Chapter One

Introduction

To use Sir Herbert Grierson's metaphor, what I have tried to do in this study is to examine one of the crosscurrents in contemporary literature. The metaphor suggests the fact that the complete history of any given time is like a body of moving water: events, ideas, religious attitudes, social ideologies, literary theories, and a thousand other things flow together like currents and eddies in a river, or perhaps an ocean. And even the mere literary history of a given time deals not only with literature but with at least some of these other currents and eddies as well—ideas, movements, religious attitudes—which literature has assumed to itself. The content of literature is everything except literature; literature, it may be said, gives a form to the "everything except." I have not, like Grierson, tried to depict an age, only one of the crosscurrents of our age: the fusion of a certain literary form with a certain subject matter, the romantic manner applied to religious matter. Inevitably, I have had to separate the form from the content in order to discuss them, though (as I shall often repeat) the two things are not really separable, but form a single current which I have called "romantic religion."

The four men in whose work I have found this peculiar fusion are Owen Barfield (an Anglican and an Anthroposophist), C. S.
Lewis and Charles Williams (also Anglicans), and J. R. R. Tolkien (a Roman Catholic). The last three need little introduction, perhaps only a reminder that all are (or were) critics and scholars who also have worked in "creative" forms. Lewis is well known for his scholarly work, his Christian apologetics, and his fiction—especially his "inter-planetary" trilogy and *Till We Have Faces*. Williams was a prolific critic, a poet, a novelist, a dramatist, and a theologian. Tolkien was for years known only within the small world of medieval and linguistic scholarship for such things as his work on *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but he has come into such recent prominence with his "fairy story for adults," *The Lord of the Rings*, that reviewers are now speaking casually of certain books as being in "the Tolkien tradition." The fourth man, Barfield, is the least known to the general reader, and his work is hardest to describe briefly. Until his recent retirement he was a solicitor in London, having no formal association with any university, an "amateur" in the world of English thought and letters—relatively unknown in England and almost completely unknown in America. His early book *Poetic Diction* (1927) for years enjoyed a kind of underground reputation among such critics and poets as R. P. Blackmur and Howard Nemerov, who were concerned with poetic theory; and in view of Barfield's recently growing influence the book seems likely to become a standard work in the field. But it was *Saving the Appearances* (1957) that began to draw wider attention to Barfield's work. Till then he had existed in the public mind largely as someone whom Lewis insisted on citing in his own work. Now, in his later years, he is finally becoming a figure of some consequence, both in England and America. A recent reviewer referred to him as "one of the major and insufficiently appreciated prophets of the time," and T. J. J. Altizer has called *Saving the Appearances* not only a "fascinating and deeply illuminating book" but has even said that it is "potentially one of the truly seminal works of our time." Since Barfield's retirement he has lectured at various American universities—Brandeis University, Drew University, Hamilton College, the University of Missouri—and has published in rapid order *Worlds Apart, A Dialogue of the 1960's* (1963), *Unancestral*
Voice (1965), and Speaker’s Meaning (1967). His work is difficult to categorize. The early books, History in English Words (1926) and Poetic Diction, are primarily philological, though full of implications about subjects larger than the history of language and the making of poetry. The later books nearly defy classification. They are basically religious, in the sense that they advance a religious view of the universe, but they are not primarily theological. They reveal a startling breadth of mind: their arguments move at breakneck speed in such disciplines as linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, historiography, biblical exegesis, depth psychology—even modern physics and astronomy. Of the four men Barfield is the only one who has not written any seriously creative work. Though the dialectic of Worlds Apart and Unancestral Voice is given a nominal fictional scaffolding, the books are no more fiction than the Platonic dialogues which they imitate in form. Because Barfield’s work is complex and relatively unknown to the general reader I have discussed it in some detail, and the chapter on Barfield is the longest of the book.

