



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 36 | Number 2 | Issue 132, Spring/Summer

Article 11

4-15-2018

C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond. Kyoko Yuasa

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Recommended Citation

Epps, Peter G. (2018) "C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond." *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 36 : No. 2 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss2/11>

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism: Word, Image, and Beyond. Kyoko Yuasa

Abstract

In *C. S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism*, Kyoko Yuasa has managed to advance the cause of careful reading and discussion of Lewis's novels as contemporary cultural artifacts, rather than mere ciphers for apologetics or mere fluff for children, for both Japanese and American audiences. This is no mean feat, not only in terms of translation but also in terms of trans-Pacific discourse, and Yuasa deserves great credit for the accomplishment. Her close reading of several of Lewis's major fiction works in a comparative frame she derives from works by Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, and John Fowles yields insights into the experimental character of much of Lewis's fiction. Yuasa convincingly suggests that Lewis not only creatively employed a wide variety of very modern forms to resist both literary and theological Modernism but also wrestled with and strove to include in his fiction the voices of the powerful women who are so present in his biography and so conspicuously absent from many discussions of his apologetics. If her claim that the texts Lewis left us evince a "Christian postmodernism" of which he is a major philosopher ultimately falls flat, it does so in the grand tradition of English letters, leaving behind like so many arched windows and paving-stones a set of claims that future readers of Lewis will want to contemplate.

Additional Keywords

postmodernism; christian postmodernism

C.S. LEWIS AND CHRISTIAN POSTMODERNISM: WORD, IMAGE, AND BEYOND. Kyoko Yuasa. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016. xii+198 pp. 9781498219389. Hbk. \$41.00, pbk. \$26.00, Kindle \$9.99.

IN *C. S. LEWIS AND CHRISTIAN POSTMODERNISM*, KYOKO YUASA has managed to advance the cause of careful reading and discussion of Lewis's novels as contemporary cultural artifacts, rather than mere ciphers for apologetics or mere fluff for children, for both Japanese and American audiences. This is no mean feat, not only in terms of translation but also in terms of trans-Pacific discourse, and Yuasa deserves great credit for the accomplishment. Her close reading of several of Lewis's major fiction works in a comparative frame she derives from works by Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Doris Lessing, and John Fowles yields insights into the experimental character of much of Lewis's fiction. Yuasa convincingly suggests that Lewis not only creatively employed a wide variety of very modern forms to resist both literary and theological Modernism but also wrestled with and strove to include in his fiction the voices of the powerful women who are so present in his biography and so conspicuously absent from many discussions of his apologetics. If her claim that the texts Lewis left us evince a "Christian postmodernism" of which he is a major philosopher ultimately falls flat, it does so in the grand tradition of English letters, leaving behind like so many arched windows and paving-stones a set of claims that future readers of Lewis will want to contemplate.

Yuasa claims "Christian postmodernism" as her own coinage for this discussion of Lewis, and describes it as "a seemingly unconventional rhetoric that Lewis must have employed to reach the mindset of the postmodern world" (2). Although tangled in expression, this description plays well with what most readers will know of Lewis's background, aims, and methods in apologetics—including his very modern insistence that his fiction was neither didactic nor allegorical, but imaginative. A standard postmodernist account of modernity argues that the postmodern condition inexorably unfolds from the conditions and structures of modernity, so that the most successful works of artistic Modernism are interpreted as overflowing or overloading the boundaries of Modernism itself. It does make sense, then, to argue that Lewis, as a thoroughly modern writer uncomfortable with Modernism, employed his familiarity with the history of literature and philosophy to negotiate a better settlement. Lewis can then be cast as a "postmodern novelist" and, given his explicit faith and its inclusion in his works, as a "Christian postmodern novelist."

