



## Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 3 - Voyage to Venus

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*Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled is a lightly edited version of Pete Lowman's doctoral thesis. Links to each part will be enabled as they are published.*

*Part 8: Appendix: The Monsters and the Christians: How can a 'Fantasy' Have a Worldview?*

### Part 3 – C.S. LEWIS' VOYAGE TO VENUS

*Voyage to Venus* – like Tolkien's *Silmarillion* – is a story of the Fall; or rather, of how the Fall is avoided on Venus – or, as its inhabitants call it, Perelandra. At the beginning of the book Ransom is sent – by angelic power this time – to Perelandra, which turns out to be a planet made up largely of oceans containing floating, mobile islands. Here he meets the Green Lady, the Venusian equivalent of the Eve of Genesis. No sooner has he made the Lady's acquaintance than Weston too reappears; but Weston is now a far more formidable force than the interplanetary imperialist of *Out of the Silent Planet* – he has become directly demon-possessed. Weston seeks to persuade the Lady to break the one prohibition Maleldil has laid upon her, which is not to remain upon a 'fixed' island (the equivalent of not eating the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil in the Genesis narrative); Ransom seeks to dissuade her. But in Perelandra the terrestrial dichotomy between physical and spiritual is no longer meaningful. Consequently, it is not inappropriate for the debate to climax at length in physical combat. Ransom is the victor; after a long

subterranean journey he finds himself in a 'holy place' where the Lady and her husband (who had been facing his own temptation elsewhere) receive their 'coronation' as rulers of the planet. After a vision of the 'Great Dance' and the cosmic purposes of Maleldil, Ransom returns to Earth.

#### (i) 'Widening the World' Again

Lewis intended that his three 'interplanetary' novels should be readable independently; so at the beginning of *Voyage to Venus* he has to address himself once more to 'widening the world' for his reader. But Ransom cannot now be the reader's surrogate in this process; his position in the plot is that of someone who has returned from Malacandra thoroughly acquainted with the 'unearthly powers'. Consequently the reader is introduced to 'Lewis' himself [1], who, having got involved with Ransom's doings at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet*, has been summoned to assist his departure for Perelandra. Lewis (the real author) has no qualms about plunging his readers immediately into the marvellous. That is not where the problem lies; anyone willing to read a fantasy at all will be imaginatively ready for the marvellous. But to introduce straightaway the theological ramifications that arose in the book's predecessor would indeed be to risk losing readers. Consequently, the angelic *eldils*, Oyarsa and his fellows, are introduced in thoroughly material terms:

*Their physical organism, if organism it can be called, is quite unlike either the human or the Martian. They do not eat, breed, breathe, or suffer natural death, and to that extent resemble thinking minerals more than they resemble anything we should recognise as an animal. [2]*

The comparison to 'thinking minerals' is far less accurate than a reference to angels would have been, but far wiser. [3] A similar tactic is used a page later when Lewis describes his involvement in Ransom's mission to Venus as 'Here we were both getting more and more involved in what I could only describe as inter-planetary politics.' This is *not* the only way he could describe it, of course: allusions to theology or even church history would have been possible – but nowhere near as useful. And the reference to the *eldils* two sentences later as 'creatures alien in kind, very powerful, and very intelligent' has a daunting note

that would be lacking from a description in theological categories.

Nevertheless, the boundaries between theological and scientific description are not watertight, and Lewis soon sets about eroding them:

*The truth was that all I had heard about them served to connect two things which one's mind tends to keep separate, and that connecting gave one a sort of shock. We tend to think about non-human intelligences in two distinct categories which we label 'scientific' and 'supernatural' respectively.... But the very moment we are compelled to recognise a creature in either class as real the distinction begins to get blurred.... The distinction between natural and supernatural, in fact, broke down; and when it had done so, one realised how great a comfort it had been.... What price we may have paid for this comfort in the way of false security and accepted confusion of thought is another matter. [4]*

In one sense, a major purpose of Lewis' fantasy is to bring about precisely this breakdown of categories; and to show, as the use of the word 'comfort' implies, that the result will not be a world that has become more tame and predictable, but indeed one that can be more disquieting. Lewis has sounded this note in a different way a few sentences earlier:

*And I realised that I was afraid of two things – afraid that sooner or later I myself might meet an eldil, and afraid that I might get 'drawn in'. I suppose everyone knows this fear of getting 'drawn in' – the moment at which a man realises that what had seemed mere speculations are on the point of landing him in the Communist Party or the Christian Church – the sense that a door has just slammed and left him on the inside. The thing was such sheer bad luck. Ransom himself had been taken to Mars (or Malacandra) against his will and almost by accident, and I had become connected with his affair by another accident.*

Here again, the imaginative impact of the *eldils* is enhanced by presenting them as a threat, entities that cannot be contemplated in safe academic isolation. There is a subtlety in the use of 'the Christian Church' – the 'Church' is something sufficiently different from the *eldils* to be used as an analogy, which strengthens the materiality with which they are being depicted: on the other hand, it is a place where a normal person can quite

conceivably arrive by pursuing 'mere speculations', and that one may possibly be avoiding out of fear rather than out of maturity. All this, summarised in the excellent image of the 'door that has just slammed and left him on the inside', is the first note of a theme that reappears when Ransom confronts the uncompromising presence of Maleldil on Perelandra. On a second reading of the book, the references to 'luck' and 'accident' will reveal themselves as inadequate: the whole force of the 'Great Dance' passage at the close is that such categories are meaningless.

