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## ***Splendour in the Dark: C.S. Lewis's Dymer in His Life and Work,*** **edited by Jerry Root**

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### *Splendour in the Dark: C.S. Lewis's Dymer in His Life and Work*, edited by Jerry Root

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caveated sense that MacDonald may be considered an apologist. Preacher, yes. Theological provocateur, indeed. Visionary, certainly. But apologist? The shoe simply does not fit. Hardy admits that the fit is strange, noting that “MacDonald scholars will likely cringe at the prospect of even designating MacDonald an apologist [...]” Indeed, and inasmuch as I myself am an avid MacDonald reader, I do. But then Hardy proceeds to explain his reason for this hesitation, arguing that it is “simply due to the negative connotations of the word as well as the ‘baggage of rationality’ which the word brings along with it” (152-3). But this is simply not the case. The objection does not lie in prejudice but in terminology, and Hardy’s thesis appears to depend on a collapse of the offices of proclamation, evangelism, and apologetics into one. George MacDonald was a preacher, who through his novels, poetry, sermons, and fairy-stories attempted to draw people to life in the living God, and who eschewed hardened systems of theology and praxis that inhibited people from approaching God. The reader who would like to know *why* MacDonald inhabited such a disposition might do better reading elsewhere.

—Jeremy M. Rios



**SPLENDOUR IN THE DARK: C.S. LEWIS’S *DYMER* IN HIS LIFE AND WORK.** Jerry Root, ed.. Downer’s Grove IL: Intervarsity Press, 2020. 240p. 9780830853755. \$20.00.

While C. S. LEWIS IS BEST KNOWN as the writer of both fantasy stories and religious texts, when he was young he dreamed of being a famous poet. *Splendour in the Dark* explores his second attempt at making his name as such, and is an excellent starting point for those who are interested in this phase of his writing career.

Over the last few years, the Wade Center at Wheaton College in Illinois has been publishing academic titles related to their seven authors. Until now, these have been two different series: The Wade Annotated Editions of C.S. Lewis’s previously published works, and the published Hansen Lectures, an annual lecture series in which professors at Wheaton College focus on the relationship between one of the seven authors represented at the Wade and their own research. This particular volume, however, combines the two into one: the first half is the Wade Annotated Edition of C. S. Lewis’s *Dymer*, while the second half presents lectures on *Dymer* given by Jerry Root as part of the Hansen series, each followed by a response from one of his colleagues.

The first half of the book is titled "*Dymer*: Wade Annotated Edition," and begins with a forward by Wade Center co-director David C. Downing. Downing starts by pointing out that technically, this poem was a career-ending literary failure. He goes on to explain that it is, however, fascinating as a study of the early work of a young writer who later became quite successful. Explaining first what is known of the creation of the poem, he then turns to the technical failings of this poem that attempts, but too rarely succeeds, iambic pentameter. Other points that Downing quickly touches on regarding the poem are the influence of George MacDonald, the heavy use of symbols, and the idea that many motifs and images that Lewis used throughout his writing are already present here. Finally, he points out that *Dymer* is a "coming-of-age narrative" (5).

Downing's introduction is followed by C.S. Lewis's own introduction to the 1950 reprint. Writing roughly 25 years after its initial publication, Lewis points out that both he and the world he lives in have changed quite a bit. In this introduction, Lewis presents his belief that the author's interpretation of a text has limited value (a belief that is better explored in such works as *An Experiment in Criticism* and the co-authored *The Personal Heresy*), but then goes on to give his own explanation of *Dymer*. The poem, he explains, begins with a rejection of the kind of society described in Plato's *Republic*, which is then followed by his own response to revolution, attitudes developed both by growing up in Northern Ireland and by watching the then-current events regarding Russia. Other concerns that he claims the poem addresses are Freudian-based psychology, the child Lewis's desire for "romantic longing" or *Sehnsucht*, self-aggrandizing dreams, and the occult. All of these are things that, he explains, the character Dymer runs from in his search for reality. One of the most intriguing points in this introduction is Lewis's description of meeting William Butler Yeats and the influence he had on the poem.

