

# The Music of Creation in Tolkien and Lewis

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We will probably never know where Dante drew the line in his *Divine Comedy* between his own belief and fiction (in the modern sense of the word). It is quite possible that, for him, such a distinction would not have made any sense. In any case, we can be sure he was, at the same time, totally serious and totally free in his writing. The result of this explosive combination has a strange place in the Christian heritage. Dante's system was never "canonized" by the Catholic Church, even partially, as *theologumenon*, like the similar teaching about the aerial toll houses in the Orthodox Church. But at the same time, the imagery of the *Divine Comedy* has become inseparable from the Christian imagination and has inspired countless theologians throughout the centuries. And maybe the reason why this influence is often so profound and fruitful is exactly because Dante is not part of the canon. He is not a church father, so we can allow ourselves to see him as our equal—as our "church brother."

In the twentieth century, a similar role was played by several British fantasy authors, the so-called "Inklings," especially J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Their writing is rooted in their traditional (and sometimes even conservative) Christian faith, but is not bound by any of the conventions of theological language. The Inklings themselves defined this approach as *mythopoeic*. Lewis speaks about Christ directly in his novels, both

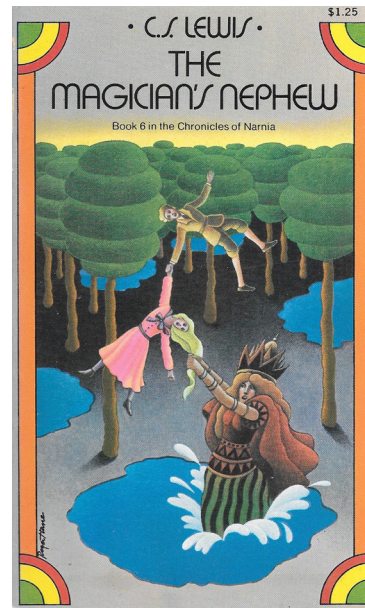
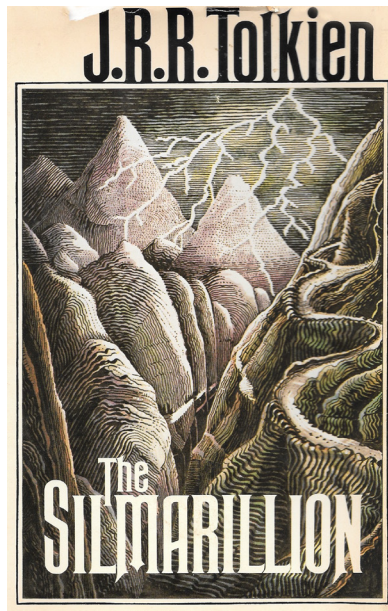


through allegory in his *Chronicles of Narnia* (in the figure of Aslan) and explicitly in his *Space Trilogy*. Tolkien's *legendarium* is an internally coherent mythical world without overt references to the religious tradition, but based on biblical themes such as the triple service of Christ seen in Frodo (priest), Gandalf (prophet), and Aragorn (king) in *The Lord of the Rings*. With the passing of the years, these texts are read more and more often not only as

The Nine Choirs of Angels surround Jesus, God the Father, and Mary. Miniature in Matfré Ermengau of Béziers, *Breviary d'Am- or*, late 14th century. British Library Yates Thompson MS 31.

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1999). Dust jacket of 1977 edition.

C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). Cover design for 1977 edition by Roger Hane.



literature written by Christian believers but as works of original artistic theology.<sup>1</sup> One of the important features of this mythopoeic theology is its ecumenical and interconfessional nature, with Tolkien being Catholic and Lewis Anglican. Its reception among Orthodox Christians already has quite a long history, thanks to Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) in England and the “Chesterton Club” in Russia, founded in the 1970s by Natalia Trauberg and Sergei Averintsev.

A specifically Eastern Orthodox confessional interpretation of the Inklings would be inadequate. These authors have no connection to Orthodox identity in its contemporary understanding. But it is exactly because of this independence that their texts can offer a new point of view on the experience of the Orthodox Church. Seeing some common Orthodox ideas and often-repeated tropes in light of Tolkien and Lewis can give a fresh perspective. This essay focuses on the practice of singing. In the Eastern tradition, singing is an integral part of liturgical life. In the imaginary worlds of the Inklings, it is the source of reality itself.

Both Tolkien and Lewis write that their fictional worlds are made by a Creator.

Tolkien even calls him The One, Eru. In both cases, creation is a musical act. It seems probable that the authors developed this idea in conversation with one another. Still, the way it is presented in the texts is very different. Lewis describes the creation of Narnia in *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), the penultimate Narnia novel he wrote. Tolkien's creation myth is “Ainulindalë: The Music of the Ainur,” and serves as the introduction to his posthumously published *Silmarillion* (1977). Although Tolkien's account was published much later than Lewis's, he conceived it as early as 1919, so it will be examined first.

