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***Christian Mythmakers: C.S. Lewis. Madeleine L'Engle, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S Lewis, et al. by Rolland Hein. Forward by Clyde S. Kilby***

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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When a first-time reader of the Narnia Chronicles reads *The Magician's Nephew* first, he reads it as a Terran who is encountering Narnia for the first time. When he reads it sixth, he reads it as a Narnian—or at least a human who has experienced Narnia—and its entire origin story takes on a mythic gravity that can't be experienced in reading it first. (88-89)

There is a rational way of knowing things and a mythic way of knowing them. Starr is to be commended for helping us see the world of Lewis—and our own world—through the eyes of myth.

—Louis Markos



**CHRISTIAN MYTHMAKERS: C.S. LEWIS, MADELEINE L'ENGLE, J.R.R. TOLKIEN, GEORGE MACDONALD, G.K. CHESTERTON, CHARLES WILLIAMS, DANTE ALIGHIERI, JOHN BUNYAN, WALTER WANGERIN, ROBERT SIEGEL, AND HANNAH HURNARD.** Rolland Hein. Forward by Clyde S. Kilby. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2014. 303 p. 9781625643841. \$37.00.

**I**N THE FORWARD TO THIS SECOND EDITION OF ROLLAND HEIN'S *Christian Mythmakers*, Clyde Kilby states that a rational definition and context for myth must be ascertained before any appreciable grasp of the foundations of this tradition may be obtained. He proposes a Jungian basis for myth-making, based on Jung's postulation that the human urge toward knowing is a persistent force: "The two most basic characteristics of man, beyond his mere physical needs, are to know and to worship" (ix).

Hein sets out to review key foundational texts in Western Literature upon which the Inklings and their successors depended and from which they drew mythic inspiration. He proceeds to examine in detail the techniques and methods of the various Inklings as they wove various mythic underpinnings of that Western canon into their works. He then shows how subsequent 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers, as heirs of that mythic tradition, succeeded to a greater or lesser degree in furthering the mission of these vanguard writers. In doing so, Hein tells an engaging story of the evolution of altered reality across the ages leading to the genre of fantasy we know and love today. He demonstrates that "while myth is not the same as the story that contains it, its power is enhanced by a story well-told" (277). The symbolic imagery may come and go, but the abstract precepts and concepts remain.

Using imagination to transcend statements and systems of knowing, the various authors reviewed in this work have created works that transcend reality to affirm the mythic nature of man, communal identity being built on shared myth. Some of the writers included in this literary overview based their works on Classical rather than Christian myths, and yet imbued them with a sense of higher purpose related to the human condition under the guise of *preparatio evangelica*. And by doing so, in the face of rationalist approaches so popular in post-Enlightenment, academic methodology, the authors examined set aside the straight-forward glamour of scientific proofs and instead pursued the higher path of allegory, symbolism, and fantastic twists on the ordinary. By taking the reader on a spiritual journey through the resolution of the Other, we are thus redeemed and return full circle to better appreciate the sacramental nature of ordinary reality, in the most Chestertonian sense.

Based upon the common Christian themes of renunciation, redemption, and rebirth, the series of which constitutes a continual cycle of renewal based on dying to self, the first work examined is Dante's *Inferno*, where Death is an ever-present, albeit implied, actor. Replete with images and a taxonomy of hell based on earthly sins, the fundamental truths of Christianity are explicated in detail. In reviewing the variations and consequences of each type of human condition, Dante journeys through a shadowy reflection of former lives stripped of humanness by their own free will. Moving on to examine *Purgatorio* and *Paradisio*, Hein shows that the pilgrimage metaphor employed by Dante continually challenges the reader to explore the divine intent hidden in the heroic, pagan quests of antiquity; the implied foreshadowing of Christ in order to maintain continuity of historic revelation; and the predestined, ultimate transition to celestial bliss that mirrors an external to internal shift of focus. Dr. Hein concludes that the "shaping principles of eternity" (27) are found in the form and structure of the Divine Comedy as well as in its comprehensive imagery.

