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***The Lion's Country: C.S. Lewis's Theory of the Real* by Charlie W. Starr**

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The Lion's Country: C.S. Lewis's Theory of the Real by Charlie W. Starr

Abstract

Book review for Charlie Starr's *The Lion's Country: C.S. Lewis's Theory of Reality*

Additional Keywords

reality

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which would mark the end of the separation between God and his creation and the beginning of eternity. Tolkien, in *The Silmarillion* and several minor texts, completes his myth of Middle-earth by drawing a chronotopic framework in which the characters live and die, choosing their eternal destiny. In his last chapter, Freeman speaks about *eucatastrophe*—a definition that Tolkien understands as a cosmological event and a compositional device which denotes a “sudden turn [of a plot, of events—A.O.] that brings a piercing joy,” according to Freeman (338). Eucatastrophe understood as a direct manifestation of God’s saving will in the current of events is at the epicenter of the Christian apocalypse as well as the literary, mythological, one.

Tolkien’s Middle-earth, traditionally interpreted in critical literature in the context of the two-world model, finds a slightly different discourse in Freeman’s book, where it is presented as a carefully crafted literary mirror of the historical and cultural Christian space. The absolute distance between the imaginary Middle-earth and Christian civilization in Freeman’s interpretation loses its absoluteness: Tolkien’s mythological chronotope becomes an artistic representation, a postmodern simulacrum, a living literary image of what had never been presented in its entirety before Tolkien—the Christian world as it is.

— Alex (Oleksiy) Ostaltsev



THE LION’S COUNTRY: C.S. LEWIS’S THEORY OF THE REAL. Charlie W. Starr. Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2022. xxiii + 132 p. ISBN 9781606354537. \$18.95.

DISCUSSING REALITY IN ANY CAPACITY is a daunting task considering our postmodern age constantly questions our perceptions of reality. As Toby F. Coley notes, “With the rise of post-Enlightenment epistemology and postmodernism, [...] objectivity is called into question and all perspectives become ‘interested’ perspectives” (414). And yet, our twenty-first century, post-Romantic world, however paradoxically, seems a perfect climate for Lewis’s thoughts to re-enter our conversations on reality. Dr. Charlie W. Starr, in his book *The Lion’s Country: C.S. Lewis’s Theory of the Real*, seeks to provide an “overview [of] C.S. Lewis’s theory of Reality” (xxi, emphasis in original). No doubt a high goal; yet Starr’s synthesis of Lewis’s writings offers a comprehensive, compact, and readable study of the Real, according to Lewis’s Christian worldview.

While Starr’s book has a humble page count, considering the gravity of such a topic as reality, the reader is advised to spend time carefully reading

through Starr's work. The average chapter length is about ten pages (the shortest chapter being "Chapter 1: The Truest Philosophy" containing five pages and the longest, "Chapter 4: The Apologetical Decade" numbering twenty-two pages). Starr's study is not meant to be a quick read, as he discusses deep theological and philosophical issues. However, the high demand of Starr's piece serves as a testament rather than a detriment to his scholarship. As Dr. Karen Swallow Prior writes, "even as you seek books that you will enjoy reading, demand ones that make demands on you" (17). *The Lion's Country* is an excellent example of an enjoyable, yet demanding work. The book expects the reader to be well-versed in Lewis's texts, particularly his religious writings, and the reader's "interest in knowing reality," pursuing "the real on multiple levels" (xix). Of course, for both Lewis and Starr, God is "the most Real thing there is" (xviii). Starr's intended audience is multi-layered, ranging from Lewis scholars, to theologians, seminary students, or even the "mere" Christian.

Starr follows other theologians' styles by including examples to illustrate otherwise *abstract truths*. I use this term somewhat ironically, as Starr would undoubtedly make a distinction between truth, that process "going on in our heads," from experiential reality (xv). As Starr writes, "Thinking is careful and clear but lacks the concrete intensity of experience. Experience is intensely real but lacks the care and clarity of thinking" (101). Starr follows Lewis's lead "of using vivid, concrete illustrations to explain a difficult concept," as he continually uses examples and humor throughout his book to enrich the reading experience while simultaneously concretizing ideas communicated by Lewis (xviii).

