George Fox University

Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal

Volume 5
Issue 1 *Combined Volume 5-6*

Article 27

2012

Review of C. S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement

Suzanne Bray
Lille Catholic University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

Bray, Suzanne (2012) "Review of C. S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement," *Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 27.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.55221/1940-5537.1138
Available at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cslewisjournal/vol5/iss1/27

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sehnsucht: The C. S. Lewis Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

> tion in a very 'magical' way. That is, he had no preconceived outline but simply allowed the images to rise in his mind's eye. This is exactly the technique that is used in magical dynamics (63).

Lewis' approach, however, has been part of the creative process for countless novelists, poets, painters, and other artists throughout history who have had nothing to do with the occult. Knight's response might be that all creative artists are tapping into occult powers without knowing it, and that this is evidence to the truth of occult beliefs. As he acknowledges with respect to Tolkien, "We find therefore in Tolkien's story a fleshing out of Qabalistic doctrines, *probably not known to him consciously* but intuitively conceived through his great imaginative powers" (121, emphasis added).

Eventually, this book reads very much as though it were written with the following scenario. The author, Knight, while publicly eschewing what he acknowledges is the darker or sinister side of occult magic, is nonetheless very attracted to, and knowledgeable about, the occult—and believes it is a positive force in the universe. (The book even contains a suggested occult meditation to increase one's creative powers by calling upon a spirit imagined as a character from Tolkien's books.) As an apologist for the occult, Knight would like to claim these famous and respected writers for his cause. If he can convince us that the occult was a positive force in their lives, we are likely to accept it for ourselves. That agenda never feels very far below the surface. But while the books make some interesting points about the four subject authors, at least with respect to the two most famous of them, the arguments fail. •

Matthew Dickerson
Middlebury College

Colin Manlove. ***C. S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement*** (Cheshire, CT, 2010). 256 pages. $14.52. ISBN: 9781936294008.

This is a new edition of Colin Manlove's book (first published in 1987), with a new introduction and new prefatory material to most of the chapters. It provides a thorough overview of Lewis' work as a fiction writer and includes chapters on *The Pilgrim's Regress*, each of the three volumes of the Cosmic Trilogy, *The Great Divorce*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *Till We Have Faces*. These are followed by a short bibliography of works by and about Lewis and an index.

Each chapter summarizes the contents of the book, identifies the main

themes, and describes the literary and stylistic devices used by Lewis to achieve his aims. Manlove is, for the most part, an admirer of Lewis' literary skills, and he aims to bring these to the reader's attention. He also points out similarities between each of Lewis' fictional writings and other literary works which may—or may not—have influenced the author. Finally, he identifies common features in all Lewis' fiction, including "the journey out of self towards the 'other'" (221); joy or the "dialectic of desire" (*Pilgrim's Regress* 205); and a vision of Heaven as solidity, joy, and dance.

The tone of the book is somewhere between the general and the scholarly. It is an agreeable and fairly easy read presented in a clear, uncomplicated style. There are relatively few quotations and endnotes, although some of those that have been provided are very informative. Moreover, some use has been made of secondary sources, although these (except in the introduction) were inevitably nearly all written before 1987. Each of the chapters is at the same time personal and full of fascinating snippets of useful information. Even the experienced Lewis scholar, for whom the long plot summaries will be merely review, is bound to learn something and benefit from some interesting insights. The description of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as "a story about gifts" (130) and Manlove's analysis of the damned souls in *The Great Divorce*, who "in flying apart . . . are actually fused together" (106) are particularly pleasing.

There are, however, two problems—one more serious than the other. There are several factual and printing errors in the text, most of which ought to have been corrected after publication of the first edition. Among other slips, Tolkien and Dyson's "Addison walk argument" with Lewis was in 1931 and not 1929 (4); Uncle Andrew is Aunt Letty's brother and not her husband (181); Jane Studdock's husband is Mark and not John (196); and there is no other document besides *The Great Divorce* that uses the word *Refrigerium* in just the way Lewis does, which implies that the souls on holiday from Hell have the chance to repent (102). Although such details in no way detract from the value of the book as a whole, they are irritating for the reader.

The second problem goes deeper than mere irritation, however: Manlove also comes out with debatable or controversial statements without providing any proof in support of his claims. For example, readers might be quite prepared to believe that Kitty's adventures in Alice Corkran's *Down the Snow Stairs* provided one of the sources for Lewis' *The Great Divorce* (101), but they would like to have been told how Manlove knows that Lewis had read the book.

These are but minor complaints. As a survey of Lewis' fiction, and a study of some of his main themes, this is a fine book. It will be particularly

useful for students with essays to write or teachers needing to prepare a lesson, and will also provide an agreeable read for those who have read some of Lewis' work and want to know more. •

Suzanne Bray
Lille Catholic University

Holly Faith Nelson, Lynn R. Szabo, and Jens Zimmermann, eds., ***Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime in Literature and Theory*** (Waterloo, ON, 2010), xxviii + 450 pages. Paperback: $42.95; ISBN: 9781554583058. Hardcover: $85.00; ISBN: 9781554581849.

According to the editors, this collection of papers had its origin in conversations at an international symposium on "trauma and transcendence" (xix). That symposium had developed out of an annual Western Regional Conference on Christianity and Literature (xi). Regardless of the provenance of the papers, it is unfortunate that the editors failed to achieve clarity, concision, or coherence throughout the volume.

It comprises an introduction and twenty-five essays, of which four have already appeared in some form elsewhere. Holly Faith Nelson's introduction relates the convergence of the terms of reference—suffering, the sacred, and the sublime—to "enquiries into trauma, religion, and aesthetics" (xvi). The first selection addresses the conjunction of the three terms with lucidity and easy erudition. The last, by Jens Zimmermann (whose serious thinking is worth the wrestle), looks back and touches on the title, saying that for "Luther, Christ is the 'glass darkly' through whom we perceive our humanity" (391). Those between are arranged chronologically by subject, grouped under twelve descriptive headings, and neither pretend to completeness nor even aspire to survey. They are "a series of case studies" (xx)—although Nelson does not clarify what they are case studies *of*: works of literature, one assumes—with pages 183–375 devoted almost entirely to late twentieth-century works. As merely listing authors and titles would consume four hundred words, the reader must be referred to the publisher's website for those details.

The introduction and essays constitute a very mixed bag of widely varying quality. Monika Hilder on Lewis, MacDonald, and L'Engle, or perhaps Lynn Szabo on Merton, might serve as a snapshot of the shortcomings—stylistic and otherwise—of the nonetheless commendable. That the essays are not all sausages from a machine set for one ideological or "theoretically correct" *Gleichschaltung* or another is a plus.