The chapter devoted to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* slides into a synopsis of the work rather than an in-depth analysis of the content. With a few early references to Bunyan's own conversion experience, Hein dives right into a detailing of what for many is a dense and difficult allegory to navigate. One may be forgiven for providing an adumbration of the text rather than an elucidation, as not many contemporaries have the perseverance to make it through a straight reading of Bunyan. However, in terms of analyzing the nature of this monumental work, the author loses his focus upon the mythic in his attempts to explain the allegoric. More attention is given to pointing out how future authors repurpose Bunyan's imagery, as in Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*, and Hein notes that "[b]ecause Bunyan's work reaches steadily forward to the world of today, we will have several occasions in this study to recall him" (63).

While space is a premium, it is surprising that the author jumps from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ignores William Blake, the great 18<sup>th</sup> century writer in the Christian mythic tradition, who brought much creativity and unique imagery into the Western canon. However, since the Inklings did not explicitly reference his work, it is understandable that Blake would be tangential and therefore not essential to this study. With the chapter on George MacDonald, we are finally at the doorstep of direct inspiration. Lewis, Tolkien and many of their contemporaries attribute a great influence to MacDonald for his literary genius and unique vision of alternate worlds. MacDonald represents the best of intellectual consistency and imaginative redemption from such diverse systems as Calvinism, Rationalism, and Romanticism. He used myth and imagination to rediscover “the joyous celebration of mystery” (66). With this chapter, Hein’s theme of Christian mythmaking begins to shine strong. He shows step by step how MacDonald builds up an alternate romantic interpretation of the world, both real and imaginary. Underneath it all is the sense of the supernatural as a spiritual reality that is more real than scientific inquiry can quantify. Thus, the known world becomes sacramental through symbolism: “Images function as symbols when they convey divine meaning and grace to the sensitive reader” (73).

With G.K. Chesterton, Hein jumps from the highly symbolic realm of MacDonald smack back into the quotidian reality of sensate Man, as only could be said of Chesterton. As a writer, Chesterton was able to capture the air of the fairy tale by using the mythic mode. He did this by situating fairyland within the spiritual realm. After a review of Chesterton’s life and conversion, Hein sets aside the discursive and journalistic works, choosing to concentrate on *Manalive* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*, two of Chesterton’s better-known fantasies. In both works, scientific thinking is presented in contrast with common sense. The surrealist tone of the intelligentsia is interrogated and shown to be absurd in light of observed reality through the agency of various characters. With Chesterton, the goal is not to satisfy the rational mind, but to get it to acknowledge that as a finite entity, it may never comprehend the infinite. And the tool he uses is fantastic imagery. This analysis is light on mythic implications, but Hein does acknowledge that as a realist, Chesterton contributes the notion that “everyday life is permeated with mythic qualities” (130). One wishes that he had provided more proof that this is so.

Charles Williams is the most difficult of the Inklings to understand, due to his unconventional perspective and unique dualistic view of reality, especially evident in the use of doppelgänger imagery. Williams sees the supernatural in the everyday like Chesterton. However, unlike G.K.C., Williams made the supernatural, fictional world more real than the physical world. In doing so, he created an Inferno-like, shadowy, alternate reality more terrifying

than Dante's by virtue of its being so very similar to our own perceptions—familiar yet other. Hein provides a very thorough interpretation of the most thorny of Williams's works, which are not easily grasped. Whereas with Bunyan, the average reader would not need a synopsis, here most readers will appreciate the explanations of both the plots and philosophical approaches that Williams presents in his novels. Clear definitions of "The Way of Exchange" and "Coinherence" are especially essential to understanding Williams's writings. Hein spends a bit of time setting the context of these two philosophies before approaching six of the novels. He shows a deft and light hand in elucidating the complexities of Williams's key themes, chief among which is the duality of existence.