As the chapter proceeds, Lewis develops his fictional surrogate's sense of unease into a condition of psychological imbalance. The function of this is not just so that the bizarre can be introduced through 'Lewis' diseased perceptions without necessitating authorial endorsement; rather, his distrust of the *eldils*, having served its purpose of increasing their imaginative impact, is itself to be revealed as a symptom of imbalance. 'Lewis' unease turns into mental confusion when he realises he has left his pack in the train:

*Will you believe me when I say that my immediate impulse was to turn back to the station and 'do something about it'? Of course there was nothing to be done which could not equally well be done by ringing up from the cottage... But at the moment it seemed perfectly obvious that I must retrace my steps, and I had indeed begun to do so before reason or conscience awoke and set me once more plodding forwards. In doing this I discovered more clearly than before how very little I wanted to do it. It was such hard work that I felt as if I were walking against a headwind. [5]*

A reader of Lewis' other books will perhaps recall that he presents 'reason' and 'conscience' as the twin footholds of grace in the human psyche [7] What if Ransom is a dupe, thinks 'Lewis': that thought makes his reluctance to proceed return with astonishing strength – and the sheer strength of his reaction makes him wonder if he is at the start of a nervous breakdown. What the reader has learned thus far does indeed leave this possibility open. But it is important to note how 'Lewis' doubts – not of the *eldils'* existence (this question is – wisely – never raised), but of their beneficence – is quietly set alongside, and linked with, mental instability. The latter is quite convincing:

*At the bottom the evening mist was partly (sic) thick.*

*There is no logical connection between the doubt and the 'breakdown'; the only connection the reader can supply is in considering them both in terms of mental confusion.*

*It should also be noted that 'Lewis' paranoia is being described from the outside. Even when he writes – with a tone a little too close to second-rate horror fiction – 'Then came a moment – the first one of absolute terror and I had to bite my lip to keep myself from screaming' [10] It is quite deliberate: Lewis continues, 'I have naturally no wish to enlarge on this phase of my story... I would have passed it over if I did not think that some account of it was necessary for a full understanding of what follows – and, perhaps, of some other things as well.' In other words, the events taking place may be about to receive an explanation of some importance – one with implications reaching beyond the immediate context of 'what follows'.*

*And so they do, when 'Lewis' and Ransom finally meet. In the meantime, 'despite the loathing and dismay that pulled me back and a sort of invisible wall of resistance that met me in the face', 'Lewis' reaches the cottage. Here there is a shrewd twist: Ransom is out. 'Lewis' is free to retreat. But the daunting prospect of repeating his journey in the dark, 'and then, I hope, something better... – some rag of sanity and some reluctance to let Ransom down', keep him from doing so:*

*At least I could try the door to see if it were really unlocked. I did. And it was. Next moment, I hardly know how, I found myself inside and let it slam behind me. [11]*

*At that point, 'Lewis' has crossed the Rubicon: with all his doubts and disturbance (and possibly because of 'some rag of sanity'), he has completed the journey to the house, and brought himself to the point where going back is harder than going on. The action that seals this is that of the slamming of a door, used five pages earlier as an image of being 'landed' in the Christian Church or the Communist Party. This is not insignificant.*

*The next words, 'It was quite dark, and warm', serve effectively to mark a new stage. Lewis has been using his character's perceptions of the outside world as marks of his subjective*

*experience – 'the black enmity of those dripping trees', and so on. Inside the cottage (which, we have been told, probably contains 'strange company', 'Visitors') it is still 'dark'; here the platitudinous physical detail (a cottage is likely to be dark when its owner is out) coalesces with 'Lewis' uncertainty. But his uncertainty is not now about intangibles – his own sanity, the interpretation of Ransom's actions; rather, it is a simple, objective question of who or what is in the cottage. '...and warm', the warmth that is felt after entering a house and shutting the door behind you, evokes everyday connotations; Lewis does not articulate them, but there is something of the sense of security, of relaxation, even of receptiveness as against the resistance involved in a difficult journey through the cold. It is perhaps not unreasonable for the reader to feel that 'Lewis' perceptions will have become more settled and trustworthy.*

*And so they have. The passage continues:*

*I groped a few paces forward, hit my shin violently against something, and fell. I sat still for a few seconds nursing my leg. I thought I knew the layout of Ransom's hall-sitting-room pretty well and couldn't imagine what I had blundered into. Presently I groped in my pocket, got out my matches, and tried to strike a light. The head of the match flew off. I stamped on it and sniffed to make sure it was not smouldering on the carpet.*

*The narration has turned from a description of 'Lewis' mental condition (and an external world perceived through the diseased perceptions of that condition) to a description of the external world perceived apparently without emotional distortion. The sense of pain helps with this, as does the bringing into play of at least three senses, 'Lewis' sight ('It was quite dark'), touch ('I groped in my pocket') and smell ('sniffed to make sure...') Likewise, 'Lewis' is now trusting his own mental processes ('I thought I knew the layout...') and is acting in a systematic manner (stamping on a match and sniffing may not seem deeply significant, but are vastly different from his behaviour on the road). Without labouring the point, Lewis has accumulated details to build up an impression that, once inside the cottage, his character is seeing things as they are, and thinking correctly about them.*

*I rose gingerly and felt my way forward. I came at*

once to an obstacle – something smooth and very cold that rose a little higher than my knees... I groped my way along this to the left and finally came to the end of it. It seemed to present several surfaces and I couldn't picture the shape. It was not a table, for it had no top. One's hand groped along the rim of a kind of low wall – the thumb on the outside and the fingers down inside the enclosed space. [12]

*Because of the concrete manner in which Lewis employs the sense of touch, the reader does not notice that he has almost completely suppressed his character's fear of the alien. For here, at last, is the unknown; conveyed effectively with the help of 'Lewis' renewed mental reliability and sensory experience. Whatever it is, he falls over it; he is preparing to get up and 'hunt systematically' for a candle (again, the note of recovered rationality),*

when I heard Ransom's name pronounced; and almost, but not quite, simultaneously I saw the thing I had feared so long to see... What I saw was simply a very faint rod or pillar of light... Since I saw the thing I must obviously have seen it white or coloured; but no efforts of my memory can conjure up the faintest image of what that colour was. I try blue, and gold, and violet, and red, but none of them will fit... It was not at right angles to the floor... What one actually felt at the moment was that the column of light was vertical but the floor was not horizontal – the whole room seemed to have heeled over as if it were on board ship... Its mere presence...abolished the terrestrial horizontal.