In “Ainulindalë,” the Creator Eru Ilúvatar makes the Ainur, “the offspring of his thoughts,” similar to angels or “gods” as Tolkien calls them elsewhere. Eru teaches them how to sing and they begin practicing alone and in groups. As they attune to each other and grow in harmony, the Creator gathers them together and reveals his plan for the Great Music, inviting everyone to participate in developing the basic theme. The singing begins, completely harmonious at first. But then Melkor, the most powerful of the Ainur, tries to sing louder and differently

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan S. McIntosh, *The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017).

than the others, not in accordance with the theme of Ilúvatar. This act of free will does not spoil the music but causes it to change: Ilúvatar introduces the second and the third themes. He tells the Ainur: "No theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite."<sup>2</sup> He then shows the Ainur the result of their music: the World amid the Void. To their surprise, the Ainur discover that by singing their melodies they have created a habitation for the children of Ilúvatar, elves and men, who were not present in the original theme. Finally, the Creator says "Eä! Let these things Be!" and gives life to the model which the choir of the Ainur has shaped.<sup>3</sup> Some of the Ainur descend into the World and start preparing it for the living creatures' arrival. Melkor goes there too, to be the enemy of the elves and men whose existence he unintentionally caused. History with its conflicts begins.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, a handful of children and adults accidentally arrive in a series of parallel worlds after leaving their home in England circa 1900. When they leave the dying world of an evil witch, they find themselves in a dark place where nothing can be seen or heard. Suddenly there begins some singing which seems "to come from all directions at once." It has no words and no clear tune, but for the protagonist it is "so beautiful he could hardly bear it." The witch is afraid of the voice. Then it is joined by a choir of voices "in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale," and stars appear in the darkness.<sup>4</sup> Light glimmers on the horizon, the young sun rises, and everyone sees that a lion is shaping the land with this song. As a conflict develops between the antagonists, who want to flee, and the others, who want to stay, the lion slowly approaches them, creating a landscape full of trees and animals on the way.

When everything is done, he pronounces: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."<sup>5</sup> So appears one more world in a multiverse with a single creator.

The worlds of Tolkien and Lewis begin with music and it is with music that they end (or begin anew). "Ainulindalë" tells that at the end of history, the Second Music of the Ainur will be performed. This time, elves and men will join it, and it will be greater than the first. In Lewis's *The Last Battle* (1956), the great giant Time blows his horn as Narnia is darkened once again, recalling the seven trumpeting angels in the Book of Revelation and Heimdall in the Nordic myth of Ragnarök. The characters observe this apocalyptic scene with Aslan only to discover that a new Narnia awaits them, of which the first was only a prefiguration.

These two creation myths have several differences, the most important of which is the style. Tolkien's text is an example of high biblical stylization, whereas Lewis writes from the perspective of children observing the situation, and balances his narrative with humorous details. The method of musical creation is different, too. For Tolkien, it is choral singing, and the conflict arises when one spirit breaks the harmony. For Lewis, it is the creator's solo, with the stars joining in the chorus for a brief moment, but only to accompany the main singer. Apart from these differences, both authors essentially describe the same process. The world is shaped by the song. The singing itself is wordless, or at least words are not the most important part of it. But the music is sealed and accomplished by the creator's word: "Eä," "Narnia, awake." Of course, this final detail is taken directly from the first chapter of Genesis (which otherwise differs a lot from the myths proposed by Tolkien and Lewis) and from the beginning of the Gospel of

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<sup>2</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (1977; London: HarperCollins, 1999), 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 87–88.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.



John: the world is made by God's word, which is God himself.

Three common theological terms come to mind upon examining these mythopoeic descriptions. The first is *Spirit* or breath, *ruach*. What else is singing but controlled breathing? We read in Genesis, "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (2:7). In the descriptions given by the Inklings, the creator figures and their servants literally exhale the world, bestowing the overabundant life that they have within them. The second term is *perichoresis*, which is often used to describe the relationship among the persons of the Trinity but can also be an icon for every other relationship. The whole world is seen as a great choir or dance, two possible translations for this Greek word. The third term, close to the previous one, is *synergy*, or cooperation with God's work of creation. This idea is particularly developed by Tolkien in the drama of Melkor's refusal of cooperation and its atonement by the elves and men in the Second Music which is to come.

While there is nothing specifically Eastern Orthodox in these theological concepts, which are common to all Christians, we may see some additional aspects of this mythology of musical creation if we look at Orthodox practice, especially in the liturgy. While the Western rites developed special uses for musical instruments and silence, the Byzantine liturgy is accompanied by a choir, and at least in theory it is the choir of the whole assembly of the faithful. The daily liturgical cycle begins with something

quite similar to the images of Tolkien and Lewis: the priest censes the temple, symbolizing the creation of the world, as the choir sings Psalm 104. At the end of it, in a burst of emotion, the psalmist directly associates singing with life itself: "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being." (Ps 104:33). The Cherubic Hymn is another example of singing together with the angels as an essential part of Byzantine communal prayer.

These reflections may bring us to some final practical conclusions. Our gathering together in the church and our singing is not only an image, but the very process of creating a world, the new world in which men, women, and all creation serve God in unity. If it is not only a decorative act or a symbolic gesture but the true music of creation, then we should be serious about it. For example, we should try to understand what we are singing—something that does not always happen in many Orthodox parishes, where singers perform hymns in traditional languages without caring much about the texts. But the most important conclusion is that we never create this new world alone, but together as a choir. In song, in our singing-breathing, we unite corporately with those standing next to us, and we should feel their joys and their pain as members of the same body. Never did this become more clear than in 2020, when so many parish choirs became separated by screens, masks, and distances. This is our chance to care for each other and to value the simple things a little more in the years to come. That is, after all, what Tolkien and Lewis were always about. ✱



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