Starr begins his study by demonstrating Lewis's link between reality and fact, while establishing God as Lewis's most definite Fact. Starr diligently delineates differences in Lewis's terminology relating to reality. Starr also discusses Lewis's ideas of desire. According to Lewis and Starr, our deepest desires cannot be fulfilled by anything on this earth. Thus, we hold "a desire for a nameless thing" (8). Our inability to fulfill our desires points to "the Transcendent other—the God—which he [Lewis] would ultimately recognize as the true source of his longing" (9). Starr also traces Lewis's thoughts on the connection between imagination, literature, and reality. Lewis would reject the argument that imagination is dissociated from reality. Rather, Lewis would claim reality is experiential; we can experience reality through stories within our imaginations. "A fictional story," writes Starr, "can put people through honest experiences that take hold of reality, which present qualities of the real" (18). Lewis would not have claimed literature is the ultimate form of reality; however, he would agree literature is a level of reality, a pathway towards experiencing the Real. Reading this section in Starr's book makes one think back to the letter Lewis received from a worried mother about her son's love for Aslan. Lewis

wrote to the concerned mother, “Laurence can’t *really* love Aslan more the Jesus [...]. [W]hen Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before” (Lewis 52). While Starr does not cite this example, Starr considers Lewis’s idea of hierarchical reality extremely important. Indeed, Starr breaks this concept up into two parts in chapters six and seven.

According to Starr, Lewis envisions hierarchies in reality, all eventually leading to the ultimate Reality, or God. Starr makes an interesting, pop culture connection to Lewis’s thinking: “Lewis imagines the possibility of vertical, horizontal, and even interior realities, a *multiverse* of being that is even more than merely hierarchical” (68, emphasis added). Fans of modern superhero films will be excited to read about Lewis’s levels of reality, as Starr’s study makes definite connections between Lewis’s thoughts and the modern science-fiction fascination with the multiverse (67). In chapter seven, the second part exploring Lewis’s hierarchical reality, Starr connects Lewis with Plato’s ideas of the Forms, discussing the similar, yet different ideas the two thinkers had on reality. Starr stresses Lewis departed from Plato’s idea of the Forms through his belief in the Incarnation. “The mutable form of Christ on Earth,” Starr writes, “was more real than that Platonic world of immutable forms, truer than the pure ideas” (74). From hierarchical reality, Starr moves into transposition, or sacramentalism wherein “the thing being symbolized is somehow *actually* present in the symbol itself” (86, emphasis in original). Transposition and sacramentalism ultimately brings Starr to his final chapter—Lewis’s vision of heaven. For Lewis, heaven is the most concrete reality we will ever experience. A major part of this chapter and a fantastic closure to his book is the inclusion of Starr’s original archival research done at the Marion W. Wade Center at Wheaton College. Starr, an expert on Lewis’s handwriting, presents a yet unpublished manuscript Lewis wrote describing heaven (113-16).

While the book’s title, *The Lion’s Country*, might lead the reader to assume much of the study will relate to the Chronicles, most of Starr’s evidence for Lewis’s theory of Reality comes from Lewis’s apologetical works. Starr does discuss some of the Narnian books, with most references to either *The Silver Chair* or *The Last Battle*. Starr also references the Space Trilogy (especially *Out of the Silent Planet*) and *Till We Have Faces*. While this might be a point of critique, we can equally frame this observation positively, as Starr’s study of Lewis’s theory of Reality can be expanded in relation to the Chronicles. Another small critique I have is the absence of Michael Ward’s *Planet Narnia* when Starr discusses Lewis’s fascination with the medieval Ptolemaic model of the universe (68, 77). While Starr does include Ward’s recent *After Humanity: A Guide to C.S. Lewis’s The Abolition of Man* in his “suggested additional reading,” a reference, if even a footnote, to Ward’s *Planet Narnia* would have helped bring the

Chronicles further into discussion where Lewis's medieval planetary thoughts are discussed.

Starr's *C.S. Lewis's Theory of the Real* opens the door for new and exciting avenues for Lewis studies, such as inquiry into Lewis's influences for his theory of Reality. Lewis scholars can also use this theory as a lens when reading Lewis's fiction, bringing to light new elements in his narratives. Future studies might also further the discussion on Lewis's layers of reality and its connection with our modern-day multiverse fascination. Starr's study fits nicely next to Mineko Honda's *The Imaginative World of C.S. Lewis: A Way to Participate in Reality*, a text which also explores Lewis's thoughts on the relationship between fiction and reality. Considering Honda published in 2000, I think the time is ripe for Starr's book to enter the Lewis conversation. Margaret L. Carter, reviewing Honda's book, wrote, "The benefits a reader derives from Honda's study will probably depend on the degree of the reader's familiarity with Lewis" (313). I argue the same is true for Starr's readers. Those who have read much of Lewis's corpus will delight in a reinvigoration of Lewis's vision of reality and those new to Lewis will be introduced to a thinker who goes further up and further into the Christian faith.

—Mark-Elliot Finley

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HOW TO MISUNDERSTAND TOLKIEN: THE CRITICS AND THE FANTASY MASTER. Bruno Bacelli. Illustrations by Silvia Bacelli. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2022. 195 pp. ISBN 9781476686943. \$29.95.

A READER MIGHT THINK FROM THE TITLE AND COVER that this is a fan's defense of his favorite writer. The reader would be mistaken. This is a serious attempt to grasp the nature of Tolkien's work, primarily *The Lord of the Rings*, based upon what critics have said about it. What is *The Lord of the Rings*? Why