

THE JOURNAL OF INKLINGS STUDIES

Amy H. Sturgis (ed.), *Past Watchful Dragons: Fantasy and Faith in the World of C.S. Lewis*. Review by Ivan P. Khovacs The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 2, No. 1, April 2012

Amy H. Sturgis (ed.), *Past Watchful Dragons: Fantasy and Faith in the World of C.S. Lewis*. Altadena, CA: The Mythopoeic Press, 2007. 222 pp. ISBN 978-1887726115.

In 1956, the *Harvard Crimson's* review of C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* complained that, though written with obvious 'wit, insight, and dignity', as a spiritual autobiography, 'dependent upon some community of past history and sensation', the book could only communicate to the extent that readers shared personally the Christian conversion experience. The writer therefore dismissed the piece as 'idiosyncratic', 'a strange alien tale' and 'idle curiosity' for anyone but the converted. The reviewer, Christopher Jencks,[1] never one to pull his punches, might have said something similar about Amy H. Sturgis's *Past Watchful Dragons*. He would have loathed its sympathetic ear for Lewis' case for Christianity, and its unapologetic take on the moral underpinnings evident in Lewis' worlds of fantasy. Some half a century later, however, critics might appreciate readings of Lewis literature which do not on principle dismiss but in fact explore what Lewis' faith convictions might bring to the diverse literary interests addressed in this anthology. Inevitably, readers of *Past Watchful Dragons* must conclude that, in Lewis' literature, faith and fantasy are inseparable. And while saying this is no great advance on the state of Lewis and Inklings studies, it does show that serious academic endeavour can turn, once again, around the 'literature and religion' axis. And, from my perspective, this can only be a good thing.

The book first came to my attention by way of Ernelle Fife's excellent essay in which she reads Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* through the lens of 'the four loves' in Lewis' well-known book of the same title. I teach a literature and theology class as part of a religious studies degree in Canterbury and was interested in critical Christian readings of Wilde's novel. Only subsequently was I taken by the authors who accompany Fife in her fine endeavour, and have been pleased with the findings.

The essays, presented originally at a Lewis colloquium at Belmont University (2005), are not intended to interrogate Lewis at length, whether on questions of doctrine or on literary merit. These are not hard-edged critical essays, but range

from contemporary tributes to constructive explorations of core Lewis literature. Each essay complements, sets off or expands the principles articulated in the others, leading the reader towards a wider understanding of Lewis, his literary influences and the contemporary relevance of Lewis literature and its theological appeal.

Still, academics might have expected the scholarly credentials represented by the essay contributors to be more critically deployed. So, for example, Fife accepts unquestioningly Lewis' notion in *The Four Loves* that love can be instructively (not to say objectively) observed through a four-sided prism. To her credit, the essay also deals with the problematic characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose complex motivations blur presumed edges between love's manifestations. A more sustained investigation, however, might prompt a question along the lines of, 'Do such neat categorisations of love deny the possible intensification of affection, friendship, eros and charity *through their interpenetration*, and therefore amount to a kind of "moral failure" on the part of the Christian Lewis?' Bruce L. Edwards finds himself responding to Lewis' 'winsome, welcoming, endearing voice' (p. 18), and concludes that, as an apologist, Lewis did not merely fill a God-shaped gap in the minds of readers, but provoked spiritual thirsts, which could only be quenched by drinking from the font of divine love. The message is salutary coming from Lewis' pen, but a touch self-validating in Edwards's essay. Marek Oziewicz, for his part, might have queried whether the morally coherent universe arguably evident in Lewis' fantasy (often apparent in a pre-lapsarian incorruptibility attributed to animals) as well as in his ethical commentary (e.g., his take on the Bible and the Tao in *The Abolition of Man*) presupposes the catholicity of 'the good', and is therefore underpinned by a sort of 'natural theology', something which might surprise many of Lewis' theologically alert readers. Would anyone in Sturgis's company, for example, have considered a title like 'Surprised by Jove! C.S. Lewis, Natural Theologian'?

Past Watchful Dragons is published by the Mythopoeic Society, by their own description an organism devoted to the literary endeavour of the members of the Oxford literary circle known as the Inklings. But that is not to say that the essays are conventionally faith-affirming. Good critical work is found, for example, in Greg Wright's essay on Lewis and film (pp. 79-92), and in Karen Wright Hayes's take on fantasy as political commentary (pp. 95-107). There is much good in these expositions of both familiar and less-often explored Lewis literature, thereby setting the stage for the kind of critical work that Lewis' spirit demands. One might quibble with evidence of edited submissions typical of colloquia somewhat instrumentally wrought into this volume under, it has to be said, a spectacular Narnia reference for a title. But, whether this collection of essays evinces some intelligent design beyond the aims of the colloquium is immaterial: *the final product prompts further critical*

interaction with the original sources and their interlocutors, which is a worthy accomplishment, indeed.

As Sturgis explained on the occasion of the book's release, *Past Watchful Dragons* intended to provide a 'breadth of arguments and approaches' on fantasy and faith in the world of C.S. Lewis (p. 5). The prefatory notes urged us to expect representatives from the fields of literature, theology, history, and popular culture to offer scholarly reflection and assembled insight on 'the messages of C.S. Lewis' fiction and nonfiction, the dramatic adaptations of his work, the influence of his faith, and his relevance to related fantasy literature....' The book, therefore, clad with a stunning cover, gives contemporary exposition to Lewis the literary critic, writer of fiction and Christian apologist (cf. the Owen Barfield reference on pp. 142-43).