The poem itself consists of multiple series, or cantos, of seven-line stanzas in a rough iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme ABABBCC. Even before beginning, the reader who recognizes this can understand why *Dymer* was not a literary success: called "rhyme royal," this was a popular structure for narrative poems from Geoffrey Chaucer to Shakespeare. In other words, it was already a couple of hundred years out of date before Lewis attempted to write his own poem in this style. It is worth noting, however, that while utilizing a form of poetry that was last popular in the Renaissance did nothing for his sales, it does make sense in light of his later academic work: especially his volume of the Oxford History of English Literature titled *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century*.

This Renaissance-style poem begins with a direct address to the reader, creating a tone a bit like *The Odyssey* or *The Aeneid*. As interesting as *Dymer* is for

many reasons, this is actually one of the weaknesses of the text. In imitating the older style, the young Lewis's poem comes across as the production of a writer who is copying a style instead of one who is truly at home in the genre. One example should suffice to prove the point: the second stanza announces, "And first a marvel—Who could have foretold / That in the city which men called in scorn / The Perfect City, Dymer could be born?" (17). The attentive reader may wonder why this is considered a marvel: after all, at this point the only person who knows anything about Dymer is his creator. The poems Lewis imitates do use such language, but they were written for audiences who could be expected to already know the main characters through other sources.

When the poetic style is ignored, the story itself could almost pass for one of the many institution-challenging young adult novels produced later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like the hero of a dystopian novel, Dymer rejects the structured and rule-bound world he lives in and sets out to find himself. At the same time, the apparently random journey, as well as the forests, castles, and mysterious women show the heavy influence of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*. While this creates an overall numinous and potentially pleasing atmosphere, it does no favors for the clarity of the poem. After all, many readers find *Phantastes* quite difficult.

But more than anything else, the story itself feels very much like Lewis's later book *The Pilgrim's Regress*. Both stories tell of a young man who runs away from the rule-bound society he was raised in. There are other similarities: both adventures begin with a sexual encounter that results in something unexpected, both include meeting other people who present different ways of interacting with the world, and both involve a battle against a monster near the end. But while John in *The Pilgrim's Regress* defeats the monster and finally finds his Island, there is no such happy ending for Dymer.

The second half of the book begins with yet another introduction. This one is by Walter Hansen, the founder of the Hansen lecture series. He first explains that the poem is both "archaic" and "opaque" (123), claims that Jerry Root does an excellent job of explaining it, and then gives a quick summary before explaining that the lecture series was founded as a memorial to his parents.

While the three essays certainly work to help the reader's understanding of the poem, it is important to remember their context. Because these were first presented as a lecture series, there is more repetition than one would normally expect in a book. It is also important to note that Root's primary interest is in Lewis as a Christian, so his interest in *Dymer* is going to focus less on style, format, and literary concerns than it does on the relationship between the ideas of the young Lewis and his later self.

In the first essay, "A Splendour in the Dark, a Tale, a Song," Root sets out to prove that even though *Dymer* is rarely read, it is an important text for anyone who wishes to understand the mind and work of C.S. Lewis. This is both because it is the most fully-developed text by the pre-Christian Lewis, and also because it presents several concepts that are more fully developed in Lewis's later works. Root first argues that the text should be read for its own value, claiming that *Dymer* is an Everyman disappointed with life, then favorably comparing the poem to Virgil's *Aeneid*. He also describes it as a "pilgrimage story" before going on to argue that the theme of the entire poem is that "Reality is iconoclastic" (143). This first lecture ends by pointing out that *Dymer* must die to pay for the things he has done wrong, but claims that this is not a Christian theme because there is no vicarious atonement—no one steps in to save him from the results of his actions.

