THE SONGS OF THE SPHERES: LEWIS, TOLKIEN AND THE OVERLAPPING REALMS OF THEIR IMAGINATION

Review by Todd Jensen

The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination, Edited by Łukasz Neubauer and Guglielmo Spirito; Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. Paper, $26.75 from amazon.com.

The Songs of the Spheres is a series of articles on the links between the fantasy writings of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, and the common themes they share. They focus on the Middle-earth *legendarium* for Tolkien, and the Chronicles of Narnia for Lewis – though bringing up some of Lewis's other works in the process.

The first article, "C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien: Friendship, True Myth, and Platonism" by Justin Keena, deals with the importance of the concept of the "true myth" to both Tolkien and Lewis. To them, the story of Jesus Christ was a "true myth" – that is, it took the familiar tale of the Dying God who returned to life (as found with such figures as Osiris, Dionysus, and Balder) and made it real, an actual historical event; it was this perspective on the Christian story that helped bring about Lewis's conversion to Christianity after his famous talk with Tolkien and Dyson in 1931. In their own writings, Tolkien and Lewis explored the concept that concepts that were just myths or stories in the present-day might actually be truth elsewhere or elsewhen as well; Lewis's "Deep Space" Trilogy had Ransom discover the originals of such mythical beings as the dragon in the Garden of the Hesperides on other planets, and filled Narnia with centaurs, fauns, giants, and so on, while Tolkien's "legendarium" placed elves, dwarves, dragons, and the like in the remote past. In the latter part of the article, Keena also explores how this approach tied in with Plato's belief in Forms as the true reality (which Professor Kirke refers to when explaining about the "real Narnia" in Aslan's country at the end of The Last Battle).

Piotr Anicet Gruszczyński's "'What *do* they teach them at these schools?': A Critique of Modern and Postmodern Outlook in the Writings of Lewis and Tolkien" explores how Tolkien and Lewis's outlook had more in common with classical antiquity and the Middle Ages than it did with the twentieth century. Lewis, in his writings, saw three world-views: the "Natural Outlook" held in ancient and medieval times, where the universe bore a divinely-created order that humanity should understand and follow, the "Modern Outlook" which believed in subordinating the natural world to man's will (Weston in Out of the Silent Planet, bent on both turning Malacandra into a human colony and preserving his species by eliminating every individual human whom he sees as an obstacle to that goal, demonstrates this mind-set), and finally "Moral Nihilism", where the "Modern Outlook" has been reinforced by the Conditioners, those who have tried making themselves like gods to rule over and control humanity (such as the members of N.I.C.E. in That Hideous Strength). Tolkien's *legendarium* held, for a counterpart of the "Modern Outlook" and "Moral Nihilism", the "Machine", the industrialized and totalitarian forces represented by Sauron and Saruman's forces, bent on controlling and enslaving the world. Tolkien and Lewis (especially Tolkien) recognized that one could not literally return to the world of the past when the "Natural Outlook" prevailed (the article points out that many of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth go astray by dwelling too much on ancient glories), but they could offer glimpses of it through their stories to remind their readers of it and thereby lead them on the right path.

Giovanni Carmine Costabile's "Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time is not Healing: Pauline Law in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien" examines the Pauline Law (the strict laws laid down in the Old Testament, decreeing punishment and reparation for wrongs) in the context of Tolkien and Lewis's writings. Both recognized that the Law, while necessary, was not enough, that God's grace and mercy was what was truly needed – the "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time", as Lewis put it. Costabile examines the story of Finwë and Míriel (the title is based on Manwë's statement in that tale, "in Arda Marred *Justice* is not *Healing*", modified to include the "Deep Magic" from Lewis's The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe) in this context.

The next two articles focus on the "creation" aspects of Tolkien and Lewis's work. Chiara Bertoglio's "The Lion and the Pitch: Creation Myths and Music in Lewis and Tolkien" deals with the role that music plays in the creation stories of both Middle-earth and Narnia ("The Ainulindalë" and Aslan's singing Narnia into existence in The Magician's Nephew, respectively). Łukasz Neubauer's "*Ex nihilo* or *ex materia*?: The Acts of Sub-creation in J.R.R. Tolkien's Arda and C.S. Lewis's Narnia" addresses the question of whether the world is created from literally nothing, or from some pre-existing substance.

Joanna Łękawska's "The Interpretation of Past, Present, and Future in The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings" examines the role of time in Lewis and Tolkien's worlds. For Narnia, the article focuses on the different rates time flows in for Narnia and our world (the phenomenon where when the children return to England at the end of the story, no time has gone by there during their adventures), but also discusses the mysterious figure of Father Time in The Silver Chair and The Last Battle, particularly his role in helping to bring an end to Narnia – and with it, time itself - in the latter book. For Tolkien's world, Łękawska concentrates on the sense of Middle-earth's ancient past, manifesting in places with long histories such as Moria, but deals with other aspects of time, such as the importance of correct timing (at the start of their adventures, the hobbits unwisely delay again and again, starting with Frodo's decision to put off leaving the Shire until his birthday; at the end, during the Scouring, they act straightaway, with no further procrastination). To complete this look at time in Tolkien's world, Łękawska explores the figure of Tom Bombadil, the oldest being in Middle-earth, who is even immune to the temptation of the Ring.

