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The Inklings, the Victorians and the Moderns: Reconciling Tradition in the Modern Age (2020), by Christopher Butynskyi

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The Inklings, the Victorians and the Moderns: Reconciling Tradition in the Modern Age by Christopher Butynskiy. Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2020. viii, 197 pp. \$90.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781683932277. Also available in ebook format.

The title fits the content. Butynskiy's study is indeed about the Inklings, about writers of (mostly) the Victorian era, about the Moderns and the Modern Age, and about Tradition. However, it is not always about each of these concepts, epochs, and groups in equal measure. The Victorians are there implicitly, yet the focus is rather on the pre-Moderns than on the Victorian era per se. What also becomes clear in the process of reading Butynskiy's monograph is his strong preference for abstract concepts and groups rather than concrete ideas and individuals. In the course of his study he discusses the ideas of H.G. Wells (1866-1946), J.B.S. Haldane (1892-1964), James Watson (1928-), C.H. Waddington (1905-1975), Paul Elmer More (1864-1937), John Henry Newman (1801-1890), Russell Kirk (1918-1994), Irving Babbitt (1865-1933), and Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953), to name only the most prominent representatives that contribute to the discourse. Consequently, the book reads more like a 'history of ideas' on a meta-level than a discussion of literary texts. And indeed, you can find only very few close readings of or references to the literary-fictional publications of the Inklings. They are dealt with primarily as thinkers and not as writers; though, of course, the two categories cannot and should not be kept strictly apart.

The Tolkien scholar, and as such I have read the book, finds him/herself introduced to a plethora of thinkers, philosophers, academics, and literati, who have all been participating in the great debate between the Moderns, i.e. proponents of scientism, and Traditionalists advocating the inclusion of metaphysical approaches. Readers of Tolkien may feel reminded of the antagonism between Saruman and Gandalf, only that Butynskiy would possibly propose a compromise between the two views. His main plea is in favour of an enlightened traditionalism that enters into dialogue with the proponents of the hard-facts-only faction. This is, according to Butynskiy, best achieved by means of a traditional liberal arts education based on the study of the *Great Books*, which "represent an interdisciplinary conversation across the ages that is committed to the discovery of truth, goodness, beauty, and what it means to be human" (41). Such an approach is able to bring together the discoveries of modern science and the wisdom and lore of the pre-technological era. Consequently, Butynskiy argues that the main achievement of the Inklings and some of their predecessors, such as G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), and contemporaries, such as Christopher Dawson (1889-1970), lies in preserving and updating traditional wisdom by "creat[ing] a unique bridge between the tradition in the past and the realities of their contemporary modern world" (24). The Inklings in particular contributed to this by allowing "their imagination to work in tandem with their reason, thus giving them a perspective in which to evaluate and resist certain promises of the modern

scientific age. They valued the place of tradition and felt that the Modern Age had a number of redemptive qualities, but was too concerned with materialism and utility” (128).

As pointed out at the beginning, the discussion of the Inklings and their works remains on a rather abstract level and Butynskyi’s study often feels like a guidebook telling you ‘What to read if you want to know more about ...’. True, in some of the later chapters he discusses individual writers/scholars (Belloc, Haldane, Watson, Waddington etc.). This is helpful for understanding the larger controversy, but it still left me wishing for more concrete text-based analyses. What I would have liked Butynskyi to do is to link these more abstract and general insights to the concrete literary texts of the Inklings. This can and has been done, as Tolkien scholars like Patrick Curry and Verlyn Flieger have shown. Many of their publications discuss Tolkien’s work within the discourse of Modernity and make their points by a close reading of the primary texts. Yet while Butynskyi references Patrick Curry’s monograph *Defending Middle-earth*, he does not mention any of Flieger’s publications—nor those by Tom Shippey or John Garth. The fact that we have a book that is (at least partially) about Tolkien yet that mentions neither Flieger, nor Shippey, nor Garth, tells you a lot about the author. Butynskyi is obviously a historian first, and a Tolkien scholar second. Indeed, he is very knowledgeable about the thinkers of the era relevant for Tolkien, but interested readers will still have their work cut out for them if they want to profit from Butynskyi’s learning.

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