



BOOK REVIEW:

The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination

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Łukasz Neubauer and Guglielmo Spirito, editors. *The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination*. Walking Tree, 2024. Cormarë Series n° 48. ISBN 9783905703481.

The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination is an anthology of essays where different scholars explore J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium and C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Their works are considered not only individually but also in contrast and comparison to one another, as the studies revolve around the Inklings' friendship. In the introduction, the editors Neubauer and Spirito reference conversations and debates between Tolkien and Lewis to examine how their works affected each other. The editors point out that the relationship between the two writers gave rise to a curious harmony between their narrative creations, despite the differences in their ways of understanding the world. This is visible, for example, in the ways in which their different approaches to Christianity are reflected in their works.

While the eleven essays in this volume all revolve around the same theoretical framework, the book would have benefited from a structure organized into more specific units. As all of the essays explore worldbuilding, plots, and characters in ways that focus on their relationship with mythology and religious imagery, a more thematically organized approach – such as having separate sections for “Concerning Myths” or “Conjuring Creatures” and so on – would have provided a clearer structure for the volume. A more considered structure would have helped to enhance the comparison between both authors and their opinions about the other's stories and worldbuilding.

Below I will briefly discuss the chapters in the order that they are currently presented in the book.

The essay that opens the book is “C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien: Friendship, True Myth, and Platonism” by Justin Keena. After briefly explaining how both authors understood myths and determined the foundational ideas for their stories – Lewis through fantasy, Tolkien through a “true-myth” with supposedly historical reminiscences – Keena develops a deep analysis of the philosophical roots of their texts. Taking Plato’s Cavern Myth as a focal point, Keena establishes a connection between the different visions of both writers, combining their foundational ideas under the concept of “Christian Platonism.” After this, in “What do they teach them at these schools?: A Critique of Modern and Postmodern Outlook in the Writings of Lewis and Tolkien”, Piotr Anicet Gruszczyński contrasts the works of Tolkien and Lewis with the writers’ contemporary society. This examination finds that the environments and plots of Tolkien and Lewis seem to be more related to Classical Antiquity and Medievalism than to their contemporary schools of thought. While this essay discusses both authors, Gruszczyński focuses on the concept of “moral nihilism,” an approach to contemplating reality attributed specifically to Lewis. After examinations of such Classical influences and comparisons to the modern world, the third essay, “Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time is not Healing: Pauline Law in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien” by Giovanni C. Costabile, jumps to searching for points of influence in early Christianity, discussing how both writers were admirers of Saint Paul of Tarsus and speculates on how the Pauline Law is alluded to in their texts. While the analysis of the moral decisions by Lewis’s and Tolkien’s characters, and the results of these decisions in light of the doctrine are interesting, Costabile offers so many different angles on the matter that the essay unfortunately suffers from a lack of focus.

While the essay that follows this, “The Lion and the Pitch: Creation Myths and Music in Lewis and Tolkien” by Chiara Bertoglio, is elaborate, it does manage to connect the creation myths of both writers with music theory. Music is a very important element in Lewis’s and Tolkien’s stories, and so analyzing the role of harmonies and composition as a narrative vehicle contributes to a better understanding of their worldbuilding, especially in Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew* and Tolkien’s *Aunilindalë*. Bertoglio also explores how both authors include references to texts such as the *Bible*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *Purgatory* into the “musical discourse” of their works. Although this analysis of influences is extraordinarily complex, Bertoglio’s ample use of examples and descriptions makes it easy to follow. The next essay, “Ex nihilo or ex materia?: The Acts of Sub-creation in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Arda and C.S. Lewis’s Narnia” by Lucas Neubauer follows the same thread on worldbuilding. Neubauer links the writers’ beliefs and influences to the result of their creations, examining whether the words imagined by both authors are really “ex-nihilo,” that is, do they really start from zero. This is also one of the examples where spelling out some of the connections between the essays would have been helpful: As this essay explores the figure of demigod, the cosmogonic myths, and Plato’s metaphysics, it would have benefited from directly contrasting its points against Keena’s essay earlier in the volume.

After this, Joanna Łękawska’s “The Interpenetration of Past, Present, and Future in The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings” explains

temporal lines in both stories, considering the existence of overlapping spheres of time. Łękawska finds that Lewis goes further than Tolkien with this subject, transforming time into a specific persona with the character of Father Time. Łękawska also takes a great interest in the mysterious Bombadil, Tolkien's character who remains at the center of both scholarly and fannish theories and debates. In fact, this makes the essay something of an outlier in the volume, as it turns the focus more towards reception and the audience's conversation around the works.

The book goes back to the mythology theme with “A Jumble of Unrelated Mythologies?: Cohesion and Consistency in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Hobbit*” by Gabriel Schenk. This title refers to Tolkien’s opinion about Lewis’s creation (repeated also by scholars such as Alan Jacobs and A. N. Wilson). Schenk proposes examples that reflect the complexity and deep meaning of Narnia as a narrative universe, at the same time highlighting some of the incoherences in Tolkien’s world and its fictional history. In the essay, Schenk argues that the only fair comparison to Lewis’s work in terms of creation would be *The Hobbit* and not *The Silmarillion* since it has been widely revised and corrected. Schenk concludes that Tolkien’s narrative preferences, such as his dislike of allegories, made him subjective when it comes to evaluating his colleague’s worldbuilding.

