

# THE JOURNAL OF INKLINGS STUDIES

**Gareth Knight, *The Magical World of the Inklings*.  
Review by Joshua Roberts  
The Journal of Inklings Studies Vol. 2, No. 1, April 2012**

Gareth Knight, *The Magical World of the Inklings*. 2nd revised ed.  
Cheltenham, UK: Skylight Press, 2010. 304  
pp. ISBN 978-1908011015.

*The Magical World of the Inklings*, written by esotericist Gareth Knight, was first published in 1990. In that process the text found itself in the fortunate position of being reviewed by none other than Owen Barfield, the only surviving member of the Inklings group. After reading it Barfield's response was unambiguous: 'Because of the combination of information, understanding and insight on which it is founded', he wrote, ' is more than outstanding. It is not in the same league with anything else I have come across'.<sup>[1]</sup> Now, some twenty years later, a new and expanded edition of Gareth Knight's classic text on the mythopoeic literature of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield—collectively known as the Inklings—is available.

Both the original 1990 edition and this 2010 text benefit from having a thorough overview of the works of all four of these writers. The C.S. Lewis segment covers Lewis' early works of Christian apologetics and his later mythological work *Till We Have Faces*, as well as *The Screwtape Letters*, and, as would be expected, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The section on J.R.R. Tolkien examines all three of Tolkien's major works: *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*. It also covers some of the lesser known stories – the 'faerie stories' of 'Smith of Wootton Major' and 'Leaf by Niggle', as well as some of Tolkien's insightful literary essays. On Charles Williams, the 1990 edition focused on his novels, but in this new and expanded edition of the book, Williams's deeply symbolic 'ritual' play *Judgement at Chelmsford*, and the cycle of Arthurian poems which were unpublished at the time of his death, are now included. Similarly with Owen Barfield: whilst the original 1990 edition included all the major literary critic and philosophic works (*Poetic Diction*, *Unancestral Voice*, *Worlds Apart* and others), the new edition has been updated to include the two novellas *Night Operation* and *Eager Spring* which were published posthumously in 2008.

So what is this insight that Barfield mentions and what is it about this insight that makes the book so valuable? Such questions, appearing as they are in a journal

dedicated to the exploration of philosophy, theology and literature through the works of the Inklings, seem particularly appropriate to consider in their wider connotation: that is, what is it about the insights of the Inklings that make their writings so valuable? *The Magical World of the Inklings* by Gareth Knight may well come to be seen as seminal to a unified understanding and answering of that question. For the text succeeds in developing a provocative case for the presence of esoteric and magical 'imaginative' elements in the mythopoeic endeavours of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield. Each of these writers, Knight argues, created a 'magical world' which initiates the reader into hidden and powerful realms of the creative imagination; and which, further, have affected the development of human consciousness itself.

The book develops and unfolds this argument by providing a valuable resource for the study of each author, and each overview acts as a conduit into that author's world. Barfield himself, in his review of the 1990 edition of *The Magical World of the Inklings*, which is included in this new edition, acclaims,

...the book has a supervening value that is altogether independent of their putative status as Inklings, whatever that means. ... I can well imagine for instance a reader who is deeply interested, or ready to be deeply interested, in one of the four...welcoming this book. He would go for it, partly for the amount of sheer information it contains about the author and his works, but still more for the matrix of wise exegetical comment in which that information is embedded. (pp. 9-10)

Both Barfield (in his forward) and Knight sensed the elusiveness of a unifying element in the work of the Inklings. Were the Inklings simply an informal group of friends? Or were they a consciously defined movement of some sort? The answer that Knight provides is not a conventional one. He suggests that it is the coherence of a group 'who aimed at nothing more than being a group of friends' that is the unifying element to their work (p. 295).

To examine this idea of diverse coherence, *The Magical World of the Inklings* focuses on the context of the Inklings in the time and space of pre-1950s Oxford. At the beginning of the book, Knight includes an Inklings Time Chart. The Inklings and their lifetimes are shown in parallel. This chart helps the reader consider the interaction between the Inklings, and the inspiration that underpins their works. Knight calls this shared inspiration 'mythopoeia', or 'magic'. Knight suggests that this undergirding of magic is the source of hidden wisdom and advice within the works of Lewis and Tolkien and Williams, and especially in the works of Barfield. Knight's aim in this book is to reveal this esoteric knowledge which he believes is

hidden within the work of the Inklings, so that those readers who wish to receive it are able.