Here, in one sense, is the end point of 'Lewis' journey through the dark. The reader's confidence in 'Lewis' has been restored at the point where he must be trusted to bear witness to the supernatural. The reader's own imagination is called into play by the colour that is neither gold nor blue nor violet; while the details Lewis does supply – above all the sense that the room has 'heeled over' – convey at once the sense of the marvellous, the powerful (the 'terrestrial horizontal' is abolished), and the sense of striking experience (especially in the connotation of motion in 'heeled over') [14]. Lewis has brought his character to a point where he is caught between two alternatives: the world outside the cottage, the 'cold and the darkness', the place of doubt and mental instability; and the world inside

the cottage, 'quite dark and warm', a world of mental clarity and trustworthy perceptions but containing an eldil. This opposition Lewis has built up from the details of his character's experience, rather than simply asserting it.

'Lewis' finds the presence of the eldil who has 'abolished the terrestrial horizontal' 'in some ways very unpleasant... The fact that it was quite obviously not organic... was profoundly disturbing. It would not fit into our categories.' [15] This was an effect of some importance to Lewis. In *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* he speaks of the 'sublimity and masculinity' of Dante's angels, and remarks:

It is the loss of this conception which finally vulgarizes the angels into those consumptive girls with wings that figure in so much Victorian stained glass. The full degradation of the Cherub – the fat baby who has played that role ever since Raphael – will perhaps be clearest if we remember that the word probably comes from the same root as gryphon. Even for Chaucer a cherub was a creature of fire: not at all 'cuddly'. [16]

One of the ways in which Lewis was trying to 'baptise the imagination' of his readers was in attempting to restore the sense of the numinous, the 'other', indeed the daunting and dangerous about the supernatural. Certainly this must be one of the impressions left most strongly on the reader by the trilogy; Lewis' angelic [17] intelligences share something of the character of the Aslan of his Narnia books who is emphatically 'not tame'. And, as a result, they appear more obtrusively real than their conventional stained-glass equivalents.

'Lewis' doubts vanish, and he feels 'sure that the creature was what we call "good" – but rather less sure 'whether I liked "goodness" as much as I had supposed.' The crisis here, it should be noted, is not merely a science-fiction crisis of a human being facing an alien; Lewis is seeking to give it moral overtones. It is being presented as akin to the choice that faces character after character in his *The Great Divorce*, where the denizens of the afterlife finally see what good and evil really are, and, thus enlightened, must make their ultimate choice. The bridge between science fiction and moral choice is supplied by the presentation of the issue in terms of the desire for independence that Lewis saw as the fundamental issue in man's relations with God. ('The one principle of hell is – "I

am my own", says George Macdonald in the quotation Lewis chose as epigraph to the chapter in his autobiography dealing with his own conversion [18].)

I wanted every possible distance, gulf, curtain, blanket, and barrier to be placed between it and me. But I did not fall quite into the gulf. Oddly enough my very sense of helplessness saved me and steadied me. For now I was quite obviously 'drawn in'. The struggle was over. The next decision did not lie with me. [19]

This 'drawn in' is a 'special case' of the 'being drawn in' that is the start of all Christian experience, just as three pages later Ransom argues that for him to battle with the forces of the dark eldils in the physical heavens is merely a 'special case' of the spiritual warfare in which all Christians are involved. Christian fantasy turns on just such 'special cases'. So too the fine balance between freewill and providence here reflects Lewis' understanding of human spiritual experience. 'Lewis' 'did not fall', did not reject the eldil; yet it is his 'sense of helplessness', his sense that the 'next decision did not lie with me', that 'saved' him – because it is accepted and not revolted against. This web of forces – which Lewis, wisely, does not attempt to unravel – is a commonplace of Christianity: the acceptance of helplessness is itself an action, a crucial surrender; and the prelude, by divine grace, to further action. Just so Lewis describes his own conversion: 'I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say, "I chose," yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite.' [20]

There is a nice touch to close the chapter. Ransom enters; the eldil addresses him, and Ransom replies; 'Lewis' has a fit of pique: 'It was in my mind to shout out, "Leave your familiar alone, you damned magician, and attend to Me."' The capital 'M' is an effective comment; Lewis himself had known what it was to be a 'reluctant', 'resentful' convert. [21]

## (ii) Fantasy as Objectification

This opening chapter has been analysed in some detail because it provides a good example of an author 'widening the world'; the whole of 'Lewis'' journey to the cottage enacts the process of discovery and surrender. The reader goes the journey with 'Lewis', and so in some small measure his imagination is 'baptised' along with

'Lewis'' intellect. But what of the doubts on the journey? The second paragraph of the second chapter sets them in a drastically new context when Ransom – employing an image more potent in 1943, when the book was published, than today – asks 'Lewis' if he 'got through the barrage without any damage?... I was thinking you would have met some difficulties in getting here... They didn't want you to get here.' [22] The conversation is fairly credible in the light of what has preceded it; if there are eldils inside the cottage there may as well be dark eldils outside it. That they should have been the source of 'Lewis'' doubts merely confirms the feeling that is carefully built into the first chapter: that the doubts are themselves at bottom irrational, unjustified, part and parcel of a mental confusion which also includes fear and illogical thinking. We noted how Lewis placed his character's doubts alongside his fear of a mental breakdown; the two were not logically connected, but their juxtaposition suggested they might possibly be different aspects of the same phenomenon, of which the dark eldils are now revealed as the cause. But then that is to take the notion of 'spiritual warfare' out of the cottage and back into the 'normal world' as a possible explanation of the 'fatal bent' in history, to which 'Lewis' referred without applying the lesson to himself. Supernatural 'spiritual warfare' is shown to be a concept that can exist quite independently of the overtly miraculous. We are not far from the world of Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*; we are also not far from St. Paul's words in Ephesians 6:12: 'Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against... spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.'

