



David Rozema

The American Inkling: Clyde S. Kilby and the Well of Wonder

A *Well of Wonder* is, indeed, a source of wonder; the sacred and satisfying kind of wonder. It is a collection of wonder-inducing essays by Clyde S. Kilby (1902–1986), one of the earliest American academics to study and introduce to students the works of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and others who made up the remarkable group known as the Oxford Inklings. It is no stretch to say that Kilby, a long time Professor of English at Wheaton College, Illinois, did more than any other man to incorporate the ideas and imaginative visions of Lewis, Tolkien, Owen Barfield, George MacDonald, Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, and Charles Williams into the evangelical Christian landscape, thereby building solid bridges between many diverse denominations and sects of Christianity in America. These bridges, thanks to Kilby and many who have followed his example, are founded on the common ideas, commitments, and creative ideals that informed and shaped the friendships that these authors had with each other, so that today, the fellowship is widespread, full of vitality, and blessedly ecumenical. It is thanks to men and women like Clyde Kilby that the unifying and inspiring ideas of Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, and the others have become so beloved and effective in the lives of so many students and readers. For Clyde Kilby was, above all, a humble man, who lived in wonder of those ideas and those authors and, most especially, in awe of the One from whom both the ideas and the authors ultimately came. This humility shines through in all of these essays. It is not self-deprecation, which is how so many mistakenly think of humility, but, rather, a genuine love of the



truth and wisdom he finds in the works and the lives of these authors. Although he was, in age, a contemporary of Lewis and Tolkien, he clearly and unenviably recognized their God-given genius. The essays in this collection range over more than thirty years, yet the joy, the wonder, and the insights Kilby gleans from these authors (especially Lewis and Tolkien) flags not one whit. I have no doubt, after reading these essays, that Kilby's own thought and writing was improved by merely reading these works regularly. This has been my own experience as well. As Kilby himself points out in many of his essays, the combination of sound reason and right imagination is what makes for the most wisdom, as is evident in the undeniable beauty and goodness of such works as *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Chronicles of Narnia*; the *Silmarillion* and *Till We Have Faces*. Along with humility, these virtues are

also those that make for an excellent teacher. So we can be thankful that they are, in a sense, contagious: Kilby was an excellent teacher, by all accounts, because these virtues were passed on to him from these authors themselves. *A Well of Wonder* is also evidence of this blessed contagion. The book was compiled and edited by several students of his: Loren Wilkinson and Keith Call, who have also edited a companion volume of Kilby's works (*The Arts and the Imagination: Essays on Art, Literature, and Aesthetics*, also published by Paraclete Press). The title they have taken from another of Kilby's former students, Luci Shaw, who, in her poem in tribute to Dr. Kilby, describes his mind as "a well of wonder".

The book is comprised of various kinds of essays (most are expository, but a few are bibliographic or biographic), along with a handful of interviews of Dr. Kilby. These pieces are categorized into three sections of the book: the first section on Lewis, the second section on Tolkien, and the third section containing material on some of the



other Inklings (Williams, Sayers, and Barfield), along with a brief account of the founding and continuing growth of the Marion E. Wade Center, a major research depository (at Wheaton College) for manuscripts and letters by Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, Barfield, Sayers, Chesterton, and MacDonald, which Kilby founded. The last section also contains the transcripts of several interviews with Dr. Kilby.

As he recounts in one of the first essays in the book, Kilby met C. S. Lewis in person only once, and very briefly. But the meeting was both cordial and profound, and led to a long correspondence between the two. It is clear from the essays that follow, that Kilby, living and teaching in the somewhat puritan atmosphere of 1950s and 1960s evangelicalism, undertook the calling to make Lewis's ideas and works known to his colleagues and his students. "A truly fresh air blows through Lewis's books", he writes. "Like the greatest writers, he knew how to take simple things and make them illustrate profound things." One of those profound things was Lewis's understanding of myths and their origins. Rather than dismissing pagan myths as lies or false explanations, Lewis saw them as "gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility". As Kilby expounds, "Mythology is replete with the dying god, with death and rebirth, and the idea that one must undergo death if he would truly live. The resemblance between such myths and Christian truth has the same relation as the sun and its reflection in a pond. It is not the same thing, but neither is it a wholly different thing." This understanding of myth, argues Kilby (following Lewis) affects how we are to read and benefit from Scripture, as it, too, is replete with story and poetic metaphor. "Even the teaching of Christ", says Kilby, "does not come to us in that manner [i.e., rigorously systematic statements] and is not a thing for the intellect alone but for the whole person. Understanding the true meaning of Christ is not learning a 'subject' but rather 'steeping ourselves in a Personality.'" While reason is an essential feature of human beings

and "never does Lewis make fun of [it] as an effective instrument" for discovering truth, another equally essential part of the whole person is the imagination. And the imagination, too, is an "instrument" of truth, for some truths transcend mere reason or observation, truths such as are expressed in ascribing moral and aesthetic value to things; truths that are eternal and inevitable; truths about the purposes and personality of the Divine Person. As Kilby writes, "Lewis believed that ultimate meanings tend to fall into metaphor, allegory, and myth, types which a Christian writer should feel he is on home ground." Expounding on this crucial complementary