A literary historian looking for obvious affinities among the four men might well focus on Oxford, for in one way or another all have been connected with each other there as students or professors. It was there that Lewis and Barfield met as students shortly after the first world war; it was there that Tolkien and Lewis met when both taught there; and it was there that Williams came and occasionally lectured when his employer, Oxford University Press, moved there from London during the Battle of Britain. During those last years of the war, the four men and some few others “argued, drank, and talked together” until Williams’s sudden death in 1945. Two years later, Oxford University Press published a collection of essays honoring Williams, the collection including pieces by the remaining three of the group and a few others.

Thus there is no little biographical justification for thinking of the four men as a group. But there is also a meeting of minds among the four, as is clear from their published references to each other. Lewis dedicated his Allegory of Love to Barfield and Barfield his Poetic Diction to Lewis. Lewis cited Tolkien’s trilogy approvingly while it was still in manuscript, and reviewed it enthusi-
astically on publication. Williams has cited Lewis’s work, Barfield has praised Williams’s work on Dante and commended his theology, and so on. My reason for grouping the four men together is this meeting of minds, and in fact the reason for the grouping is the argument of this study. I hope to show that the work of the four men is best understood when seen as a fairly homogeneous body of both critical and creative literature written for a specific purpose and from a specific point of view: in short, when seen as romantic religion.

I do not mean by the term only that the four men are romantic writers who have an interest of some sort in religion; I mean (as I have said) that their romanticism is hardly separable from their religion. It may be argued that any deeply-felt romantic conviction is intrinsically religious—that the romanticism of Shelley and Coleridge and Melville, for example, is not only a literary point of view but a religious one as well. I do not quarrel with that view. It seems to me quite likely that Melville’s vast and incomprehensible ocean, his Job’s whale, and the various Gothic elements of the book, such as the spirit spout and the Parsee’s prophecies, are objective correlates for his romantic agnosticism, for his religious point of view. But that is a very large argument in itself, and leads to the further hypothesis that any deeply held artistic view—such as that of James, or Zola, or Brecht—also implies a religious view. My argument is simpler and less speculative. I wish to show that the work of these four men reveals itself, on analysis, as a deliberate and conscious attempt to revive certain well-known doctrines and attitudes of romanticism and to justify these doctrines and attitudes by showing that they have not merely literary but religious validity.

In short, I want to demonstrate that the result of their work is a literary and religious construct whose purpose is to defend romanticism by showing it to be religious, and to defend religion by traditionally romantic means. This construct is what I mean by the term romantic religion. Thus the romanticism of the four men is both scholarly and combative. It is necessarily scholarly and even antiquarian because of the mere lapse of time between the early nineteenth-century romantics and themselves. It is necessarily com-
bative because their purpose is not literary criticism—or literary creation—as such: it is the revival and use of romantic doctrine for present ideological and religious disputation. The romanticism that they advocate is what Williams calls “corrected romanticism” and what Barfield means by romanticism that has “come of age”; it is romantic doctrine lifted into the realm of formal doctrinal religion and justified as being part of that religion.

Specifically, I shall argue that both Barfield and Tolkien revive Coleridge’s doctrine of the creative imagination and defend its validity by showing that it leads (for Barfield) to truths about God and man and the relationship between them and (for Tolkien) to a state of soul essentially the same as that of the soul that has achieved the Christian beatitude. I shall show that Lewis has revived the Kant-Coleridge distinction between the Practical and the Speculative Intellect in order to apprehend and then defend the truths of the Christian faith. And I shall show that Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien in various ways affirm that the experiences which we generally call romantic—Sehnsucht, sexual love, faerie—are also, or can be, religious experiences.

