

# INKLINGS OF BELIEF

Jeffrey Folks

*The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings—  
J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams*

By Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski  
(New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015)

In *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings—J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Owen Barfield, Charles Williams*, Philip and Carol Zaleski have written a superb history of the group of writers and thinkers that included, in addition to the luminaries named in the subtitle, such figures as Hugo Dyson, Robert Havard, Lord David Cecil, Nevill Coghill, Lewis's brother Warnie, and Tolkien's son Christopher. The Inklings, one learns, were accomplished in many forms of literary endeavor and, in a few cases, in nonliterary pursuits as well. Members of the group wrote fiction, poetry, essays, and academic studies, and several pursued careers in law, medicine, and the church.

What united them was a love of learning, a devotion to the Christian tradition, and a profound concern for the current state of Western civilization. As such, they became deeply involved in cultural disputes concerning the relationship of man to God, the nature of society, the role of education, and the proper modes of reading and criticism. Their inherent traditionalism put them at odds with the intellectual consensus of their

day and in particular with that prevailing at Oxford and Cambridge.

It is reassuring to know that, long before the rise of contemporary literary criticism dominated by radical approaches such as deconstruction and identity politics, all of it classifiable under the heading of "Theory," a group of Christian thinkers at Oxford fought valiantly, if not always successfully, against Theory's predecessor: the so-called scientific criticism of I.A. Richards and the dogmatic professionalism, with its criterion of "seriousness," of F.R. Leavis. The Inklings' rebuttal of Richards and Leavis was based on a clear-sighted view of literature as an endeavor that held inestimable worth in its own right. Artistic creation must not be understood as the handmaiden of "greater" ideological purposes, nor must it be seen as merely psychological or autobiographical expression.

Storytelling is an essential human activity that stems from man's attempts to know the shape and order of life and the relationship of human existence to a higher order of truth. It follows that the study of literature must allow for the greatest freedom of insight and interpretation, particularly as concerns the mind's longing for enrichment and order. The sine qua non of this approach is an unshakable respect for the wholeness of existence consequent upon the presence

---

**Jeffrey Folks** is the author of *Heartland of the Imagination: Conservative Values in American Literature from Poe to O'Connor to Haruf*, among many other books.

of divinity in the created world. Scientific and programmatic approaches would seem to require its practitioners to adhere to the opposite path: the demotion and ultimate abolition of the humanities so understood in the face of the presumed importance of ideological goals based on utilitarianism, social justice, or some other quantifiable scheme.

The Inklings shared the conviction that modern literature from the Victorians up to their present constituted a decisive break with the past, both in its hostility toward Christianity and in its rejection of meaning altogether. As Lewis pointed out in *De Descriptio Temporum*, his inaugural lecture as the first occupant of the chair in Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge, the rise of nihilistic movements such as surrealism and Dadaism, not to mention the increasing politicization of the arts and humanities that followed, testified to this break with the past. These developments were accompanied by the rise of a machine culture that constituted perhaps the greatest threat of all since it was, as the Inklings saw it, the means by which the forces of unbelief could control the world. As it is, that same struggle for the preservation of humanity informs the rebellious tradition of the faerie, running from Spenser and Shakespeare through the Romantics and late Victorians such as George MacDonald and William Morris. As Tolkien wrote in his lecture “On Fairy-Stories,” fairy tales are a crucial embodiment of the most essential human aspirations: those of recovery, escape, and consolation in the face of those forces that limit the human imagination to the here and now.

The Inklings sought recovery for a civilization that had lost the capacity for wonder. As in the United States, where progressives such as Herbert Croley, Waldo Frank, Randolph Bourne, Sinclair Lewis, and Edmund Wilson (along with a host of other writers,

journalists, academics, and politicians) dominated the discussion, the cultural landscape of Britain in the interwar period was overshadowed by the works of radicals such as H.G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, and George Bernard Shaw. What these progressives shared above all was the conviction that, given the malaise into which civilization had fallen after the Great War, the mass of ordinary human beings must be rescued by a political elite that would bring order and “planning” to human affairs. To bring about this utopia for “New Republicans,” as Wells had called the enlightened citizens of his extraterrestrial paradise in *A Modern Utopia*, the attachment of ordinary citizens to traditional belief systems and institutions must be severed and world governance with progressive norms of thought and behavior must be imposed.

Nothing could be more abhorrent to the Inklings than such communal and egalitarian schemes of social regulation. As the Zaleskis note, though Lewis had devoured Wells’s science fiction as a youth, he “saw his adult science fantasies as an ‘exorcism’ rather than a maturing of this passion” (45). Likewise, in his influential book *Saving the Appearances* (1957), Barfield repudiated the evolutionary premise upon which the progressive argument rested. In response to Wells’s *Outline of History*, which sketched the rise of life along Darwinian lines, Barfield argued that such a process of evolution “was not merely never seen. It never occurred” (438). The secular materialism of progressive thought was also completely foreign to the religious idealism of Charles Williams and, of course, to that of Tolkien.

Tolkien believed that escape, one of the central motifs in his fiction, was, as the Zaleskis put it, “not a sign of weakness, but of strength and sanity” (245). Further, Tolkien understood that human beings

sought consolation in a world of “wonder and enchantment” (245)—a world in which quite ordinary creatures found themselves cast as defenders of goodness and order. That, of course, was Lewis’s intent as well, both in his own persona as an ordinary man of good will elucidating the reasonableness of Christian faith and in his fictional creation of a world under assault defended by common folk.

