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### Review: Colin Manlove, *Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present* (UND Press, 1992)

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# ARC

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*Christian Fantasy: From 1200 to the Present.* By Colin Manlove. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992. ISBN 0-268-00790-X. Pp. x+356.

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This ambitious volume, written with undisguised zeal, is both a theological and a literary analysis of the high points in the long convergence of Christian devotion and the fantastic imagination in Europe and America. Starting with the late medieval *Queste del Saint Graal*, Colin Manlove tackles Dante, Spenser, Marlowe, Milton, Bunyan, Blake, George MacDonald, Charles Kingsley, Charles Williams, and C.S. Lewis in chronological succession. The breadth of Manlove's attempt is admirable, and his knowledge of this diverse coterie, both the canonical and the lesser known, formidable.

*Christian Fantasy* comes across as erudite, without being forced; lines like the vastly understated "It is thus evident that some fairly strange implications are present within the invented imagery of *Paradise Lost*" (112) add a touch of sincerity and wonder rarely present in the self-assured practice of criticism. Such touches mix with the occasional flash of beautiful prose, as in the following passage:

All these ideas, images and movements surge within a poem that sometimes labors under their weight, sometimes flashes with real poetic apprehension—a poem made still more inaccessible to us than the novels, dealing as it does not only with 'mythological' material in a non-narrative mode, but glancing so intently at its packed ideas that they often shiver and multiply before us.... (234-5)

Truly has Manlove risen to the challenge of his subject matter here.

Yet the author's breadth of vision ultimately gets in the way of the book's flow. Though his remarks on Dante, Milton, and Blake are often interesting, space restrictions will inevitably limit any discussion of these expansive writers—how can anyone deal adequately with the *Commedia*, or *Paradise Lost*, in twelve to twenty pages? If the contrast between Dante's (static, immobile) and Milton's (dynamic, peripatetic) 'Satans' succeeds (107), a similar comparison of Goethe's *Faust* with Marlowe's *Faustus* (where Marlowe inexplicably praises Goethe's hero for helping "others rather than himself" [91]) fails. *Christian Fantasy* does come into its own in the second half—the discussion of "Modern Christian Fantasy"—where the author clearly feels more at home in dealing with MacDonald, Kingsley, Williams, and Lewis. These figures (with the exception, perhaps, of Lewis) are marginal enough that one can provide new insights into their writings in a few pages, and Manlove gives some fascinating glimpses into the fantastic imagination of the modern Christian fabulists. Perhaps a somewhat emended *Modern Christian Fantasy* is the book Manlove wanted to write, but was impelled to search for justification by way of an ideality of origins—in this case the foundation stones of the 'Western canon'.

Presumably Dante, Milton, and Bunyan are here to illumine the develop-

ment of a genre; but given the diversity of material, Manlove struggles somewhat to give substance to the rubric that is supposed to be holding all these works together—"Christian fantasy." What, exactly, is such a beast? In the brief Introduction, the author delays his response, hoping, perhaps, that the book itself will provide an answer to this vexing question: "[F]or now," he assures the reader, "the point to remember is that all these writers want to put over a vision of supernatural reality, and that they chose to do so through fantastic inventions. They have all of them set out to reveal a new picture of Christian truth" (9). What remains unclear, however, is just how wide a definition of 'Christian' (and, for that matter, of 'truth') Manlove is willing to allow. Swedenborg, Blake, even the seemingly orthodox Milton and Dante, stretch the limits of orthodoxy to an extent that Manlove may not be giving full due.