That biblical verse is the starting-point for the next stage. Ransom tells 'Lewis' that Oyarsa is sending him to Venus to engage in conflict with 'depraved hypersomatic beings at great heights (our translation is very misleading at that point, by the way.' 'Lewis' counters that this passage refers to 'moral conflict'; Ransom replies that:

...your idea that ordinary people will never have to meet the Dark Eldila in any form except a psychological or moral form – as temptations or the like – is simply an idea that held good for a certain phase of the cosmic war... But supposing that phase is passing? In the next phase it may be anyone's job to meet them... well, in some quite different mode. [23]

And in that 'supposing' lies the whole rationale of

these novels as supernatural fantasies; their 'fictional hypothesis', their 'What if...?' We note elsewhere in this study, in the section entitled 'The Monsters and the Christians' (see Part 8, Appendix), that a function of fantasy is to vary basic aspects of reality, in just the way that is implied here. In objectifying moral conflicts into more physical terms, Lewis might seem merely to be writing allegory (that, after all, is the basis of Pilgrim's Progress). But if (as Lewis believed, and as orthodox Christianity has always stated) moral decisions do not merely involve contradictions of principles but (in some obscure manner) conflict in which external intelligences play a part as well, then to portray them as combat is not merely to allegorize. Fantasy then objectifies in physical terms what is already in existence as a non-physical reality. [25].

To Lewis this was something more than a fanciful hypostatization. One of his close friends, and a significant influence on his thinking [26], was Owen Barfield. One particular notion of Barfield's, which recurs in Lewis' writings, the latter paraphrased thus:

Mr. Barfield has shown, as regards the history of language, that words did not start merely by referring to physical objects and then get extended by metaphor to refer to emotions, mental states and the like. On the contrary, what we now call the "literal and metaphorical" meanings have both been disengaged by analysis from an ancient unity of meaning which was neither or both... As long as we are trying to read back into that ancient unity either the one or the other... we shall misread all early literature and ignore many states of consciousness which we ourselves still from time to time experience. [27]

Sure enough, towards the end of the third book in the trilogy, *That Hideous Strength*, we find Ransom warning the sceptic MacPhee against dividing 'one of Barfield's "ancient unities".' [28]

But there is still more to it than that. Lewis, both as a classicist and as a literary critic, had a high regard for myth.

'Myth in general is... a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination', he wrote in *Miracles*; it is in the incarnation that that 'truth... becomes incarnate as History'. Yet 'Myth remains Myth even when it becomes Fact', and must be responded to at both

levels. [30]

This vision haunts Lewis' fantasies. His short story 'Forms of Things Unknown' presents an astronaut arriving on the Moon and encountering a Gorgon; the trains of our world are mythological 'smokehorses' to the inhabitants of the alternative dimension in *Dark Tower*; in the Narnia of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Man himself is a myth. In *That Hideous Strength*, Merlin comes back to life. But the idea is clearest in *Voyage to Venus*. Ransom's first morning on *Perelandra* is a case in point:

At Ransom's waking something happened to him which perhaps never happens to a man until he is out of his own world: he saw reality, and thought it was a dream. He opened his eyes and saw a strange heraldically coloured tree loaded with yellow fruits and silver leaves. Round the base of the indigo stem was coiled a small dragon covered with scales of red gold. He recognised the garden of the Hesperides at once... He remembered how in the very different world called *Malacandra* ...he had met the original of the Cyclops, a giant in a cave and a shepherd. Were all the things which appeared as mythology on earth scattered through other worlds as realities? [31]

Later, he meets mermen, humanoid creatures without intelligence, and remembered his old suspicion that what was myth in one world might always be fact in some other. He wondered also whether the King and Queen of *Perelandra*, though doubtless the first human pair of this planet, might on the physical side have a marine ancestry. And if so, what then of the man-like things before men in our own world? Must they in truth have been the wistful brutalities whose pictures we see in popular books on evolution? Or were the old myths truer than the modern myths? Had there in truth been a time when satyrs danced in the Italian woods? [32]

When he eats the food of the mermen, he suddenly sees things as they do, becoming 'startlingly conscious of his own experience in walking on the topside' of the floating islands 'as a miracle or myth.' [35]

Lewis' fantasy world is thus one analogous to that which he believes existed before the Fall and will reappear in 'the glorious resurrection... the fact and the myth re-married, the literal and the

metaphorical rushing together'. [37]

(iii) The Providentialist Paradise

Such an objectification of spiritual states presents its own problems. It is a truism that good fictional characters are harder to portray than evil ones; on Perelandra Lewis has an even greater task, the presentation of a whole paradisiac planet. When Ransom arrives on Perelandra, he finds himself plunged into an ocean:

As he rushed smoothly up the great convex hillside of the next wave he got a mouthful of the water. It was hardly at all flavoured with salt; it was drinkable – like fresh water and only, by an infinitesimal degree, less insipid. Though he had not been aware of thirst till now, his drink gave him a quite astonishing pleasure. It was almost like meeting Pleasure itself for the first time.... The water gleamed, the sky burned with gold, but all was rich and dim, and his eyes fed upon it undazzled and unaching. The very names of green and gold, which he used perforce in describing the scene, are too harsh for the tenderness, the muted iridescence, of that warm, maternal, delicately gorgeous world.... It was altogether pleasurable. He sighed. [38]

Lewis' sudden employment of the present tense is used to give a sense of authority, of a scientific observation that is timelessly accurate. But the dominant tone is one of an overpowering sensuousness, in contrast to the concrete descriptions of Ransom's arrival on Malacandra in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Still, once he has established this tone, the more concrete descriptions reappear, in the depiction of the floating island:

As he approached it he saw that it ended in a fringe of undoubtedly vegetable matter; it trailed, in fact, a dark red skirt of tubes and strings and bladders... He grabbed again and got a handful of whip-like red strings, but they pulled out of his hand and almost cut him. Then he thrust himself right in among them, snatching wildly straight before him. For one second he was in a kind of vegetable broth of gurgling tubes and exploding bladders; next moment his hands caught something firmer ahead, something almost like very soft wood. [39]

There is not space here for a full examination of how Lewis builds up and brings to life his fantasy world of Perelandra. [40] What is worthy of particular note is how Lewis' initial, almost over-

sensuous paragraphs give the landscape something verging on a moral significance. It is a note that recurs:

He was not in the least tired, and not yet seriously alarmed as to his power of surviving in such a world. He had confidence in those who had sent him there, and for the meantime the coolness of the water and the freedom of his limbs were still a novelty and a delight; but more than all these was something else at which I have already hinted and which can hardly be put into words – the strange sense of excessive pleasure which seemed somehow to be communicated to him through all his senses at once... There was an exuberance or prodigality of sweetness about the mere act of living which our race finds it difficult not to associate with forbidden and extravagant actions. Yet it is a violent world too. Hardly had he lost sight of the floating object when his eyes were stabbed by an unendurable light. [41]

The last sentence does a little to prevent the passage seeming over-sickly. [43]; and it offers an enormity of pleasure, with no taint of evil or shame. The trustworthiness is directly related to Ransom's providentialist faith in 'those who had sent him there'; the 'exuberance of sweetness' without shame is a reminder that this is a Creation without a Fall.