In this respect, Gareth Knight's background as one of the world's authorities on ritual magic, the Western Mystery Traditions and Qabalistic symbolism provides depth and challenges for the reader. When his case for the apparatus of esoteric investigation of the imagination is applied to Lewis and Tolkien, these challenges are particularly strong, for many will come to these authors considering them to be primarily orthodox Christians. While Knight's premises will be criticised by many readers, Knight's expertise in magic and myth gives him a unique perspective. His approach moves this book away from the orb of straightforward literary criticism and into a potentially profound and provocative philosophical level. Knight argues that, at times sub-consciously, Lewis and Tolkien, and certainly Williams and Barfield, are fulfilling the deeper requirements of an inner quest of self-transformation found within Western magical traditions.

He begins to identify the elements of this quest firstly through Lewis, then respectively through Tolkien, Williams and Barfield. In Lewis' Narnia books Knight identifies key elements of magical lore and practice. He notes, for example, that Lewis' Narnia books began with a picture in his mind – one of a faun holding an umbrella under a lamppost. Knight notes that from this image Lewis filled out – without pre-planning – the rest of the story. Knight strongly rejects the idea that the Narnia books are merely Christian propaganda; he argues instead that they contain insight into magical practice. In the Qabalistic tradition, as Knight describes, there is similar use of imagery to enable an exploration into the inner world of consciousness. This inner world allows access to what is realer and deeper - the mental plane (or, put more crudely, the astral realities) accessed through myth-making processes. This journey to deeper realities is mythopoeia or magic in its fuller scope. It is akin to the deeper magic from before the depths of time that Lewis references in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. This is God's magic: a divine metaphysics that is Platonic in scope and is a far cry from the peddling of personal spells (pp. 75-80). Simon Magus in the Book of Acts represented the latter, as too did Uncle Andrew and Queen Jadis in *The Magician's Nephew*. Knight sees this secretive, gain-motivated approach as weaker than mythopoeia, and something of which to be wary. By contrast, a true understanding of spiritual reality leads one to realise that it has greater solidity and weight than the world of physical appearances (p. 88).

The rising of images led to the creation of Tolkien's legendarium as well, as Knight ably argues. Like Lewis', Tolkien's imagery has magic elements, which, Knight

suggests, he accessed through his deep use of imagination (p. 119). Deeper truths emerged because Tolkien's imagination was set to mythological themes. The Valar (the angelic beings who rule over the earth) help us to see how the gods and goddesses of various pantheons are an underlying reality perceived through differing cultures (p. 124). The functioning of secondary imagination becomes an act of sub-creation. As Aulë, one of the Valar, creates dwarves who become independent of himself, so too do Tolkien's works become independent of their creator (p. 126). By pushing himself into the depths of imagination Tolkien accesses the stories of the primordial past and the ethereal planes on which they exist. In some sense, then, these stories are very real. They access for us, as readers, depths of consciousness only achieved before in past ages. Tolkien himself suspected that his imagination was accessing an objective reality (p. 136). Tolkien writes: 'For when Faramir speaks of his private vision of the Great Wave, he speaks for me. That vision and dream has been ever with me—and has been inherited (as I only discovered recently) by one of my children, Michael' (*Letters*, No. 180).[2] So too, in the esoteric circles of Qabala, imagination can access the past, which is recorded upon the subtle ethers of the universe.

Imagination is connected to the power of language, and of the Inklings, it was Barfield who revealed the historical changes in human perception and consciousness that are represented by language (p. 251). For Knight, Barfield is the central author of the Inklings. His contribution is none other than the philosophic underpinnings of mythopoeic writing (pp. 295-97). Barfield is consciously aware of the deeper levels of meaning which his fellow Inklings have accessed through their imaginations. He demonstrates that there is room for both evidence and intuition – that what we call matter interacts with mind and would not exist without it. He takes their nascent awareness of the power of mythopoeia – of high magic – and places its depth into words: achieving breadth. Through Barfield in particular, Knight explores the very practical way in which the creative imagination is invoked within the reader by the author, and the magical 'real' world this invocation creates, showing that there is an underlying reality of consciousness to consider.

The arguments that Knight presents are challenging. They are provocateurs to the mind and to an easy acceptance of what we consider reality. *The Magical World of the Inklings* is not a book to be read quickly. It is one to savour and reference, to pick up and be challenged by, especially given its implications of what – startlingly – the Inklings may have been.

Joshua Roberts

[1] From Barfield's cover endorsement.

[2] Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).