Past Watchful Dragons is divided into five sections, preceded by an introduction, according to treatments of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, ostensible adaptations of Lewis literature, an exploration of Lewis and cognate literature, Lewis and faith, as well as Lewis and related authors. Graduate students would especially welcome insights relevant to their own research interests emerging under the corresponding headings. Honourable mention in this regard goes to the reading of Lewis in the light of J.K. Rowling's fantasy, and vice versa (cf. Kathryn N. McDaniel's essay on pp. 183-207), literary connections between the two being of increasing academic interest.

The persistent typographical errors might be eventually forgivable, if it were not for the £29 cover price from Amazon. More irritating, though, are the occasional lapses into language which narrows the scope of Christian dialogue. For example, in a discussion on Christian vocation, the author does not hesitate to presume that Christian mission entails a unidirectional movement—literally, a 'missions trip' (p. 142)—from the West 'to a third world country'. Lewis, I would have thought, even at his most archconservative (and despite the malaprop, and now widely-discussed, dark-skinned Calormenes of his creation) would have castigated the cultural superiority implied in such a view of the mission of the Church.

Then again, one might take issue with editorial oversights. One bristles at a passage, in an otherwise fine discussion on film, which is allowed to confuse the emotional response elicited by film fantasy with the deliberate manipulation of emotions in film documentaries such as the Nazi-vehicle *Triumph of the Will* (p. 87). Again, from an editorial perspective, one might initially take issue with the grandiose claim that, in his day, Lewis 'pushed preaching to the highest levels of artistic and aesthetic discourse' (p. 153). However, on fuller reading, one discovers in Gregory M. Anderson's essay on homiletics and Lewis' pictorial imagination an intelligent

piece challenging the arguably muted force of rhetorical preaching in post-modern contexts with the creative power of *poesis*. Equally commendable is H.L. Reeder's essay (pp. 171-182) on the familiar theme of the 'baptized imagination' which, the author suggests, following Lewis, 'is unafraid of using the things of this world' to furnish Christianity's imaginative shaping of post-modern discourse (p. 182). So, apart from some obvious flaws, the texts are informative by turns, and therefore a welcome addition to Lewis studies, and more generally to contemporary interest in theology, imagination and the arts.

A final point worth raising relates to the issue of Lewis scholarship and the heritage of his theological conservatism. It seems inevitable that some corners of the Church have tended to appropriate the moral elements of Lewis' fantasy in support of reactionary values. On literary principle, it always seems a shame to see readers prize Lewis' fantasy primarily for its moral payoff, to see the moral of the story extracted, as it were, from the experience of being taken "Further in and higher up!" by the spin of the tale. The essays in this collection may or may not fall hostage to such fortunes, but it is clear that they come from critics and educators who show themselves to be, first and last, good readers of story. And their readings of Lewis lead me to wonder whether Lewis was a good storyteller who happened to be a particular sort of Christian? Or, whether he was someone for whom fantasy *and faith* were warp and weft in the weaving of fine stories? Or, more likely, whether these questions are two sides of the same coin?

On the broader point about faith, Lewis' writings might be for some irritatingly conservative. However, his conservatism—one characterised by conventional Christian morality rather than the aggressive, neo-theocratic streams evident, for example, in my own home state of California—can often be misunderstood as sanctioning this or that political agenda in our day. This, I suggest, outside my brief remit, is a mistake of anachronism, not to say a failure of the imagination of the kind which Lewis would have deplored. Lewis might be preachy, but he earns our hearing; his homiletic spins us into its tale, and is not asserted by dint of divine right.

This, then, brings me back to the point about faith and literature I raised at the outset. For if the faith perspective from which Lewis writes (and even that from which, broadly speaking, the essay contributors examine Lewis' fantasy) turns out to be a critical standpoint from which the import of fantasy is studied in English departments at today's universities, then we may have indeed got past some formidably imposing dragons of the previous century, New Criticism and Post-Structuralism, to name only two.

That being the case, I conclude with a salutary word about the book under review. I understand the novelist who says that she only writes stories that she herself would want to read: nothing pleases me more than to read a work of theology or a literary essay which I would wish to have written. C.S. Lewis, in commending the translation of Athanasius's classic 'On the Incarnation', enthused about 'working...through a tough bit of theology' with a pipe in his teeth and a pencil in his hand, comparing the posture to one of prayer.[2] That was Lewis, the Oxford don, speaking. For my part, I might say the same for a good bit of academic writing. And having reviewed this anthology, I hope to read more, bent pipe in hand, from the authors of *Past Watchful Dragons*.

Dr Ivan P Khovacs

References

1. Christopher Jencks, 'The Spiritual Odyssey of an Oxford Don: *Surprised By Joy*, by C. S. Lewis, Harcourt, Brace and Co'. *The Harvard Crimson*, 16 March 1956. Available on 10 August 2011.
<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1956/3/16/the-spiritual-odyssey-of-an-oxford/>
2. St Athanasius, *On The Incarnation*, trans. Religious of C.S.M.V., intro by C.S. Lewis (London & Oxford: Mowbray 1982 [1944]), p. 8.