It was not just the forces of secularization and materialism that posed a threat; it was also the complacency and sense of inertia among Christians themselves. The failings of those antagonists who played such an important role in modern intellectual life could be readily identified and refuted, but the temporizing of shallow believers posed a more corrosive menace. Lewis acknowledged as much when he described his reasons for writing the Narnia books. His intent, as the Zaleskis characterize it, was “to recover an instinct for sacred things from the moralistic sentimentality by which it had been deadened” (390). Or, in Lewis’s words, to “make [the particulars of the Christian faith] for the first time appear in their real potency” (quoted in *The Fellowship*, 390). In the same way, Tolkien sought from the beginning to compose a compelling Christian mythology for Britain—a fairy tale that would help to restore belief in the transcendent order of things. By casting the traditional struggle of good versus evil in the unfamiliar guise of hobbits and orcs, he also aimed to restore potency to belief that had become stale.

The fierce response of liberal critics to the works of the Inklings foreshadowed the culture wars to come toward the end of the century. It is surprising that even George Orwell, who shared many of the Inklings’ concerns, should have been merciless in his criticism of both Lewis and Tolkien. In a review of Lewis’s *Beyond Personality*, quoted

by the Zaleskis, Orwell wrote that the book was an example of “the silly-clever religious book” (308). Once their liberal orthodoxy had been brought into question by serious and influential minds, the response of progressive critics was in many cases dismissive and even abusive. Unable to counter the claims of the Inklings with logic or persuasion, they resorted to intimidation and abuse.

In fact, the labors of the Inklings posed a serious challenge to the liberal consensus of the times. Lewis argued that postmedieval culture, culminating in the radicalism of the early twentieth century, was an anomaly within the larger Christian civilization of the West and, indeed, within human civilization generally, within which faith, order, and moral law are normative. What liberals such as I. A. Richards, William Empson, and Edmund Wilson had heralded as a new road to utopia was, in fact, a disastrous turn into a dark and murderous wood. In its harshness of form, incomprehensibility, rejection of tradition, hostility toward conventional institutions, and reductive materialism, modernist literature was unlike anything that had come before.

The crux of the issue was the modernist elevation of self as the sole arbiter of taste, a development not unrelated to the rise of totalitarianism. As the Zaleskis point out, Lewis often repeated George MacDonald’s adage, “the one principle of hell is ‘I am my own’” (149). Gradually, between stumbling across MacDonald’s fiction in 1916 and converting to Christianity in 1931, Lewis came to see the dire implications of modern theories of self-empowerment. Self-sufficiency of the modern sort is grounded in pride in the expansive powers made possible by science and reason untethered from the past, and this crippling pride is the source of alienation of man from nature, from other men, and, most important, from God. As Lewis put it

in *Mere Christianity*, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.”

As scholars, Lewis and Tolkien defended an open-minded approach toward learning that stressed a holistic and humane attitude as opposed to the “scientific” and activist approaches that arose with the work of Richards and Leavis. Despite the popular success of the Inklings’ fiction (and in Lewis’s case, nonfiction) among a general readership, their scholarly work was far from inconsiderable, and it was especially important for the example it set as a defense of a humane approach to learning based on erudition and general intelligence rather than abstract theory. Their scholarship was, of course, aligned with their Christian faith.

In the case of Lewis, as the Zaleskis stress, his “entire scholarly project...was nothing less than to give an account, at once historical and spiritual, of Europe’s Christian literary imagination” (184). In *The Allegory of Love*, with its emphasis on Spenser and other premodern figures, Lewis sought to look “through medieval eyes” in order “to see a meaningful, humanly habitable, ordered universe” (184). As soon as one detached oneself from the parochial perspective of one’s own historical moment, one entered a universe of thought that in the West was overwhelmingly Christian. To dismiss this inheritance or to proclaim oneself “neutral,” as many of his contemporaries did, seemed to Lewis indefensible. It was another act of the self-sufficient ego believing it could remake the world as it pleased in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

In his scholarship Tolkien likewise focused on the premodern Christian litera-

ture of England, in particular that written in Anglo-Saxon and Middle English. Long before Lewis grasped it, Tolkien understood that with the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, myth had “entered history” (188)—not least of all, the history of Britain. This reality was the focus of the Inklings’ discussion on the morning of Addison’s Walk, September 20, 1931, a discussion that led to Lewis’s conversion one week later.

*The Fellowship* is a remarkable literary biography in that it conveys the intense drama and significance of intellectual pursuits that in less capable hands might otherwise seem less compelling. The book is filled with such a range of information and analysis and such a depth of insight that it is truly a delight to read. The authors’ knowledge of the four principal authors and of secondary authors, context, cultural traditions, and influences is quite impressive. Equally so are the Zaleskis’ incisive judgments of the importance of particular texts as contributions to an enduring literary tradition of Christian fantasy.

Certainly, the book’s conclusion that the significance of the Inklings’ work “amount[s] to a revitalization of Christian intellectual and imaginative life” (510) is incontrovertible. The authors’ focus on the two major figures, with suitable attention paid to Williams and Barfield and lesser members of the circle, makes possible a coherent narrative that culminates in an appreciation of the enormous challenges the Inklings faced and of the full measure of their achievement. I suspect *The Fellowship* will remain the definitive account of the Lewis/Tolkien circle for years to come. It deserves to be read by a very wide audience indeed. *The Fellowship* is, in sum, an absorbing account that is altogether worthy of its extraordinary subject. †