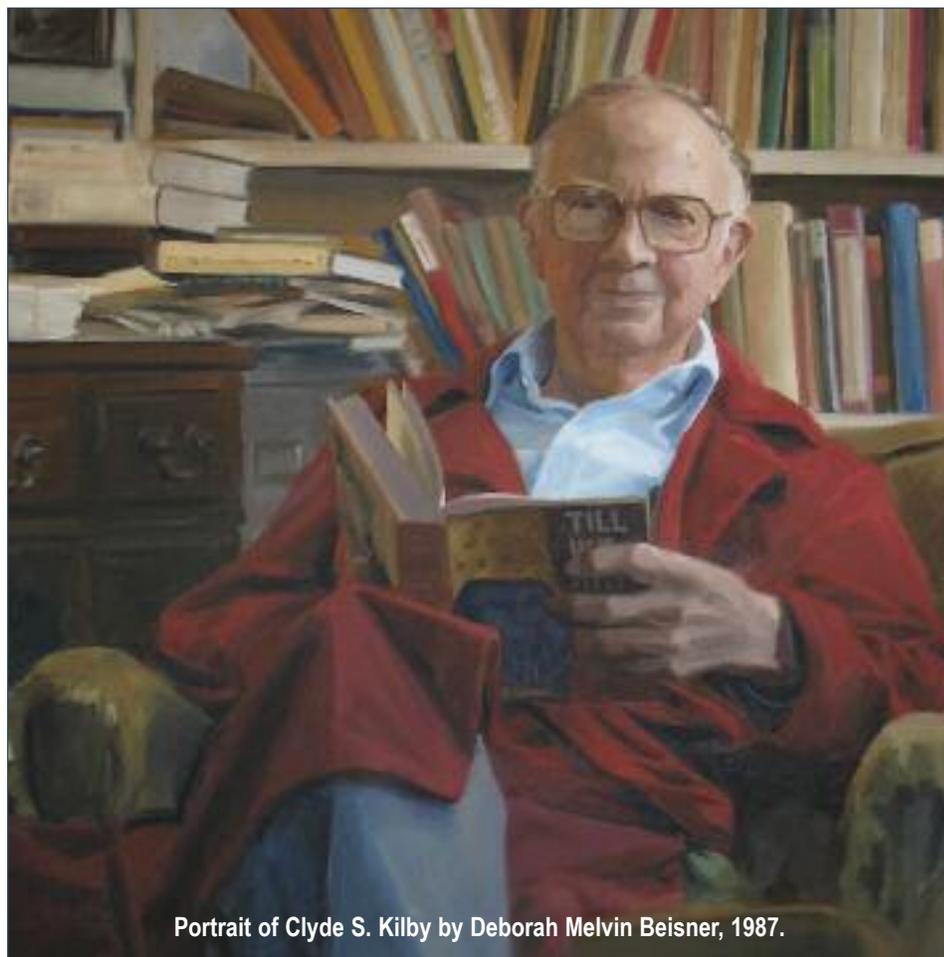


relation between reason and imagination and expanding on its glorious implications could be seen as the underlying theme of most of the essays in this section of Kilby's book, with the central and most in-depth essay being the one entitled "On Imagination and Reason". In this essay we find some of Kilby's best writing. "Lewis believed that reason can never properly exist on its own", writes Kilby, "The plant called reason must have its roots in a deeper soil and its leaves spread out to a more ambient air." The "deeper soil" is the reality of "a changeless standard" of goodness and beauty from which reason can germinate and grow. The "more ambient air" that

reason spreads into is that of imaginative creativity, our God-given organ of expressing praise and joy. As Kilby points out in another essay, Lewis understood that the nature of God's love for persons is seen in "his wish to make every man more individual, more himself in the right sense . . . God loves distinctiveness". But rather than this leading to disunity, "God aims at the paradox of infinite differences among all creatures, a world of selves, like that of a loving family." In an important essay on Lewis's views of music, worship, and spiritual disciplines, Kilby clarifies the distinction Lewis makes between personal taste in these areas and the more important judgment as to the spiritual value of them. Insofar as our art, our worship and praise, and our spiritual discipline is a "form of obedient love and ecstatic adoration", it cannot fail to bring us "real joy". The section on Lewis concludes with an excellent essay discussing the allegorical and symbolic interpretations of *Till We Have Faces*, Lewis's last and most unique novel, because it is a "Christian" re-telling of the ancient Greek myth of Cupid and Psyche.

