seemed,
Sinking beneath the waves.
Balder returned no more!¹²

¹¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Tegnér's Drapa," in *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (London: Fredrick Warne, 1868), 216-18. https://archive.org/details/poeticalworksofh00long_1/page/216/mode/2up?q=balder. Accessed 7 January 2023.

¹² Longfellow, "Tegnér's Drapa," 217-18, lines 37-9 and 43-8.

Here, too, a dead god is handed over to a funeral pyre and a horse appears. Longfellow also immerses his scene in the light of the setting sun, which may have contributed to Lewis's (mis)interpretation of the *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods* as evening.¹³

The similarity between the two scenes is unmistakable, and this could be the reason why Rackham's image evoked the memory of the dead Balder in Lewis, and he intuitively knew that Siegfried belonged to the same world as Balder. The images which arose in his mind apparently also resembled the imagery of Longfellow's poem.

And there is a second, somewhat less obvious, reason. In "Early Prose Joy," Lewis explains:

I saw that twilight hanging pale and motionless over the Atlantic, slowly fading through the endless summer evening of the North: I saw those gods wheeling through it aloft on flying horses: I think (but of this I am uncertain) [that] even then, from some forgotten source, I supplied them with winged helmets.



Lewis's hesitation about the winged helmets suggests that he *was certain* about the flying horses—that they were part of the original vision and not a later back-projection. Longfellow, who, according to "Early Prose Joy," was Lewis's only source for Norse mythology up to that point, does not mention flying horses anywhere. So, the question arises as to how Lewis came up with the idea of having his gods fly on horses—unless the picture itself gave him cause to do so. Now Brünnhilde on Grane is the only illustration in the volume that shows a deity on a horse. This alone does not explain why Lewis, with his vivid, visual imagination, should have

¹³ Balder is referred to in Longfellow as the god of the summer sun, so that his burial coincides with the sunset; Lewis's vision is marked by the fading of the summer evening of the north.



The Ride of the Valkyrs
J. C. Dollman
By Arrangement with the Artist

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seen gods on flying horses. It is conceivable, however, that he had seen paintings of flying gods somewhere else, and that the illustration evoked the memory of these paintings in him. The *Edda*, which Lewis came to know only afterwards, features horses as mounts of the gods, and Wagner's Valkyries are also often depicted on flying horses. Rackham's illustration may have evoked the memory of such a painting Lewis had once seen, for example in H. A. Guerber's *Myths of the Norsemen*.¹⁴ In the picture *The Ride of the Valkyries* by J. C. Dollman that is printed in this volume, the goddesses also wear winged helmets.¹⁵

We cannot be certain that *The Literary Digest* was available at Cherboung House. *The Bookman* and *The Times Literary Supplement* are more

¹⁴ H. A. Guerber, *Myths of the Norsemen from the Eddas and Sagas* (London: Harrap, 1909), 176. <https://archive.org/details/mythsofthenorsemen00gueruoft>. Accessed 7 January 2023.

¹⁵ When Lewis first visited his sick neighbour Arthur Greeves in April 1914, it was Guerber's *Myths of the Norsemen* that he saw on a table beside the bed (See Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 130 [end of Chapter 8 "Release"]). Unfortunately, it is not known when he first read this book. Rackham's first volume of *Ring* illustrations *The Rhinegold and The Valkyrie* also features the Valkyries riding flying horses, but Lewis didn't see this volume until later. Whether he had a glimpse of this volume before he received it as a natal gift from his father in the Christmas holidays of 1913/14 is not known. See letter of 24 November 1913 to Albert Lewis, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. by Walter Hooper, 3 vols. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004-7), 1:40.

likely suspects to be found in the school's library or common room. As we have seen though, the archives reveal that they contain no illustrations of *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*. Thus, if Lewis really saw the image of Brünnhilde jumping with Grane onto the funeral pyre of the dead Siegfried, his reaction to both image and title would find an easy explanation. In the spirit of a cautious suggestion, it remains an open question whether Lewis actually saw this image in *The Literary Digest* or in some other unknown magazine. The combination of his description of a Rackham illustration titled with the exact phrase, *Siegfried and The Twilight of the Gods*, suggests, in my opinion, that we are on the right track. It would be a striking coincidence if another literary journal had published exactly the same combination of image and caption at about the same time.

So the hunt is on: if someone should find the combination of image and title mentioned by Lewis in a British magazine (whether with the same illustration or a different one), and/or should put forward an equally plausible or even more plausible idea of what Lewis might have seen in his schoolroom at Cherbourg House, I'd be delighted—I'm sure we all would be delighted—to hear about it!

Meanwhile, when we bring together the autobiography *Surprised by Joy* with the recently published evidence of "Early Prose Joy," the *Literary Digest* advertisement remains strikingly resonant of Lewis's profound teenage encounter with Northernness.