Jeffery C. Davis's response to this first essay is quite straightforward: while he agrees that *Dymer* is important for Lewis scholarship, he argues that it is not great literature. He gives two reasons for this: the text is unremarkable and it has no long-term effect on its readers. He follows this up by discussing early reviewers who had the same response, pointing out that none of them called it great literature, either.

Root's second essay, "The Low Voice of the World / Brooding Alone Beneath the Strength of Things," focuses on what Lewis stated were the influences on *Dymer*. He starts with World War I, then moves into a discussion of myth in general before discussing the connection he sees between *Dymer* and Euripides's play *Hippolytus*. From here he moves into what is clearly the richest mythic source: Norse myth. The influence of Norse myth can be seen in the epigraph before the poem, a quote from the Icelandic "Havamal" in which Odin talks about sacrificing himself to himself. Norse myth also appears at the end, when the name of Baldur is invoked in the idea of renewal that somehow comes from death. Root points these out as well as the detail that in an earlier draft *Dymer*'s name was that of the first man in Norse myth. He may stretch the point a bit by arguing that a wise lark in *Dymer* is actually influenced by Odin's two ravens. Root's primary interest is in Lewis's faith, but clearly it is not his only interest. Intriguingly, Root ignores the biggest literary influences: the ancient as well as medieval and Renaissance narrative poems Lewis was imitating, and the writings of George MacDonald. From literary influences, Root moves to the concepts that Lewis discusses in the 1950 introduction, presenting them also as "influences" instead of as the ideas being explored.

Because of this, Mark Lewis's response to Root's second essay focuses not on what Root says, but on Lewis's introduction. He particularly focuses on Lewis's claim that he is explaining the poem, arguing that no matter how much an author explains, the audience will misunderstand. In using the term

"misunderstand," he seems to ignore Lewis's own statement that the author's interpretation is just one of many interpretations of equal weight. If we take his words at face value, Lewis may not have seen these other responses as "misunderstandings," but as "other interpretations."

Root's third and final essay is titled "Out of Old Fields the Flowers of Unborn Springs." This one focuses on what Root calls the "interconnectedness" between this poem and Lewis's later writings (207). While Downing's introduction to the Wade Annotated Edition states that there are images and motifs present in *Dymer* that also appear in his later work, Root eschews those in favor of general concepts. He lists these as the "encounter with reality," "encounter with the contemptable," "encounter with his true self," and the "quest for meaning" (207). Root explains how each of these is present first in *Dymer*, then appears again in the later fiction, with some differences in an understanding of what each actually means. On the one hand, the reader may be disappointed that there is no discussion of the similarities between the Magician's House in *Dymer* and the Magician's house in *The Voyage of the "Dawn Treader,"* but Root is doing more than simply showing recurring images. Instead, he is trying to get at the very heart of the basic concepts that drove Lewis's writing throughout his life.

The final response, presented by Miho Nonaka, does even less to engage with Root's ideas than Mark Lewis's. Nonaka, a Japanese poet, tells a few stories from her own experience, including both the joy and the confusion of reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in a Japanese translation as a child. She does point out that she agrees that *Dymer* presents many things that appear in Lewis's later works, but then goes on to explain that she would like to see a discussion of how Lewis's youthful understanding of himself as poet shaped his later works. She points out that it is not uncommon for a writer's earlier ideas to become fully developed in their later work, but claims it is rare for a "gifted, ambitious poet" to give up the genre entirely and start writing prose. The poet Nonaka sees this as a form of sacrifice (239).

Ultimately, this book is an important addition to Lewis studies. It is not the last word on the topic of *Dymer*, but instead opens the door for more conversation and exploration. Both Downing and Root make statements that are worth exploring more fully. And while the book's unusual format may at first seem unnecessarily complicated, having the text of *Dymer* easily accessible while reading Root's explorations of it creates an enriching experience for any fan or scholar of C.S. Lewis.

—Melody Green