When Yuasa stays close to this more modest understanding of "postmodern" as a negotiation of a better settlement with modernity, her approach has some merit. Yuasa is at her best when closely reading specific stories from Lewis, which she keenly appreciates both in themselves and in their

historical and theoretical contexts. In discussing *Till We Have Faces*, for example, Yuasa emphasizes Lewis's "retelling of stories," arguing that he "extracts the essence of myths through the process of retelling" (142). She is aware of the balancing act by which Lewis, both influenced by and reacting against Bultmannian Biblical criticism, sought to assert the historical factuality of "true myth" while also arguing, in Neo-orthodox fashion, that not the verifiability of its history but its ineffably mythic character was the source of its significance. Thus, although he claims to avoid allegorism, in Yuasa's words Lewis "uses the novel as a tool of truth in the same way as mythology" (143). Shakespeare would be surprised to learn from Yuasa that "story within a story" is a "postmodernist" approach, but it is true that such disrupted and diverted narrative flows are characteristic of much modern and postmodern writing. In extreme cases such as *Till We Have Faces*, which is not only a multilayered epistolary narrative but has a false ending and a complicated relationship between the narrator and the implied audience, such choices beg further explanation.

Yuasa senses that Lewis's strictures against allegorical readings of his works cannot easily be applied to *Till We Have Faces*, and offers methodical descriptions of the manifestly emblematic characters of the novel—representatives of the pagan cosmos of the received Psyche and Cupid story, among others. She peels apart the layers, guiding the reader through the original story, Lewis's adaptation of it, and the rhetorical moves his character Orual makes in retelling it within the story. Yuasa's sensitivity to the way "Orual changes herself from [...] an ugly woman, Ungit, to a harmony of both Orual and Psyche" is valuable, and provides an opening for further reflection on the ways the experiences and writings of women are reflected and refracted in Lewis's writings (146). If phrases such as "the monopoly of multiple roles to the abandonment of self" are opaque (146), patient readers will often find more helpful explanations later, such as that "Orual monopolizes all perspectives" through her extremely privileged initial position and her self-conscious reversal of status (149). Indeed, Yuasa's exploration of what seems to be a surprisingly complex presentation of women's writing as a model of negotiating spiritual reality and identity is so interesting that I could seriously wish for a chapter or more carefully teasing out the extent of Joy Davidman's influence on *Till We Have Faces* that Yuasa tantalizingly mentions in one concluding paragraph (161), after having suggested the line of inquiry in her introduction (8-9) and framed up the analysis at length in one section of a previous chapter (57-65).

In Chapter Three, on *That Hideous Strength*, and Chapter Four, on *Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* Yuasa provides readings similar to her discussion of *Till We Have Faces* in Chapter Five. These readings alone offer plenty of value, although even here Yuasa would have been better served by tougher editors. In a middle-voice book based on a doctoral dissertation such as this, the readings

really should be a great deal more polished and detailed. It is hard to resist the suggestion that this might have been possible had Yuasa abandoned the attempt to invent a “Christian postmodernism” such that Lewis can be called, as the title of Chapter One has it, “Philosopher of Christian Postmodernism.” The critical and comparative readings in these chapters alone are quite sufficient to support the more modest and accurate claim that Lewis can meaningfully be read as a “postmodern novelist” on the basis of similarities between his rhetorical strategies and those of other novelists called “postmodern,” and a “Christian postmodern novelist” on the basis of his deployment of those strategies to secure an opening toward Christian truth that maintains the tension of historical verity and personal truth. Much of the work of Chapter Two, including the tantalizing work on the presence of women’s writing in Lewis’s works, would gain definition and solidity by serving an analysis of Lewis’s writings rather than an idiosyncratic theory about the anachronistic philosophical project he definitely never named, and with which he is unlikely to have felt much sympathy.

Nevertheless, the project of defining “Lewis’s concept of Christian postmodernism” has been attempted, and must be evaluated (2). Yuasa enforces this upon her readers. It is tempting to take at face value the significant retreat from her major claim expressed in sentences such as “[Lewis] is an anti-modernist philosopher who welcomes postmodern sensibility” (4); there is no very great difficulty in allowing that a modern writer strategically employing an array of modern rhetorical strategies in order to find a way past Modernism is “postmodern” in some meaningful sense. Such a postmodern artistic sensibility is entirely compatible with an “anti-modernist” philosophical agenda; noticing it is no stranger than pointing out the affinity between the works of Hieronymus Bosch and those of Salvador Dali. On the very next page, however, Yuasa rejects the nuance, averring that “many Lewis scholars [...] conclude that he is neither modernist nor postmodernist. The reason for their antipathy is a fear of both thoughts” (5). Indeed, she repeats this delegitimizing attribution of motive early in Chapter One (14), and it serves as the subtle thread dividing the “negative” response from “positive voices” who “do not deny the complicated nature of Lewis’s writings” (6). Setting aside any such fear, then, and also the fear of giving offence to such a gifted reader of Lewis’s fiction, let us evaluate Yuasa’s core claim.