Gabriel Schenk's "A Jumble of Unrelated Mythologies?: Cohesion and Consistency in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe and The Hobbit" challenges the theory that the reason why Tolkien did not care for the Chronicles of Narnia was because of the much more careless world-building in them than in his own works. Schenk points out that The Hobbit contains its own share of anachronisms (such as Bilbo's matches and tobacco), and that while the Chronicles of Narnia mix elements from many different

mythologies (beings from classical myth like fauns, centaurs, and nymphs alongside ones from more northern myths and legends like dwarfs and giants), it does so in a cohesive way, a feeling that they are a right match for their roles in the story. (Schenk does not offer an alternate explanation for why Tolkien was not fond of the Chronicles of Narnia, though he seems to hint that this lack of fondness may have been exaggerated, and arose in part from one secondary source repeating another.)

Hamish Williams' "Dionysiac, Apolline, Orphic, or…?: Nietzschean Conflicts in Representing the Natural World in Christian Fantasy" analyzes how Tolkien and Lewis's works portrayed the Dionysiac and Apolline approaches from Nietzsche's philosophy, particularly in response to that philosophy's belief that God did not exist. For Lewis, Williams explores the Bacchus scenes in Prince Caspian, where Bacchus and his followers serve Aslan in restoring joy and freedom to Narnia after the Telmarines' Apolline misrule; he particularly points out how, under Aslan, Bacchus is stripped of the more violent aspects of Dionysus in Greek mythology - for example, where Dionysus's worshippers ripped their adversaries such as King Pentheus to pieces, Bacchus changes one into a tree instead. Williams then turns to Tolkien's depiction of the Old Forest, showing how its nightmarish Dionysian attacks upon the hobbits are countered by Tom Bombadil, who rescues the hobbits in a manner that Williams describes as Orphic (simply telling Old Man Willow to leave them alone), rather than the cold and controlling manner of the Apolline approach. (Crucial here is that Bombadil does not have power over others, but that others have no power over him.)

Andrzej Wicher's "The Liminality of J.R.R. Tolkien's Non-human Species: A View through the Lens of C.S. Lewis" studies the "liminal" or "in-between" nature of the Elves. The Elves display this nature in many ways throughout Tolkien's work; for example, they are longer-lived than Men, to the point that they seem immortal, and yet can be slain in battle. Both Tolkien and Lewis wrote about Elves and fairies in their non-fiction writings as "liminal" beings; Tolkien, for example, quoted in "On Fairy-stories" a passage in an old Scottish poem about Thomas the Rhymer (a human minstrel whom the Fairy Queen took as her lover) about how the road to Fairyland is neither the "narrow path to Heaven" nor the "broad road to Hell" but a third route, "that bonny road/ that winds about the fernie brae". Wicher points out how this almost "twilight" nature of the Elves ties in with a different "in-between" element in The Lord of the Rings, the growth of the hobbit heroes as they undertake their perilous journeys.

Franz Georg Árpád Klug's "'Ye are of your father the devil': Satanic Figures in Arda and Narnia" delves into an examination of the main villains of Tolkien and Lewis's fantasy works, such as Morgoth, Sauron, and the White Witch, and how much they reflect the Christian depiction of Satan. One of his chief observations is that Tolkien's "satanic archvillains" seem more well-rounded than those of Lewis; he ascribes this to Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman's eagerness to embark on creation and sub-creation, a longing that Tolkien himself felt strongly.

The closing article, Kris Swank's "The Nostalgic Fantasy of 'Good Plain Food' in Narnia and Middle-earth", discusses how Tolkien and Lewis's love of what Tolkien called "good plain food" (that is, simple food, grown locally, and shared) filled their writings, and compares it to a similar fondness in the works of Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, and A.A. Milne. All five writers felt a nostalgia for an age where simple food, unspoiled by industrialization, existed; Swank points out that even in their childhood, food in Britain had already taken on the "industrialized" tone that they deplored, but they could still picture the kind of food they yearned for as an "imagined past", and wrote about it in a way to share their love of it with their readers. (The article, incidentally, quotes the same passage in a letter of C.S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves in 1930 that also appeared in the notes to Dale Nelson's "The Inklings # 6: From Innisfree to Rivendell" in the December 2024 issue of "Beyond Bree".)

The Songs of the Spheres is strongly academic in tone, with a very scholarly vocabulary (using such words as "liminal" and "interpenetration"), but is well worth reading for those interested in how Tolkien and Lewis's imaginative works reflected each other – and in what ways they differed from each other.