This is followed by Hamish Williams’s essay “Dionysiac, Apolline, Orphic, or...?: Nietzschean Conflicts in Representing the Natural World in Christian Fantasy” which again returns to Classical references as Williams explores how the conflicts contraposing the Apolline (stability, shape, order) and the Dionysiac (chaos and misrule) are represented in Christian Fantasy, mainly by acts of nature. Williams adds to these two new elements: With regard to Lewis he introduces the element of “Aslanine,” which corrects the loss of order and respect to the natural laws, and with Tolkien he links the “Orphic” which refers to the constant search for balance between order and chaos where nature acts as a stabilizing agent. According to Williams, this latter element is incarnated by Tom Bombadil, again demonstrating the great interest that this character attracts due to his enigmatic nature.

As a sort of reversal of Schenk’s essay earlier in the collection, the next essay, “The Liminality of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Non-human Species: A View through the Lens of C.S. Lewis” by Andrzej Wicher, analyzes the creatures imagined by Tolkien from the perspective that Lewis depicted in *The Discarded Image*. According to Wicher, there are different types of liminality, which sometimes take the form of certain rites of passage and transformation. His main example is the peculiar mortality of Tolkien’s elves and the meaning of Lothlórien, as the liminality of their status regarding death makes them neither mortal or immortal but “longaevi” (long livers), a term used by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*. This feature helps to classify them in a place between mortal Men and the godlike, immortal Valar.

Following the motif of non-human creatures and linking it to the biblical theme, in “Ye are of your father the devil’: Satanic Figures in Arda and Narnia” Franz Georg Árpád Klug addresses the subject of evil in the shape of satanic entities in relation to the Christian backgrounds of Tolkien and Lewis. In his discussion, Klug examines various characters, classifying them in two “satanic triplicities” which he finds in Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman on Tolkien’s side, and in the White Witch Jadis, the Lady of the Green Kirtle, and

Tash in the case of Lewis's work. This essay encompasses several aspects of the evil in the narratives of both writers, for example, examining the role of villains as vehicles of God's plan, the analogies with the Fall, and the corruption of characters such as Boromir through comparisons to Judas. Overall, Klug's aim is to compile the influence of the religious beliefs of Tolkien and Lewis and to demonstrate how they are visible in the representations of evil in their narrative universes. However, the essay unfortunately tries to pack too many things into a fairly concise chapter, resulting in a lack of focus in its deeper analysis.

The book concludes with "The Nostalgic Fantasy of 'Good Plain Food' in Narnia and Middle-earth" where Kris Swank discusses the role of nostalgia in relation to the importance of food in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As Swank explains, Tolkien called that element "Good plain food" and C.S. Lewis's brother, discussing Lewis's tastes, called it "old domestic cookery." As this seems a shared fondness of comfort, tradition and childhood memory, Swank argues that there is a point of idealization in both writers' conceptions. This use of nostalgia for times long past and memories of the loss of innocence is reflected in their works, Swank posits, both through grand celebratory feasts and through creating small oases of comfort amid conflict. This is a good example of the kind of nostalgia exhibited by generations that have lived through wars (as Tolkien and Lewis had) or serious economic recessions, which leads them to long for the times when everything was simpler, even if the reason for that impression of an easier life was that they were children during that period.

In conclusion, *The Songs of the Spheres* is a collection of essays that offers a variety of perspectives on the narrative universes of J. R. R Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Its main contribution is the multiplicity of perspectives as it contrasts both authors' works without diminishing any of them. The combined exploration of Tolkien's and Lewis's narratives highlights their similarities and differences in how their works reflect the real-world cultures and beliefs behind their worldbuilding processes. As previously stated, this book would have benefited from a different structure, since the repetition of themes can give an impression of redundancy when readers encounter the same subjects here and there, with some of the connections getting lost. For example, Gabriel Schenk and Andrew Wicher's essays revolve around the views that Tolkien and Lewis had about each other's narratives and imagination, so it would have been very interesting to link the essays together more directly. Moreover, certain essays, such as Klug's analysis of satanic archetypes, lack the depth required by the subject, suffering from trying to fit too many ideas into one relatively brief chapter. That being said, the book offers interesting approaches to the worldbuilding processes and the mutual sources of inspiration for Tolkien and Lewis, in a way that can captivate both scholars and readers who desire to get a deeper understanding of the texts and everything around them. The Inklings' relationship and mutual influences is certainly a topic that should receive further scholarly attention in the future.

Biography: Andrea Valeiras-Fernández's PhD research in English Studies focused on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, analyzing the presence of the text in popular culture. Her current academic interests focus on storytelling and social assimilation of different narratives. Her publications include articles about illustrations of *Alice*, the worldbuilding process, and the role of music

and poetry in the text. She has also explored Terry Pratchett's Discworld, studying the importance of the footnotes as a tool for expanding the lore and reinforcing the satire.