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Review of Mythopoeic Narnia: Memory, Metaphor, and Metamorphoses in The Chronicles of Narnia

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Salwa Khoddam, *Mythopoeic Narnia: Memory, Metaphor, and Metamorphoses in The Chronicles of Narnia* (Hamden, CT, 2011). xiii + 259 pages. \$16.99. ISBN: 9781936294114.

NEAR the close of *The Voyage of the 'Dawn Treader'*, the Pevensie children sit down to breakfast in the “utter east” with an impossibly bright white Lamb, who intimates to them that their way into Aslan’s kingdom will not come through Narnia, but through their own world. In response to Edmund’s astonished query about whether there is access to Aslan’s kingdom from his own world, the Lamb (who is, of course, Aslan) responds, “There is a way into my country from all worlds,” before metamorphosing back into the form of the regal Lion (215). Scholars will recognize in the Lion’s response an indication of C. S. Lewis’ belief that all myths and beliefs point to Christianity. Salwa Khoddam’s new book, *Mythopoeic Narnia*, sets about the formidable task of analyzing Lewis’ prodigious use of Western myth in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and detailing the metamorphic power that the mythic imagery has in bringing about Christian *theosis*.

In this extremely learned but readable volume, Khoddam examines how Lewis used the imagery and metaphors of myth, culled from his capacious memory, to construct richly allusive narratives of character metamorphoses in the *Chronicles* (218). Khoddam argues that the specific metamorphoses undergone by the protagonists of Lewis’ novels are a kind of *theosis*: a process that involves “following their god’s commandments, sharing with his struggles, metamorphosing into fellowship and being in-folded [*sic.*] in their god, and finally receiving salvation” (36). The “salvation” of the characters in the *Chronicles* is, of course, an analog of Christian salvation. As Khoddam concludes, “Lewis’ chronicles [*sic.*] are Christian fairy tales built on a metamorphosis from darkness to light, from blindness to vision, from Despair to Joy, from city to garden” (223). There are, she argues, implications for Lewis’ readers, for whom the act of reading and reflection may bring about—vicariously, one presumes—the same process of *theosis* in “our world.”

This quasi-devotional effect of *theosis* is doubtless something many readers have felt in reading the *Chronicles*, though drawing attention to the Christian salvation analogs in Lewis’ works is not the greatest contribution of this volume. Its strength and principal contribution to Lewis scholarship is the weight of source research the author provides in making the case for Lewis’ subsuming of Western *mythos* into the Christian world of Narnia. In the Introduction, Khoddam writes: “the *Chronicles* reflect Lewis’ understanding of myth as the handmaiden to Christianity” (5). The subsequent chapters reinforce that claim, highlighting images from Classical and Nordic myth,

Christian tradition, Patristic writing, the Bible, and medieval and Renaissance literature. The author then illustrates the importance of such mnemonic imagery in the metamorphic narratives of Lewis' "fairy-tale."

At the center of Khoddam's analysis are three structural metaphors (or motifs), around which the "motifemes," or mythic plots, of the Narnian books are constructed: the city, the garden, and the sea. After chapters detailing the importance of myth to Lewis' understanding of Christianity (3) and the importance of memory as a repository of the mythic imagery necessary for the process of metamorphosis/*theosis*, Khoddam explains the role of these central metaphors in the narrative arc of the story, as well as how their presence within the narrative serves to bring about metamorphosis/*theosis* in their respective story's protagonists (and, by implication, the readers). This is accomplished by elevating the fairy-tale plot from the "diachronic" to the "synchronic": that is, the "out of time" or "eternal" level—essentially the level of Christian truth (41).

At least a chapter is devoted to each of these metaphors, and the collective "memory" of Western tradition is mined for a number of attendant metaphors that deepen the "synchronic" meaning of the motifs. The motif of the sea, for instance, is set against the backdrop of nautical imagery from Classical tradition, the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, Spenser, Coleridge, and many other resonant sources. Other metaphors in the *Chronicles* are subjected to similar analysis. There is a chapter on the importance of light as an image, for example, which includes a rich discussion of the mythopoeic importance of icons; a chapter on apocalypse, situating the events of *The Last Battle* in the mythic context of the Book of Revelation and Nordic myth; and, a chapter contrasting Lewis' *theotic* metamorphosis with the metamorphic trope as used by Ovid. Taken as a collective whole, the source material that Khoddam surveys constructs a mythopoeic context that starkly illustrates what Lewis apparently meant when he wrote in *Spenser's Images* that "all myths and hieroglyphs hide a profound meaning, in agreement with Christianity" (quoted in Khoddam, 219).

In the final chapter, Khoddam writes, "It has been my effort in this study to uncover some of the 'learned' sources and traditions of the images (iconographical at times) in the *Chronicles* and show how they enriched the theme of metamorphosis/*theosis* in each of the seven chronicles [*sic.*]—what in mythical terms is termed metamorphosis and in Christian terms *theosis*" (218). She has achieved her goals and then some. This represents part of a new approach to the *Chronicles* that treats seriously both the literary and theological significance of the books and works under the assumption that neither significance detracts from the other.

If, as the author argues, Lewis intended to produce the vicarious process of *theosis* in his readers by subsuming the riches of Western myth into Christian narrative, then readers of the *Chronicles* will find this metamorphic experience deepened by reading Khoddam's work. Though some may find the extensive source material tough sledding in places, this should not deter any part of Lewis' devoted readership from engaging with this stimulating analysis. •

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J. T. Sellars, *Reasoning Beyond Reason: Imagination as a Theological Source in the Work of C. S. Lewis* (Eugene, 2011). 256 pages. \$29.00. ISBN: 9781608995035.

GIVEN that C. S. Lewis has never achieved widespread popularity among theologians—though some, such as John Milbank and Alister MacGrath, cast themselves as adherents of the Lewis tradition—the scarcity of academic works covering his theology is not surprising. In some circles, he is viewed as a gifted literary scholar with poetic and perhaps philosophical ambitions, but who failed at these and so turned to writing fiction and popular apologetics. It is from the refutation of this image that J. T. Sellars begins his book.

The positive purpose of the book is more general: to rescue the perception of Lewis' writings from flat rationalistic and vulgar psychological treatment and to demonstrate the premodern roots of his teaching, writing, and research. While decades ago Lewis made a considerable impact as an “apostle to the skeptics”—a brilliant logician presenting rational grounds for the Christian faith—now, amidst the crisis of Enlightenment rationalism, much of the interest in him has shifted to the imaginative part of his method. (Whether this shift is justified is another matter.) The analysis of such an “imaginative Lewis” in the book is thorough and detailed. Each step of the argument is supported by references to the sources and backed up by solid evidence (endnotes comprise more than a third of the book). The key concept of the book is imagination as a fully legitimate cognitive ability; by its analysis in Lewis' works, Sellars demonstrates imaginative knowledge as a “reasoning beyond reason.” He sequentially considers such points as rationality with its limitations and conditionality; the nature of Lewis' creative inspiration; desire and longing (comparing Lewisian *Joy* and *Sehnsucht* with Platonic recollection and Augustinian longing for God); the “Tao” of Lewis' moral theory in com-