When Ransom meets the Lady of Perelandra, this attitude to the trustworthiness of the planet, grounded in a sense of providence, is reintroduced. Lewis emphasises the alienness of the Lady's consciousness. She is the 'Eve', the only woman in an unfallen world, and when Ransom first meets her he is struck by her calm expression which 'might be idiocy, it might be immortality, it might be some condition of mind to which terrestrial experience offered no clue at all.' [45]

Communication gets no easier as time goes on: the Lady does not understand the meanings of 'people' (there are only two human beings on Venus), 'home' (the whole planet is her home) or 'alone' (she has never experienced loneliness). She nonetheless turns out to be well-informed about the inhabitants of the rest of the Solar System, and Ransom learns from her that the hrossa of Mars will soon be extinct. He is sad: 'Are they to be swept away? Are they only rubbish in the Deep Heaven?' The Lady replies that she does not know what 'rubbish' means: in a world

so full of Maleldil's will, the concept is meaningless. [46] Nor does she understand the difference between freewill and Maleldil's ordaining, until Ransom explains it, and she has certainly never regretted that ordaining. Ransom's query on the topic brings forth a triumphantly effective reply:

'But are you happy without the King? Do you not want the King?'

The Lady is not just a curio; she is the queen and mouthpiece of a providentialist paradise where the spiritual and moral are inseparable from the physical. The Lady asks Ransom why he frowns, and what such gestures mean 'in your world':

'They mean nothing,' said Ransom hastily. It was a small lie; but there it would not do. It tore him as he uttered it, like a vomit. It became of infinite importance. The silver meadow and the golden sky seemed to fling it back at him. As if stunned by some measureless anger in the very air he stammered an emendation: 'They mean nothing I could explain to you.' [48]

This is effective too. The physical force of 'tore him... like a vomit' and 'fling it back' underline the sense that here, on Perelandra, a lie is an event: Ransom is defiling the unsullied unity of paradise. For this paradise that has taken shape in a Christian imagination must be a paradise radiant with the presence of God; and it is this presence, almost physically manifest, that rejects untruth. Something similar occurs when the first temptation fails:

At the same moment he was conscious of a sense of triumph. But it was not he who was triumphant. The whole darkness about him rang with victory. He started and half raised himself. Had there been any actual sound? Listening hard he could hear nothing but the low murmurous noise of warm wind and gentle swell. The suggestion of music must have been from within. But as soon as he lay down again he felt assured that it was not. From without, most certainly from without, but not by the sense of hearing, festal revelry and dance and splendour poured into him – no sound, yet in such fashion that it could not be remembered or thought of except as music. It was like having a new sense. [49]

Here the passage succeeds precisely because it is close to a common human experience of joy: but in the universe of Lewis' fiction the suggestion

is that the 'festal revelry' is no mere 'pathetic fallacy', no allegory of a mental condition, but rather is an external reality in which the internal emotion participates.

This is also true of Ransom's perception of the revelatory process whereby the Lady learns directly from Maleldil:

'How do you know that?' asked Ransom in amazement.

Here again what Lewis records is not utterly distant from an earthly experience of awe so intense that it almost seems a physical sensation. The recognisable nature of the experience means that the manifestation of the presence of Maleldil is something believable. Its very intangibility – when presented by Lewis as a datum about something the narrator's authority guarantees as a real event, rather than as a stimulus to doubt – is equally recognisable. Thus, ironically, a mystical experience appears as a 'realistic' feature rather than a 'marvellous' one.

The Lady's remark that 'Maleldil is telling me' recurs several times in different forms. [53] Lewis seeks to mitigate any problems this may create for his readers by presenting Ransom sharing their surprise: "'You know that?" said Ransom sharply.'

But the convergence is no real shock. It is only a recurrence of the linkage created between Christian belief and Lewis' myth in the second chapter, where Ransom explained to 'Lewis' that his journey to Venus was merely a special variety of the spiritual warfare that is every Christian's duty. (That in turn means that while Ransom's expression of sharp surprise makes him a surrogate for the reader, his astonishment must have more to do with the Lady's in-depth knowledge of events on Earth than with her use of the Christian framework; the Malacandrians had had that framework too.) And the Lady's theistic beliefs – or observations or experiences, as they might equally well be called – make sense as an integral part of the Perelandran world that Lewis has created with tangible particularity. The whole paradisiac and trustworthy character of this world demands some explanation such as the Lady's beliefs provide. If as readers we have responded

to Lewis' imaginary world, we will accept this too as part and parcel of it.

(iv) Some Varieties of Rebellion

Where there is an Eden-like Paradise, the possibility exists of an Eden-like Fall. The question of whether this event, of such crucial importance in the relationship between the created beings and their Creator, will be repeated on Venus is the subject of much of the rest of the book. But Ransom's actions as a free, responsible moral agent take place against the backcloth of the presence of God that we have described in the previous pages.