The analysis of Tolkien's works looks at art as sub-creation, in that we are all imitators of the Creator God. The power of language is such that we must have the experience first and then the words to express what the heart already knows. Thus, the Augustinian tripartite man is fully engaged in the process of creation (the body experiences, the mind processes, and the heart feels.) In this Tolkien was influenced by Owen Barfield's work in semantics, or the science of meaning. As Hein observes, "[h]e argued that language in its earliest stage was not metaphorical, as so many students of language have argued, rather it was mythical" (180). As imitators of God, the art created by Christians can be redemptive and therefore language is a redemptive tool. Examining the set of Tolkien's work from the *Silmarillion* through *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as some critical works (*On Fairy-stories*, for example,) the author takes time to look at techniques of composition and finds that Tolkien relies on archetypes, imagery, and typical questing episodes (escape, recovery, and landscapes) to paradoxically create an intensified realism. The themes of renunciation, redemption, and rebirth are now experienced as escape, recovery, and consolation.

*Sehnsucht*, or the longing for the ineffable, dominates the discussion of C.S. Lewis's *oeuvre*, and this in turn is connected to the desire to be united with beauty: "to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it" (Lewis qtd. in Hein 215). With Lewis, we meet a writer where the encounter and subsequent journey with myth-making actually led to his conversion to Christianity, instead of flowing from that faith. To Lewis, myth was not just a genre, but a supernatural manifestation of all that is truly real. To that end, Hein provides ample evidence in the works he examines. Starting with Lewis's *The Pilgrims Regress*, the reader is suddenly pulled back to Bunyan. However, the trajectory is a very different one from what John Bunyan had created. Instead of a linear journey with heaven as the end goal, Lewis creates a circular pilgrimage where all that was formerly incomprehensible is now desirable because the character John has a totally new

perception of reality and God. The author also examines *The Great Divorce*, the *Space Trilogy*, and *Till We Have Faces*, all of which exhibit clear mythic elements. However, Lewis's most famous series, the tales of Narnia, are left out. This may be due to their somewhat allegorical nature. Their absence is notable, as they contain many instances of myth, as well as the common themes of renunciation, redemption, and rebirth.

In the final chapter, "Myth Today: L'Engle, Wangerin, Siegel, and Hurnard," the author examines four modern writers who are heirs to the mythic traditions instantiated in 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature by the Inklings. While each of these writers has some mythic elements in the works examined, this was the weakest chapter of the book. Hein would have been better served to concentrate solely on L'Engle and go more in-depth into her *A Wrinkle in Time* series. His analysis of the other three authors was cursory and did not sufficiently tie into the theme of myth making that had been integrally developed up to this point. Hein concludes the book by addressing the "essential nature of artistic composition" (284), but only implies that the referent is "dying to self" or perhaps evidencing the "maturity of spirit" which leads to dying to self. The book would have been better served with a stronger conclusion to wrap up the key points around the common ideas of journey, redemption, and reward that are universal to myth regardless of religion.

— Sharon L. Bolding



**DEATH AND IMMORTALITY IN MIDDLE-EARTH: PROCEEDINGS OF THE TOLKIEN SOCIETY SEMINAR 2016.** Edited by Daniel Helen. Luna Press Publishing: Edinburgh, 2017. 206 pages. ISBN 13: 978-1-911143-33-8. Softcover. \$16.50; \$8.99 Kindle edition.

IN AN APRIL, 1956, LETTER HE WROTE TO JOANNE DE BORTADANO discussing *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien said, "The real theme for me is [...] Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race 'doomed' to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts in a race 'doomed' not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete" (*Letters* 246). Published in 2017, the Peter Roe Memorial Fund's seventeenth volume features twelve essays on this theme first presented in the Tolkien Society seminar in Leeds on July 2, 2016. (Tolkien fan Roe was a poet, cartographer, and author. He was killed in 1979 at age 16 after being struck by a truck outside his home.) Small as it is, only five by seven inches with 195 pages of text, *Death and Immortality in Middle-earth* is not slight.