Permitted no distinction between “anti-modernist philosopher” and “postmodern novelist,” there is simply no way to support the thesis that Lewis is “postmodernist” in any sense Lewis himself might have recognized as part of his philosophical agenda. Yuasa provides all the evidence needed to reject this claim in her own arguments and circumlocutions. She is unfortunately not sufficiently well-versed in modern philosophy, nor sufficiently well-advised by her “positive voices,” to adjust her claim accordingly. Yuasa begins by

informing her readers that “the term ‘postmodernism’ was first used in the 1930s and culturally expanded in the 1960s” (14). (Let the reader look in Volume XII, Issue 4 of *The Hibbert Journal*, published in 1914, for an essay titled “Post-Modernism,” which is not strictly the first usage, but among the first relevant ones for a discussion of “Christian postmodernism.”) Having adverted to this history, Yuasa’s discussion of “postmodernism” turns instead on a contest between various writers from the 1990s and later. She describes a “negative” view based on Lyotard’s crucial 1979 essay *La Condition postmoderne* and a “positive” view that apparently isolates Lyotard’s use of Wittgenstein from his larger project. She does not, however, offer any understanding of Lyotard’s discussion of “meta-narratives” and “micro-narratives” except the one she attributes to those who “negatively interpret the notion of the ‘postmodern’ as the dethroning of God,” namely, that incredulity toward metanarratives is “rejection of the traditional values in Europe” (14-15). Of course, Lyotard’s concern in 1979, 16 years after Lewis’s death, is the enclosure of all human knowing within computer networks, with the concomitant reduction of human discourse to a means of optimizing the programming of each human subject in the interests of a society conceived as a network of functions and datasets. The metanarratives he discusses are the animating principles of social-science theories, principally the idea that society necessarily comprises two parts in conflict (Marxism), which he regards as “traditional theory” (and which has no obvious relationship to, say, the moral universe of European Christendom). Yuasa bases her claims on sources who plainly do not understand recent philosophy, and unfortunately has not done sufficient primary research to correct them.

As a result of this misplaced trust in sources and her own lack of understanding of the major sources of postmodern thought, Yuasa leaves her reader to search for sense in phrases such as “traditional values in Europe [...] that include dualism, either by science or by absolute belief” or “re-evaluate, from a Christian perspective, the significance of individual varieties based on the postmodern philosopher’s phrases that respect multiple opinions” (15). Presumably this “dualism” is a misunderstanding of Lyotard’s characterization of traditional (Marxist) theory as regarding social change as the product of class conflict. Turning the page, one must hope it is simply unhappy phrasing that has James K.A. Smith affirming “interpretive pluralism within the church” such that “one (single) world is composed of multiple (plural) factors, as may be seen in the Trinity” (16). Surely the reader is not meant to conclude that the Trinity is an example of wordplay, or a composite being? Presumably this sentence results from confusing the idea that human reception of truth is perspectival (so that there will always be a plurality of specific affirmations, each of which may be true in their respective senses) with the understanding that language signs are

frequently plurivocal, especially when applied to God (whom creatures necessarily apprehend analogously).

As an evangelical scholar interested in postmodern thought, Yuasa would profit by a closer examination of Smith's work, and that of Stanley J. Grenz, along with a more careful reading of the primary sources of postmodern philosophy in general. Instead, Yuasa superficially attends to these and then depends heavily on far weaker interlocutors, like Crystal Downing (who glosses Derrida phrases without having understood his project), from whom she learns that "some fear postmodernism on the assumption that taking all truths equally leads to relativism" (18). Of course, literally attempting to situate all human truth-claims within some rarefied conception of "truth" or set of claims about inculturation of meaning such that all such claims can be considered "true" not only "leads to relativism," but is relativism itself. Postmodern thinkers differ about whether relativism is good or bad, and also about whether it is or is not a necessary result of the historical processes by which modernity came to be. Nearly all philosophers of any stripe, however, could agree that the assertion "it is not God but human language which is situated" (18) is mere hand-waving in the face of the *de facto* pluralism of modernity and the question of relativism that arises from it. Similarly, Yuasa's choice of Louis Markos as her major foil among Christian Lewis scholars is unfortunate (19); his argument that Lewis is a staunch anti-modernist (and *ipso facto* an inveterate enemy of postmodernism) actually aligns better with her extensive discussion of Lewis's anti-modern rhetorical strategies than her own arguments do. His depiction of Saussure and Derrida is facile, but his argument nonetheless cleaves closer to the actual sources of postmodern thought than Yuasa ever gets.