On this last point—the way that Lewis, Williams, and Tolkien make use of subjective experience for religious purposes—a word should be said in advance. We live in the age of analytical philosophy, what one writer has called “the ghost of logical positivism.” As a result, all of us have become aware of Wittgenstein’s “language game.” We have become wary and cautious about the words we use, afraid of making statements—especially about religious matters—that have no verifiable meanings and which therefore (we are afraid) mean nothing. We may be hesitant, then, about accepting at face value religious assertions which spring from such wholly subjective experiences as Tolkien’s “thrill,” or Williams’s “falling-in-love” experience, or Lewis’s “longing.” This may well be a prudent approach, yet unless we wish to dismiss the work of these three men out of hand, we ought to remember that not all verification is the same, since not all statements are of the same kind. John Wilson reminds us of this: to the question “How are religious statements ultimately verified?” his answer is “By re-
Ligious experience.” And he goes on to show that religious experiences cannot be verified in the usual empirical way, any more than esthetic experiences can be so verified, yet both are real.

Ability to make scientific tests of our experience is not necessary. . . . It is not necessary that the experience should be shared by a majority of people. . . . It is not necessary that the experience should be. . . . whole and complete. It may be true of an experience both that it is cognitive, and that we have to learn how to have it. . . . It is not necessary that the testing-system for assertions should be universally adopted, or that the terms figuring in the assertions should have a meaning constant for all groups of people who make them. . . . Prediction of a sophisticated or scientific nature—or any prediction beyond what is implied by the assertion itself—is not a necessary condition.8

To this it might be added that Christian theology itself springs from a “given,” an experience—not an idea but a happening, or a series of happenings.

To return to the subject of the revival of the elements of nineteenth-century romanticism: this revival will be clear enough, I believe, in spite of the confusion surrounding the word romanticism, though a writer who deals with romanticism and religion together may fairly be accused of recklessness. In either matter, much less both, he may feel, like Sir Thomas Browne, that he is “not a proper Champion for Truth, nor fit to take up the Gauntlet in the cause of Verity.” I do not intend to darken counsel on the subject of romanticism by attempting to define or even describe it. Everyone knows Lovejoy’s famous comment that we must have a “discrimination of romanticisms” before the word loses reference completely. A defining word that can be applied equally to Satan, Plato, St. Paul, and Kant is no doubt close to meaning nothing. But as Northrop Frye has pointed out, it is because Lovejoy abstracted the word from its historical context that he was able to show its amazing variety and its seeming ubiquity in all the ages of literary history. But romanticism is not an idea, Frye insists, it is an event with “a historical center of gravity, which falls somewhere around the 1790–1830 period.” To deal with it as an idea is to commit “the fallacy of timeless characterization” and do as Lovejoy did:
break the single idea down into component ideas, many of which conflict with each other. The real historical characteristic—and therefore identity—of romanticism, Frye argues, is not in the ideas but in the poetic imagery to be found in romantic poetry. In general, the imagery indicates what has often been noted as a romantic characteristic: it is “subjective” in the sense that it tends to turn inward into man’s own conscious and unconscious mind in order to establish the meaning of the “outer” world. Frye aptly quotes Coleridge from the Notebooks: “In looking at objects of Nature, I seem rather to be seeking, as it were asking for, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new.” The “something within,” Frye notes, is a sense, common to most of the romantic poets, that they were in touch with something other than themselves—“a creative power greater than his own because it includes his own”—and this can be seen in the work of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Blake, and Shelley. This sense of the meaning of things coming from within the human mind—and from something greater with which the human mind is in touch—is not an idea but a historical attitude brought about by the romantic reaction to Newtonian mechanical laws, so that the romantics were historically induced to see the outer world as dead and mechanical without the “organic” and life-giving processes of the human imagination.

René Wellek has also defended the notion of romanticism as an entity rather than a conglomeration of ideas nominally yoked by violence together. Like Frye he sees the common denominator of romanticism as “one central and valid concept: the reconciling, synthetic imagination” with “its rootedness in a sense of the continuity between man and nature and the presence of God.” Not only English romanticism but that of the continent as well was “the concern for the reconciliation of subject and object, man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness. . . .”

