

Why the Inklings Aren't Enough

TOWARD THE END OF his life, Karl Marx found himself in conversation with an earnest would-be acolyte who was burbling about his plan to found a Marxist club. The older man suddenly rounded on him, declaring: *Je ne suis pas une Marxiste!* (I am not a Marxist). In a few simple words Marx managed not only to reject the status of cult hero but also to insinuate that systematizing his thought would falsify it.

In a similar vein, it has often been noted that the two Oxford dons at the center of the famous literary group known as the Inklings—C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien—would be appalled by the virtual canonization that has been conferred on them by adoring fans.

What concerns me, however, is not so much the tendency of many Christians to treat these two writers as saints, as dubious as that may be. Rather, I find worrisome the fact that for many believers today, the Inklings seem to provide the sole literary diet. As we near the half-century mark since their deaths, this clinging to Lewis and Tolkien seems less a matter of homage and more an act of quiet desperation.

The problem is not the Inklings, but Inklingism.

Unfortunately, debates about the legacy of Lewis and Tolkien tend to get bogged down in wrangles between elitists and populists. The elitists argue that both writers opted for fantasy as a medium because they suffered from a form of arrested development: they created escapist realms that provided refuge from the emotional and psychological complexities of life. Populist defenders retort that the elitists are only concerned with the deviant and dysfunctional, failing to perceive the way Lewis and Tolkien celebrate virtue, goodness, and common sense.

One way to begin disentangling the half-truths underlying this debate is to place the work in context. Critic Alan Jacobs has pointed out a number of reasons for the popularity of the Inklings among American Christians:

that they were British, Oxford dons, upheld a middle-class code of common sense, were not professional theologians, and excelled as storytellers.

These are good points, but the issues run deeper. Lewis and Tolkien, along with Charles Williams and earlier British Christian writers such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, George MacDonald, and G. K. Chesterton, sought to baptize the Romantic movement. They shared with the Romantics an aversion to modern, technological society and stressed the healing powers of nature, organic form, and the dignity of the common man. With the Romantics they celebrated the Middle Ages as a time of unity and balance. Narnia and Middle Earth are essentially medieval cultures.

Many of these authors turned to the idyllic mode—in fantasy, allegory, and science fiction—to provide oases of meaning in a time of fragmentation. The Inklings championed “mythopoeic” literature, the crafting of alternate worlds where symbols and stories could heal the wounds of modern, alienated man.

At its best, this Christianized Romanticism achieved what it set out to do: to re-enchant the world. In an era of cynicism and disillusionment, the Inklings brought to life the mythic density of a sacramental vision, the sense of the sacred, even of holiness, amid the ordinariness of everyday life.

Of course, the typical attack on the Inklings takes them to task for running away from the harsh realities of mature life into the childish world of fantasy. Here the nastier comments about Lewis’s sexual life are brought in, along with the fate of Susan in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, who fails to enter heaven because she prefers “nylons and lipstick and invitations” to God.

In a chapter on realism in *An Experiment in Criticism*, Lewis calls this the argument against “infantilism,” and goes on to make the case for the virtues of childlike wonder, citing Tolkien as an authority. Ostensibly, Lewis is merely arguing that fantasy be given a place in the canon. Indeed, his book is a plea for tolerance and the development of a catholic taste in literature.

But here things get muddled. In this chapter and elsewhere Lewis is guilty of putting his finger on the scales: while granting that there is a distinguished tradition of realism—*Middlemarch* and *War and Peace* are his paradigms—he evinces no enthusiasm for it. He makes realism an entirely modern phenomenon, which is nearly impossible to maintain. While the realistic novel may be a recent development, realism itself is deeply woven into our culture, from the Greeks onward. It is no secret that he found little

of interest in modern literature, loathing even the poetry of T. S. Eliot, a fellow defender of the faith.

The seed of Lewis's defensiveness on this point tends to blossom into the full populist fury of his defenders. But just as it is wrong to condemn the Romantic imagination, it is also wrongheaded to erect it into a self-sufficient system, which causes its own set of confusions. For example, many lovers of the Inklings don't quite know what to make of Philip Pullman, whose trilogy *His Dark Materials* employs mythopoeia to create a Nietzschean "anti-Narnia," as one writer has put it.

One does not have to deny the glories of Narnia when deploring the fate of Susan, who leaves the scene the moment she becomes sexualized—in short, the moment when she leaves childhood for the ambiguities of adulthood. In a sense, she leaves the realm of fantasy and enters the world of realism. Religious readers ought to follow her there, where her tale is told by other writers. There may be no accounting for taste, but as every nutritionist will tell you, health is dependent on a balanced diet. Those who fail to heed that advice are truly guilty of infantilism.