Yuasa simply has not grasped the major principles of any of those thinkers whom disciples and detractors alike recognize as "postmodern philosophers," or what it is that causes them to speak of "postmodernity" or a "postmodern condition." As a result, she gleans from Downing, especially, some very strange notions about Lewis's project. Yuasa relates as Downing's the claim that "Lewis deconstructs past models the same way that Thomas S. Kuhn argues in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)" (20). This suggestion would probably startle both Lewis and Kuhn, not least because "deconstruction" would not enter the vocabulary until several years after Kuhn published on "paradigm shifts" and Lewis died. Furthermore, while there is an affinity between Kuhn's work and Lewis's, this affinity falls just where they are both modern: in that they consider major *gestalts* in human understanding as essentially similar to the developmental process of an individual. This means they take as given that there is a continuity of subject (the individual or the society) and a direction of change (toward a more comprehensive integration of experience and explanation). What is quite implausible is that Lewis would

agree that “deconstructs” as Derrida coins the term, or even Heidegger’s *Destruktion*, is what Lewis does with regard to philosophy, to theology, or to “past models.” It is especially the case that Lewis’s *The Discarded Image*, in affectionately detailing the Ptolemaic cosmos while admitting that its elaboration from a phenomenal description of the visible universe required correction as more accurate science became available, is not accurately described in the words “He exposes the modernist’s construction of another model, which he indicates in *The Discarded Image*: ‘No model is a catalogue of ultimate realities’” (20).

So while “rehabilitates the values discarded by modernist thought” is a good description of some of Lewis’s work (1), Yuasa does not help us to clearly grasp what these are and whether such rehabilitation is characteristic of postmodern philosophy. Without a clear sense of whether “modernist” means a typically modern person such as Lewis, a theological Modernist such as Loisy or Bultmann, or a poetic Modernist such as Eliot or Auden, we cannot begin to judge the truth of “The term ‘postmodernism’ is generally used to mean the anti-modernist movement in and after the 1960s that advocates a multiplicity of philosophical and cultural notions” (2). Without understanding that, we cannot make sense of whether “Lewis deconstructs the modernist’s single interpretation of the truth.” Surely it cannot mean something as adolescent as “He deconstructs the interpretation commonly accepted by the previous generation,” for such a deconstruction would fail before it began; such a narrow tactical objective would simply evacuate the meaning of the term “deconstruction.” Nor is it possible to defend the assertion that “Lewis deconstructs the previous interpretations of the text influenced by the cultures of the time” (3), whatever “text” may be indicated, on the basis of acknowledgments of changing science in Lewis’s paean to the Ptolemaic cosmos in *The Discarded Image*.

Indeed, the reader is left to wonder whether Yuasa finds that the belief that all learning is inculturated is an objectionable Modernist belief, so that readers must be freed from “text influenced by the cultures of the time” (3), or whether it is a desirable postmodernist belief, so that Lewis is to be praised for being “a promoter of peripheral cultures” (4). Of course, the idea that learning is deeply inculturated is part of the postmodern inheritance from modernity, because the postmodern condition is precisely what follows when the social and technical conditions of modernity do not answer satisfactorily to prevailing modern descriptions of them; postmodern thought typically argues that modernity is constantly producing its own excess, overflowing itself, without having exhausted the impulses which led to those conditions and those descriptions. (Prominent among these impulses, of course, is the turn away from the sources of cultural authority inherited from European Christendom, a turn

dramatized by references to the “death of God” or “the default of God.”) While modernity’s excesses may be traces of any number of possible understandings excluded or simplified out in reductive modern conceptual schemes, including the claims and values of “peripheral cultures,” postmodern philosophy insofar as it is named by the disciples and detractors of its major thinkers does not find this significance by an “anti-modernist” gesture that invites “collaboration with the author to reach an understanding beyond human interpretation” (3). In fact, the welcome given to “micro-narratives” is precisely conditioned on the rejection of any such transcendent understanding.