Frye’s and Wellek’s depiction of romanticism seems to me an accurate one, and one that applies not only to nineteenth-century romanticism but also to the romanticism which is the subject of this study. In fact, as I hope will be clear from the romantic revival I describe, Barfield may “stand for” Coleridge, while Williams may
stand for Wordsworth, and Lewis and Tolkien may stand for—or at least suggest—Shelley and Keats respectively. (I hasten to add that I mean these comparisons only in what Thomas Browne called “a soft and tropical sense,” and am not making value judgments.) In any case, in the following pages I use the words romantic and romanticism dozens of times but never, I hope, in such a way as to cause confusion. Generally I have used them in the obvious senses in which they are applied to Coleridge and Wordsworth. Thus I call Kant’s “transcendental” philosophy romantic; I call Coleridge’s doctrine of the primary and secondary imagination romantic; I call Wordsworth’s view of Nature romantic. Beyond these rather doctrinaire uses, I occasionally use the terms to describe attitudes and phenomena which most of us would, I believe, agree to call romantic. Thus I speak of “romantic longing” in connection with Lewis, partly because he himself uses the phrase, partly because the desire for what is over the hills and far away (either in this world or in some other) seems to me at least intelligible as it is explained by transcendental philosophy. I call imagined worlds romantic when it is clear that they are imagined not only for satirical or didactic purposes but also for their own sake, because I believe that in such imaginings some sort of agreement with Coleridge’s notion of the secondary imagination is implicit. In no case do I equate the word romantic with unreason or irrationality, though I believe that in the romantic attitudes of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the four men to be discussed, reason in the sense of discursive or inferential thought usually plays a secondary part to something else—intuition, imagination, or religious faith.

Finally, one last word on the subject of romanticism: I do not intend to show (in fact, I could not) that the four men I am concerned with are identical in their romanticism. It would be untrue to characterize them as all equally indebted to Coleridge, or as all equally sure that Wordsworth’s belief in Nature is valid. In far better organized religions than the romantic one I describe, some latitude is permissible. By calling the Oxford group romantics, I do not suggest that they are carbon copies of one original, any more than Keats is a carbon copy of Shelley.

I have not tried to make this study a “source” study or an “in-
fluence" study, much less a "history of ideas" study; I have simply tried to keep my eye fixed on the phenomenon and describe it as accurately as possible. There is no doubt that the four men influenced each other in various ways; often, as in the case of Lewis's debt to Barfield, the influence is admitted. But I have not tried to emphasize influences so much as similarities and resemblances. It is true, of course, that no intellectual group exists isolated in time, that every group and every man has roots. The ultimate source of the Oxford romantics is nineteenth-century romanticism; but I shall note here some other obvious sources and suggest others more conjectural.

Of Barfield I shall say nothing now, because the nature of his work has led me to discuss in the next chapter his debt to Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy. Williams presents a problem to the critic concerned with the sources of a man's thought. Lewis has mentioned Williams's vast reading: he was acquainted with the church fathers and with much of the literature of Western mysticism; he had a broad if unsystematic knowledge of technical philosophy—ancient, medieval, and modern; he seems really to have read all the important critical and creative literature from the time of the English romantics on, and a great deal before that time as well. There is also the possible influence of certain occult studies, which certainly produced at least the trappings of most of his fiction. And in his publishing position at the Oxford University Press he had easy access to at least cursory knowledge of ideas and disciplines beyond enumeration. Anyone acquainted with Williams's work can point out certain writers and bodies of ideas which seem to have been special favorites of his: Wordsworth, Dante, the pseudo-Dionysius, Malory and the Arthurian legend, Milton. He draws on all these and more, but there is no obvious pattern to his choices. As Lewis said, Williams will not be pigeon-holed. He certainly admired the work of Evelyn Underhill, whose letters he edited. John Heath-Stubbs has pointed out that Miss Underhill's early novel The Pillar of Dust seems to have served as a model for much of his fiction. More important than her fiction, perhaps, is her work in mysticism and the history of worship. Williams's The Descent of the Dove, A History of the Holy Spirit in the Church,
INTRODUCTION