To anyone familiar with the secondary literature on the works of Tolkien from the last twenty years, to be told that *The Lord of the Rings* is "essentially a Christian narrative" would be commonplace. But in the 60s and 70s this claim was not only surprising, it was laughed out of the popular court (at least in America it was). *The Lord of the Rings* had become part of the anti-war, anti-establishment hippie culture (many of whom mistakenly interpreted the Ring as an allegory for the Bomb), and for that reason was also rejected by the more conservative and traditional elements within the church. Few people knew the truth about Tolkien himself, who was a devout Catholic and a staunch defender (and lover) of the classical liberal tradition. Fewer still understood how these commitments were the underpinnings of the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, making it, in Tolkien's own words, "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work". Furthermore, since the story has almost no explicit religious rituals

in it, and because Tolkien wished to avoid allegory as such, it is not surprising that the casual reader (or film maker) would fail to see the Christian elements in *The Lord of the Rings*. Kilby, however, was no casual reader, but, on the contrary, a careful one. So the first essay in this section of the book—“Mythic and Christian Elements in The Lord of the Rings”—is undoubtedly one of the first of its kind in America. In it, Kilby argues for both its mythic qualities and its Christian sympathies. Using Micea Eliade’s description of myth as the “nostalgia for a periodic return to . . . the beginning of things, to the Great Time, [when] objects or acts acquire a value . . . because they participate, after one fashion or another, in a reality that transcends them,” Kilby shows that *The Lord of the Rings* evokes just such a longing in us—a longing for sanctity and wholeness. The mythic quality of the story is obvious. What is less obvious, however, is that this particular myth parallels the story told in Christianity about mankind’s creation, fall, and redemption. Repeatedly, throughout both *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Silmarillion* (which, of course, had not been published yet), Kilby shows us the recurrence of the Biblical story: the goodness of the created world; the pride of creatures made in the image of the Creator, leading to their fall and exile from home; the intervention of grace and the redemptive power of charity, of hope, and of faith. These parallels, though not (strictly speaking) allegorized, are exemplified throughout Tolkien’s corpus. Kilby adeptly offers insight into why Tolkien was adamant in his disclaimer that *The Lord of the Rings* was not allegory: “I think he was afraid that the allegorical dragon might gobble up the art and the myth.” This remark arises out of Kilby’s understanding of Tolkien’s masterful essay, “On Fairy Stories”, in which he argues that the ultimate value of myth lies in its power to evoke the longing for wholeness, for a cosmos in which all created and creating beings are part of the Great Music; each one a wonder, a mystery on its own, but all contributing to the Glory of the Whole. In the essay that is clearly the richest pearl between the covers of this collection, “The



Portrait of Clyde S. Kilby by Deborah Melvin Beisner, 1987.

Lost Myth and Literary Imagination”, Kilby starts out wondering why, “in our so-called realistic world there are hundreds of thousands of high school, college, and university students (not to mention doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, etc.) who are reading a story about elves and dwarves, orcs and balrogs, seeing stones and magical rings, and . . . Shire-loving hobbits who . . . accept a quest . . . in the highest tradition of heroism and in an atmosphere patently free of the hard ‘realism’ that is said to be the archetype of our time”. The explanation, argues Kilby, is the desire we all have “to recover the Lost Myth. This Lost Myth, I think, is the myth of man’s wholeness”. The longing for such wholeness is as acute as ever in our time, despite the advances in science and technology: “The sense of a broken and adrift civilization is, I think, the most apparent thing on our present horizon.” “Is ours not a Brave New World? But then one must ask . . . why people are not filled with deep satisfaction, quiet ecstasy, and great expectations? Why along with [our] sense of

power do we have an almost overcoming sense of despair?” Following Tolkien’s lead, Kilby argues that it is literary myth—“Fairy Stories”—that can most effectively reveal to us the nature of our despair, our longing; and, if it is a Fairy Story of the highest order, transpose in us the overwhelming joy found in the victory over this despair. This is what Tolkien referred to as *eucaastrophe*, and he thought it a hallmark of the highest form of Fairy Story. The practical effect of such stories is, as Kilby reminds us, *evangelium*; bearing witness to *eucaastrophe*. *The Lord of the Rings* is, of course, just such a story. Relating this to his idea of the Lost Myth, of wholeness, Kilby argues that the best myths will “summon the whole man to thought within a hierarchical universe”; “recognize mystery in nature”, as well as the “co-inherence of all things”; and complementary wholeness of imagination and reason within the mind of man.