There are at least three possible scenarios for a Perelandran Fall, and all of them have to do with an attitude to God's providential presence: an attitude of obedient faith, or else of resistance. The first is hinted at before the Lady's appearance, when Ransom first comes ashore. One of his first discoveries is that Perelandran fruit have a taste that brings with it a more or less ecstatic experience. 'It was like the discovery of a totally new genus of pleasures, something unheard of among men, out of all reckoning, beyond all covenant. For one draught of this on Earth, wars would be fought and nations betrayed.' [54] He finishes one fruit and is about to take another:

He was now neither hungry nor thirsty. And yet to repeat a pleasure so intense and almost so spiritual seemed an obvious thing to do... Yet something seemed opposed to this 'reason'... Perhaps the experience had been so complete that repetition would be a vulgarity – like asking to hear the same symphony twice in a day. [55]

Lewis does not elaborate on or explain this notion, but it recurs five pages later when Ransom discovers another immense pleasure in a wood of 'bubble trees', trees that draw up water and then expel it in the form of aromatic bubbles. [56] Ransom senses the same constraint against repeating his pleasure:

He had always disliked the people who encored a favourite air in an opera – 'That just spoils it' had been his comment. But this now appeared to him as a principle of far wider application and deeper moment. The itch to have things over again, as if life were a film that could be enrolled twice or even made to work backwards... was it possibly

the root of all evil? No: of course the love of money was called that. But money itself – perhaps one valued it chiefly as a defence against chance, a security for being able to have things again, a means of arresting the unrolling of the film. [57]

Here, on a planet without sin, Lewis is creating a form amid the flux of ecstatic experience; in a world where there is no such thing as chance, and evil powers are absent, where all is radiant with providence, the attempt to control and to impose one's own shape on experience is a kind of rebellion. Where the Fall has not occurred, aesthetic and moral good amount to much the same thing. But, Lewis suggests, maybe the same might hold good in our world: the clutching at security might itself be an evil. If there is a providence in our world too, that evil is simply a lack of faith.

Likewise, when the Lady learns (from Ransom) that she possesses freewill, she realises that there is the possibility of 'clinging to the old good instead of taking the good that came.' [59] Here, the 'clinging' is linked with the Fall of Lucifer, with the deliberate rejection of God's plans, a lack of faith in the loving, creative variety of Maleldil's providence.

Later on Ransom realises that indeed 'Maleldil never repeated Himself. As the Lady said, the same wave never came twice.' [62]

When it comes to presenting the temptation of the Lady, Lewis has two sets of metaphors to choose from as specific embodiments of these issues. One is through Ransom's issue of fruit, of deciding whether to ignore the 'inner adviser' and repeat a meal. On the other hand, the Lady more often resorts to images of the waves, of welcoming and plunging into the wave that Maleldil sends; and it is this metaphor that Lewis chooses to place at the centre of the action. Had he chosen the other, it would have been virtually impossible to prevent his book appearing an unimaginative retelling of the Genesis account. [63]

The temptation, then, is to break the sole specific prohibition that Maleldil has given to the inhabitants of Perelandra: not to sleep on the Fixed Land, the one solid island among the floating archipelagoes. This is the equivalent of

'eating the fruit' in the book of Genesis; the basic issue is whether the Perelandrans will obey Maleldil or not. [64] If Ransom's rebellion against the moral constraints that 'come naturally' on Perelandra would have amounted to a disregard of general revelation, then disobedience to this prohibition would amount to a rejection of special revelation. Only after the temptation is over does the Lady realise the reason for the prohibition, that to stay on the Fixed Land would also be to refuse to commit oneself to the unpredictable but providentially-guaranteed motions of the waves, seeking rather to be master of one's own fate:

And why should I desire the Fixed except to make sure – to be able on one day to command where I should be the next and what should happen to me? It was to reject the wave – to draw my hands out of Maleldil's, to say to Him, 'Not thus, but thus'... That would have been cold love and feeble trust. And out of it how could we ever have climbed back into love and trust again? [65]

Elsewhere on the planet her husband has faced the same issue. He has been shown what was happening to the Lady, and known that she might fall. Would he trust the goodness of Maleldil's unrevealed will (as with the Fixed Land prohibition) and continue to obey Him? Or would he repeat Adam's error [67]

The way in which the narrative action expresses the issue of faith as it arises even in terrestrial reality is plain. At the same time, as a fantasy, the book can objectify these realities in physical terms, embodying them in the geography of the imaginary world. And here is one of its major strengths. Lewis' starting point for his vision of Perelandra was not the story of the Fall, but a mental picture of floating islands. [69], there is a superb fitness between the geography and spiritual realities of the planet; the objectification is exact.

Life on 'floating islands' journeying unpredictably through the waves is an excellent 'objective correlative' for the Perelandran abandonment to the – sometimes unexplained – will of Maleldil; life on the Fixed Land would indeed involve self-imposed fixity. There is an admirable unity in the whole conception; Lewis' 'sub-creation' approaches his notion of the New Creation where 'Every state of affairs in the New Nature will be the perfect expression of a spiritual state and every spiritual state the perfect informing of, and

bloom upon, a state of affairs.' [70] There is also a third variety of sin which can be committed on Perelandra. It is one of which the Lady is probably incapable, but which represents the standard reaction of an unregenerate, fallen human being to the presence of God. Lewis presents it just after Ransom's first audience with the Lady has closed with his attempted lie:

That sense of being in Someone's Presence which had descended on him with such unbearable pressure during the very first moments of his conversation with the Lady did not disappear when he had left her... At first it was almost intolerable; as he put it to us in telling the story, 'There seemed no room.' But later on, he discovered that it was intolerable only at certain moments – at just those moments in fact (symbolised by his impulse to smoke and to put his hands in his pockets) when a man asserts his independence and feels that now at last he's on his own. When you felt like that, then the very air seemed too crowded to breathe; a complete fulness seemed to be excluding you from a place which, nevertheless, you were unable to leave. But when you gave in to the thing, gave yourself up to it, there was no burden to be borne. It became not a load but a medium, a sort of splendour as of eatable, drinkable, breathable gold. [71]

This is a significant passage, having a direct parallelism with terrestrial reality. In the autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* Lewis presents his desire not to be 'interfered with', to 'call my soul my own'. [73] Here, then, Lewis is portraying the ordinary, terrestrial human being enacting the sin of the Fall; and almost certainly he felt himself to be representing what was at issue in his readers' relationship with God – or with any hypothetical God that might turn out to exist. Hence the somewhat out-of-place reference to cigarettes and pockets (Ransom is, in fact, naked); these are intended as a means of identification with the reader. The fantasy element still exists in the objectification of the divine Presence as something highly tangible, even 'intolerable', challenging Ransom's attitude rather than becoming forgotten. Nonetheless, the experience of the supernatural in a fantasy context here comes close to what Lewis saw as terrestrial experience of the divine; and the references to 'eatable, drinkable, breathable gold' are presumably included to distance it, so that an experience which Lewis hoped would be

recognisable should not appear as preaching.