It seems as though Manlove wants to develop an aesthetic of Christian fantasy based on the proverbial (Romantic) distinction between 'imagination' and (mere) 'fancy', but this divide is never fully elucidated, and remains unclear. Aquinas is a source for a related distinction, whereby the images of religion are "needful and profitable," compared to the poet's use of "modes of expression for the sake of visual representation" (8). Yet Saint Thomas is speaking here of the Scriptures, which are, according to Manlove, not 'Christian fantasy' at all. Elsewhere, in justifying the inclusion of Swedenborg in the volume, the author speaks of "Christian fantasy in our sense of a *fiction* involving supernatural beings" (131). Finally, in the preface to the section on "Modern Christian Fantasy," Manlove rejects its status as a genre, admits the looseness of the rubric, and proposes that the name itself is more applicable to works of the last two centuries, given the more conscious and explicit invention of other worlds in response (suggests the author) to the concurrent "de-supernaturalization" of the world. Whereas pre-modern Christian fantasy "questioned or confirmed," the modern variety "invokes" our imaginations, in order to "make us thrill imaginatively to a divine reality both near and far, both with us and other" (163). Once again, we are left un-sure of the tie that binds these works—the (pre-modern) "questioning" as well as the (modern) "invocative"—together, other than their inclusion within these same bound covers.

*Christian Fantasy* is, according to the author, at once a "celebration of" and an "elegy for" Christian fantasy, which has fallen prey to the rationalist scepticism of our age. Manlove echoes Lewis's lament: "Who [can] make imagination's dim exploring touch / Ever report the same as intellectual sight?" (260). The author feels this loss, and it is reflected in the writing. Indeed, if *Christian Fantasy* peaks in the second half, it suffers a long *dénouement* in the final section on "Other Writers," where Manlove goes through an endless string of would-be Lewises and MacDonalds. With several exceptions (e.g., Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, T.F. Powys's *Mister Weston's Good Wine*, both written, significantly, before World War II), the elegy trumps the celebration; whether dismissing the narrow evangelism of Madeline L'Engle ("which reduces the fantastic worlds to mere tools" [278]) or the unmitigated escapism of American fantasy ("the refusal to accept [the world's] complexity and fallenness" [280]), the "terminal decline" of Christian imaginative writing is assiduously, almost painfully delineated. Though this

work ends on a positive note—a clarion call for the syncretic reweaving of traditions old and new, familiar and foreign—the tone of the last chapter casts a shadow over the book, and the reader cannot help but lament, with the author, the death of the Christian imagination.

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*Celebrating Eternity Now. A Study in the Theology of St. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696–1787).* By Hamish Swanston. Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1995. ISBN 0-89243-842-8. Pp. 256.

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Hamish Swanston combines a mastery of charmingly written incoherencies with a flair for scintillating non sequiturs to tempt the reader away from taking this book too seriously. Professor Swanston often states that St. Alphonsus, in his pursuit of eternity, wanted nothing to do with history that had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Swanston joyfully practices what Alphonsus preached. Thus is this book more of a meditational celebration than a study. Since Swanston is a popular lecturer, a much published theologian (*Community Witness, Ideas of Order, A Language for Madness*, and two volumes of *Studies in the Sacraments*), and a noted musical critic (*In Defence of Opera* and a recent study of Handel), the editors at Liguori Publications have obviously rushed to bring his own unrevised words to the public, mainly to take advantage of the fact that 1996 is the 300th anniversary of Alphonsus's birth.

The reader may open at random to any page of Swanston's jotted musings (in astronomy, music, opera, history, law...) to sample the flavor of the author's Dionysian style—and close the book after a paragraph or two, satisfied in having grasped the essence of the entire book. Since Alphonsus is the most important moral theologian in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, was made a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius IX, and is the founder of the missionary Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, the seventh-largest men's institute in the Church, one would naturally have expected a great deal from the author, himself the first Roman Catholic to head a Department of Theology at a British university since the Reformation.

The extensive information about operas performed during Alphonsus's lifetime which might have influenced the saint's writings, alone would have made an obscurely interesting article. At \$24.95 (U.S.), Swanston's handsomely bound book should find a quiet corner in a few college libraries before becoming an out-of-print curio. Not since Théodule Rey-Mermet's weighty portrayal of Alphonsus's youth in *Le saint du siècle des lumières* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1987)—based on little more than inference—has another author succeeded in doing so much with so little evidence. Readers more interested in a narrative history of theology might rather wish to consult the briefer work by Rey-Mermet, *La morale selon St. Alphonse de Liguori* (Paris: du Cerf, 1987). However, should the reader insist on prosaically beginning at the beginning and continuing through to the end of