Kilby became acquainted with Tolkien’s work and with Tolkien himself much later than he did with Lewis. Somewhat surpris-

ingly, however, he had a much more intimate personal relationship with Tolkien. The story of the friendship he formed with Tolkien is the subject of the third essay in this section of the book, and it reveals as much about Tolkien's character and personality as I have found in any of the biographies I have read on Tolkien. The occasion of their friendship was Kilby's offer—and Tolkien's acceptance of it—to spend the summer of 1966 aiding Tolkien in the effort to edit and critique the pieces Tolkien had written (some parts from as early as 1918) of the history of the First age of Middle Earth, for example, the *Silmarillion*.

The anecdotes and insights in this semi-biographical essay are too many to cite here, but I will mention two. The first is Kilby's impression of Tolkien from the first day of their summer together: "The most obvious thing about him was . . . his easy and stately stance and especially his well-shaped head and ever interesting face. His conversation bore about it a steady parturientcy, like the sort of grass that sends out runners to root in every direction. One often felt that his words could not pour out fast enough—there was a sense of the galloping on of all his ideas at once, along with kaleidoscopic facial changes." This description implies some of the reasons why, as Kilby relates, there was not much outward evidence after the summer was over that he had helped Tolkien very much: the *Silmarillion* was still quite fragmented, partly because Tolkien was eager to have a good listener who could follow him down the many tracks his ideas and images led him. The long talks were not due to a lack of familiarity with Tolkien's work, either. Kilby was well-prepared for the summer work. No doubt it was also too great a task to be completed in one summer. And, in fact, we know that it was not until after Tolkien's death that the *Silmarillion* was finally completed and published, due to

the tireless (and still ongoing) work of Tolkien's son, Christopher. Despite Kilby's doubts at the end of the essay that he had helped Tolkien at all, he undoubtedly was helpful by way of friendship and encouragement: "My own policy in the reading of

abstract and allegorical than those of Tolkien or Lewis. There is one very short essay on Dorothy Sayers, and another focusing on the authors whose works are collected by the Wade Center. Kilby gives a very brief overview of these authors in this essay,

as he does also in one of the two interviews found in this section. The remaining material includes an account of the founding of the Wade Center and its continuing work, and the two parts of an interview Kilby gave to the Tolkien journal, *Arkenstone*. In these interviews, he discusses the same ideas that he covers in earlier sections of the book. We do, however, see a bit more of his personality and his passion

for these authors and their works. An explanatory introduction is provided for each essay, and the book begins and ends with two brief notes from Loren Wilkinson, one of the editors of this collection. All are well-written, moving tributes to Dr. Kilby.

Clyde S. Kilby was not only a passionate, tireless advocate on behalf of Lewis, Tolkien, Williams, Barfield, Sayers, MacDonald, and Chesterton, he was also an insightful, joyful, and (most of all) humble scholar, teacher, and friend. If that be not enough to recommend this book, then it's time to get back on that bus to Grey Town.

A Well of Wonder

By Clyde S. Kilby

Edited by Loren Wilkinson and Keith Call
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David Rozema is the Inklings Professor of Philosophy and Literature at the University of Nebraska Kearney. He has published widely on the works of Plato, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Aristotle, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and Wendell Berry.

Jef Murray, *Into the Wardrobe*.



other people's manuscripts...is to give negative criticism, the sort that nets the most value toward a revision. But I quickly discovered that this sort of criticism was not what Tolkien wanted or needed. Convinced that he could not write a genuinely poor story, I was able conscientiously to be generous with my praise. And this I was." This section of the book closes with a moving tribute to Tolkien on the occasion of his death.

The third section of *A Well of Wonder* is not so focused on either a single author nor on a set of thematic ideas as the first two sections. There are two essays on Charles Williams: the first an introduction to some of the ideas in Williams's books, but by no means an in-depth study, and the second more biographical, recounting how he befriended both Lewis and Tolkien. One insight Kilby offers by way of explaining the differences between the fiction of Tolkien and Lewis, on the one hand, and Williams on the other, is his observation that Williams was a man of "the city", while Lewis and Tolkien were "country" men—lovers of nature (trees, landscapes, places, etc.). This may also be the root of another difference: Williams' novels are far more