Insofar as Yuasa is right to highlight Crystal Downing’s rejection of one facile reading of Derrida’s oft-mistranslated *«il n’y a pas dehors-texte»*, then, she is sorely mistaken to follow Downing to the conclusion that “Derrida resisted the modernist values along with other post-structural thinkers” (4). What Derrida did, in collaboration and rivalry with a number who rose to prominence downstream of Heidegger in the 1960s, was to push the work he inherited from Heidegger farther than Heidegger did—to be more thorough in delimiting the enclosure of any possible encounter with Being precisely by ever more rigorously enforcing the principle that everything understood among beings is already found in the language of beings—that “there is no ‘beyond the text.’” Carefully attended to, Derrida is much more interesting than the snarling destroyer Markos fables forth; but Derrida is definitely not trying to help Lewis guide anyone to “an understanding that transcends human language” (18). Nor, we may be confident, would Lewis, the recovering atheistic Idealist with Boethian and Neo-orthodox affinities, be a likely choice to cooperate with Derrida in this project.

The confusion nears its peak when Yuasa, again following Downing, reads the incident of the Tower of Babel as describing “the modernist Christian world” that “sets up one discourse as an absolute truth for reaching Heaven, so that they get confused with multiple interpretations in the postmodern world” (13). The puzzling sentence raises the question of how any “discourse” might serve “for reaching heaven,” even if one should find a method for evaluating any “discourse” as “an absolute truth.” Any question of identifying this “modernist Christian world” with the theological Modernism that Lewis opposed is, of course, out the window at this point. The absolute apex of the confusion, however, must be the claim that

Through reading classical literature, including the Bible, Lewis is possibly inspired by such postmodern approaches as: the Apostle Paul’s method of speaking within the discourse of the reader, the dialogic potential of language, the joy of reading in any genre, and the reader’s participation (7).

If St. Paul's rhetoric is postmodern, we may well ask, what is not? The rest is silence.

Throughout this book, Yuasa demonstrates that she is a careful and deeply sympathetic reader of Lewis, and insightful when she is reading closely. Her care for the much-loved novelist, apologist, and Oxford don is worthy of praise, and her skill in the service of those works and their characters is exemplary. I would dearly love to read the book she writes about Joy Davidman's presence in the text of *Till We Have Faces*, or more straightforward comparative work. As for *C.S. Lewis and Christian Postmodernism*, any Lewis scholar who is interested in the author's ongoing popular and critical reception should add it to the shelf, especially those who identify as evangelicals and make room for their faith in their scholarship. I would not assign it to a class, as its conceptual world is confused and the very poor editing makes the book much easier to nit-pick than I have here represented. It is of no use in serious discussions of "postmodernism," except as an example of an idiosyncratic usage of the term derived from weak philosophical sources; readers not warned about this are likely to give up on the book before the end of the Introduction. Those who persist, perhaps encouraged by the very tactfully worded blurbs on the back, will likely be rewarded with several insights into Lewis's novels that are worth the price of admission.

—Peter G. Epps



OWEN BARFIELD: PHILOSOPHY, POETRY, AND THEOLOGY. Michael Vincent Di Fuccia. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock 2016. 250 p. 9781498238724. Hbk. \$55.00, pbk. \$35.00, Kindle \$9.99. Series Veritas 20.

READERS FAMILIAR WITH THE INKLINGS GENERALLY have some knowledge about Owen Barfield and his works, which might prompt interest in Michael Vincent Di Fuccia's *Owen Barfield: Philosophy, Poetry, and Theology*. Although it is not essential for a reader to have prior knowledge about Barfield, it could be helpful since Di Fuccia's book is not as much an introduction to Barfield as it is scholarly insight on Barfield's theories about philosophy, poetry, and theology. These subjects can be deep and sometimes difficult to understand, but Di Fuccia does an admirable job of providing background in each chapter before delving into weightier analysis. His introduction includes a brief literature review and outlines the plan of the book with some defined terminology.

With any study of Barfield, it is a given that Rudolf Steiner, anthropology, and the "evolution of consciousness" must be discussed as key