(v) The Presence of Evil

Ransom himself could have brought the temptation to the Lady. But fantasy tends to objectify spiritual states; and so it is that Weston reappears as the overt representative of evil, having travelled to Venus in his spaceship. One of his last recorded remarks on Mars in *Out of the Silent Planet* was 'Me no care Maleldil. Like Bent One better: me on his side.' [77] He is, in short, demonically possessed.

The debate that follows on Weston's first encounter with Ransom functions in several ways. To begin with, it is a matter of Lewis having to get Weston onto Venus, and seizing the opportunity to settle a few philosophical scores with the then-popular notion of 'emergent evolution', whence Weston draws most of his jargon ('Ransom had heard this sort of thing pretty often before' [78]), by pointing out that a creed with no adequate framework of good and evil contains nothing to keep its adherents from evil. The debate has its own interest: it includes a new and impressive character telling his life story. It also serves to give intellectual fibre to Lewis' imaginary world without drifting into obtrusive didacticism; the characters are capable of talking sense – an important point in view of the emphasis on almost orgiastic pleasure in earlier sections.

Still, Lewis' main task here is to depict the reality of evil; and the evil of the Bent One is merely using the chatter of 'emergent evolution' just as it is merely possessing Weston's body. Several aspects of Lewis' technique here deserve comment. First, there is the flatness of Ransom's language when he seeks to avoid the idea of Weston's commitment being to anything more disturbing than a set of ideas: 'I expect all you really mean is that you feel it your duty to work for the spread of civilisation and knowledge and that kind of thing.' The sense of inane platitude here makes Weston appear the realist when – with an effectively nasty 'cackling laughter, almost an infantile or senile laughter' – he replies, 'There you go, there you go... Like all you religious people. You talk and talk about these things all your life, and the moment you meet the reality you get frightened.' [79]

Secondly, there is the miracle of Weston's facility in the Perelandran language. The important thing about this is that, because Perelandran and English cannot be distinguished by the reader, Weston's use of Perelandran does not appear miraculous until Weston himself points it out. [80] Hence very little 'suspension of disbelief' is necessary. But to accept that miracle is to accept the presence of evil incarnate. Thirdly, there is the unpleasant passage where Lewis shows his full hand, and Weston, following his logic through, announces, 'I call that Force into me completely':

Then horrible things began happening. A spasm like that preceding a deadly vomit twisted Weston's face out of recognition. As it passed, for one second something like the old Weston reappeared – the old Weston, staring with eyes of horror and howling, 'Ransom, Ransom! For Christ's sake don't let them –' and instantly his whole body spun round as if he had been hit by a revolver bullet and he fell to the earth, and was there rolling at Ransom's feet, slaving and chattering and tearing up the moss by the handfuls. Gradually the convulsions decreased... Ransom... found a bottle of brandy which he uncorked and applied to the patient's mouth. To his consternation the teeth opened, closed on the neck of the bottle and bit it through. No glass was spat out. 'O God, I've killed him,' said Ransom. But beyond a spurt of blood at the lips there was no change in his appearance. The face suggested that either he was in no pain or in a pain beyond all human comprehension. [81]

'Horrible things', and especially 'slaving and chattering', may be unnecessary. But the rest – the sudden distinction of two personalities in Weston; the old, original Weston demanding compassion; the sense that the very presence of Weston has trapped Ransom into manslaughter; the biting off of the bottleneck, implying that Weston is either thoroughly insane (which we have seen he is not) or thoroughly possessed – all do their work.

There is more to come. A few pages later, Ransom comes across what appears to be a new animal.

At first he thought it was a creature of more fantastic shape than he had yet seen on Perelandra. Its shape was not only fantastic but hideous. Then he dropped on one knee to examine it. Finally he touched it, with reluctance.

A moment later he drew back his hands like a man who had touched a snake. [82]

The reader's interest has been brought into play – we have not been introduced to a new animal for some time – and the word 'snake', at the end of a long paragraph, carries an element of shock. It focuses the thrust of the whole sentence into one abrupt monosyllable; more important, the reader recognises the experience of touching a snake, but snakes do not exist in Perelandra. The very concept of a poisonous, hostile creature is alien to the trustworthy world Lewis has built up. Which is precisely the point he goes on to make: for the creature is a mutilated frog. 'Some accident had happened to it.... Something had torn a widening wound backward... along the trunk and pulled it out so far behind the animal that the hoppers or hind legs had been almost torn off with it.' To Ransom, such a thing on Perelandra is 'like a blow in the face', a denial of everything he had thought Perelandra to be.

He decides to put the frog out of its misery. But he had neither boots nor stone nor stick. The frog proved remarkably hard to kill. When it was far too late to desist he saw clearly that he had been a fool to make the attempt. Whatever its sufferings might be he had certainly increased and not diminished them. But he had to go through with it. The job seemed to take nearly an hour. [83]

The sense of frustration is plain; Ransom, again, has been trapped into involvement with evil. Disorder has come and is spreading. 'Sick and shaken', Ransom washes, resumes his walk – and finds a trail of mutilated frogs. After the twenty-first he finds Weston, ripping the frogs open with his fingernails,

quietly and almost surgically inserting his forefinger, with its long sharp nail, under the skin behind the creature's head and ripping it open... Their eyes met... Weston... did not look like a sick man: but he looked very like a dead one. The face which he raised from torturing the frog had that terrible power which the face of a corpse sometimes has of simply rebuffing every conceivable human attitude one can adopt towards it. The expressionless mouth, the unwinking stare of the eyes, something heavy and inorganic in the very folds of the cheek, said clearly: 'I have features as you have, but there is nothing in common between you and me.'... And

now, forcing its way up into consciousness, thrusting aside every mental habit and every longing not to believe, came the conviction that this, in fact, was not a man: that Weston's body was kept, walking and undecaying, in Perelandra by some wholly different kind of life, and that Weston himself was gone. It looked at Ransom in silence and at last began to smile... The smile was not bitter, nor raging, nor, in an ordinary sense, sinister; it was not even mocking. It seemed to summon Ransom, with a horrible naivete of welcome, into the world of its own pleasures, as if they were the most natural thing in the world and no dispute could ever have occurred about them. It was not furtive, nor ashamed, it had nothing of the conspirator in it... This creature was whole-hearted. [84]