echoes Miss Underhill's view of the Church as fundamentally a mystical experience translated, and in part distorted, by the necessary institution and organization in which it is embodied. And her work in mysticism shows a broad and tolerant view of medieval occultists, many of whom she holds to have been quite close to genuine mystical experience. This latter view, I believe, Williams must have found more than palatable. Yet, even granting a certain indebtedness to Miss Underhill, there is more to Williams than that. I have suggested in my discussion of his "romantic theology" that he tried to subsume under the heading of the "romantic experience" many seemingly disparate values drawn from his reading in literature, philosophy, and religion. Like Coleridge he was forever aiming at synthesis. My own belief is that his work, like Coleridge’s, is inconclusive. But I freely admit also that, like Coleridge, he requires a Lowes to follow his attempt.

With Lewis there is, first of all, the obvious influence of George Macdonald. In dozens of places Lewis has praised Macdonald, and has even spoken of himself as a kind of disciple. His debt to Macdonald’s Unspoken Sermons, he has said, "is almost as great as one man can owe to another. . . ."11 In The Great Divorce the hero, venturing into the afterlife, meets Macdonald, as Dante met Virgil; and it is Macdonald who explains to him the nature of heaven and hell. In the later discussion of Lewis we shall see that he credits Macdonald’s books with bringing about his reconversion to Christianity. Such clear and present influence, one would think, should be easy to describe. In fact, however, it is very difficult. If one turns from Lewis’s praise of Phantastes, for example, to the book itself (which was published in 1858), one can guess readily enough that Lewis was attracted by the Spenserian quality of the story. The hero moves through fairy landscapes much like those of The Faerie Queen; but there is no allegory in Phantastes, and though there is a kind of quest, neither the hero nor the reader is quite certain of its real nature. At the end of the book the hero thinks he has heard a voice proclaiming a great truth: "Yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his con-
dition at the time, could be assumed by the best good." Perhaps
the best way of describing the book and some of Macdonald’s other
novels, such as *Lilith*, is to say they are fairy romances, without
any special doctrine, but with a “feel” of holiness to them. For
Lewis they seem to have combined in a special way his early tastes
for *faerie* and a desire to bring these tastes into a moral realm. Later,
as we shall see, he could attribute to Macdonald’s work the quali­
ties to be found in the great myths—the generalized meaning, what
Tolkien calls the “inherent morality,” and the impact on the reader
that takes place on a non-rational level. In his own fiction, particu­
larly in *Till We Have Faces*, he tries to recapture that peculiar
blend of fairy romance and generalized religious feeling that he
found in Macdonald.

In trying to describe the influence one is finally driven to para­
phrasing Lewis’s description of it, and to concluding that each man
takes something different to the books he reads. I believe the na­
ture of the influence is best understood by seeing Macdonald as an
early advocate of romantic religion, which can exist as a corollary
to a man’s professed formal religion. And this is also true of the
other man on whom Lewis greatly depends, Chesterton. Like
Lewis, Chesterton had high praise for Macdonald, and a strong
case could be made for a line of inheritance running from Mac­
donald to Chesterton to Lewis and Tolkien. All these men meet
on that middle ground between *faerie* and formal religion which
is the subject of this study.

A final word should be said about the organization of this study.
I have begun with Barfield because I believe that many of the
romantic notions common to the members of the group exist in
their most basic and radical form in his work. I have dealt with
Lewis next because much of his work is best seen in relation to
Barfield’s. I have discussed Williams next and then Tolkien be­
cause I believe that much of what Lewis and Williams have to say
is brought into sharper focus by Tolkien’s view of the religious
implications of the fairy story. In the concluding chapter I have
tried to “place” romantic religion in the context of the current
religious situation. It is a tentative and perhaps somewhat fumbling
attempt; but I have made it in the belief that the literary and re-
ligious croscurrent I have dealt with is of some significance, that it suggests partial answers to the perennial question—which is basically religious, but which all serious literature and literary theory implies—the question of what it means to be a man alive today.