It is loathsome and superb. The combination of painstaking care ('almost surgical'), general commonplace ugliness ('long sharp nail'), straightforward horror ('very like a dead one'), and above all the alien nature of the pleasures this creature is enjoying, add up to a striking evocation of evil. By the end of the paragraph the whole imaginative experience of Perelandra is back in play: Weston, or whatever he is now, is as pure and undiluted an example of what he is as the Lady – and the whole planet – are of what they are. Weston himself, the human being, has disappeared; this is important, because the process of fantasy objectification will soon turn spiritual conflict into physical conflict, and Ransom must not seem a murderer. But it is also important to note the sense of something trivial, something childish, about the Un-man (as Ransom begins to call it); Lewis remembered the problems Milton created by making his Satan too admirable. [86]

To this Lewis adds a neat science fiction touch, emphasising that the Un-man is now something that does not really belong to the physical universe at all. It seems an obvious device until one considers how seldom it has been used, or indeed could be:

One got the impression of a force that cleverly kept the pupils of those eyes fixed in a suitable direction while the mouth talked but which, for its own purpose, used wholly different modes of perception. The thing sat down.... If you could call it sitting down. The body did not reach its squatting position by the normal movements of a man: it was more as if some external force

manoeuvred it into the right position and then let it drop... Ransom had the sense of watching an imitation of living motions which had been very well studied and was technically correct: but somehow it lacked the master touch. [87]

To this reader, at any rate, this is an impressive and credible evocation of unqualified evil; Lewis has succeeded in creating an imaginary Garden of Eden with a real toad in it.

#### (vi) Decision and the Presence of God

Voyage to Venus is a book with many strengths. The debate between Ransom and the Un-man that occupies the central chapters has been worked out in minute detail. Space demands, however, that we pass it by, noting only the effective way in which Lewis presents Ransom continually outmanoeuvred and overburdened by the tussle with an immortal intelligence. One section that does require particular attention is Chapter Eleven, where 'supernatural causality' attains simultaneously its greatest prominence in the book, and its closest convergence with Christian experience in terrestrial reality, producing something almost unique in contemporary fiction.

Ransom finds himself awake, and his mind goes straight to the problem in hand. After three chapters of temptation, the Lady has remained faithful to Maleldil, but her imagination is being corrupted and her resistance undermined psychologically:

It seemed to Ransom that, but for a miracle, the Lady's resistance was bound to be worn away at the end. Why did no miracle come?... He could not understand why Maleldil should remain absent when the Enemy was there in person.

The 'as if' is the keynote for the rest of the chapter. It introduces as a simile something we have already learnt to accept as one of the Lady's unearthly experiences; and this is to be a way of introducing the same thing happening to a terrestrial consciousness. But it is done gently: what is communicated 'as if' is less a proposition than a sense – a sense of awe that Ransom has already experienced and that is not alien to Christian experience on earth. This 'realism' is enhanced by the straightforward piece of psychological observation that follows – 'There is a chattering part of the mind which continues, until it

is corrected, to chatter on even in the holiest places'. The 'chatter' is equally straightforward – and meets with a stark response:

'It's all very well... a presence of that sort! But the Enemy is really here, really saying and doing things. Where is Maleldil's representative?'

The sense of motion in the sporting comparisons suddenly gives imaginative depth to the idea that some dialogue really is flashing back and forth between Ransom's mind and some other source. And this time, the content of the 'answer' is indeed propositional. Yet it is acceptable because it is a proposition to which the reader will easily assent: we recall – without the hindrance of Ransom's humility – just who was sent him to Perelandra.

Ransom objects:

He, Ransom, could not possibly be Maleldil's representative... The suggestion was, he argued, itself diabolical – a temptation to fatuous pride, to megalomania. He was horrified when the darkness simply flung back this argument in his face, almost impatiently. [90]

Here the 'darkness' is not merely giving information, but contradicting or rejecting Ransom's notions; thereby gaining objectivity. ('Impatiently' is the imaginatively important word here.) Yet even now we are not far removed from terrestrial experience. Christian readers will know what it is to wrestle with a moral issue in prayer, and find that an apparently plausible line of reasoning just 'does not fit'. An agnostic may see this as simply objectifying conscience, but is unlikely to find it unimaginable. Once again, fantasy serves to objectify things usually less tangible, while raising the question as to whether the things symbolized are merely internal, mental events, or objective, external realities normally beyond the reach of our perceptions.

His mind darted hopefully down a side-alley that seemed to promise escape... As long as he did his best – and he had done his best – God would see to the final issue. He had not succeeded. But he had done his best... Probably Maleldil's real intention was that he should publish to the human race the truths he had learned on the planet Venus. As for the fate of Venus, that could not really rest upon his shoulders. It was in God's

hands. One must be content to leave it there. One must have Faith....

The 'violin string' is a superb image; but also of importance is the way in which Lewis' supernaturalistic causality serves to enforce rather than to obliterate the significance of human action.

It is precisely the vague, evasive spirituality of 'One must be content to leave it there. One must have Faith' that the 'darkness' is ruling out. In so doing, it acquires imaginative reality by identification with all that has been most powerfully embodied in the book hitherto; for the beautifully-imagined world of Perelandra is one where every action is indeed significant, and the evil of the Un-man is something that must (in such a world) receive a response. It is Ransom's ideas, not the 'darkness', that have a sense of unreality. Ransom speaks in possibilities and qualifications ('probably', 'could not really'); the 'darkness' speaks forth certainties, crisp, uncompromising. 'They could, if they chose, decline to save the innocence of this new race, and if they declined its innocence would not be saved'; if thus, then assuredly thus. Yet Ransom's very evasiveness is realistic. Lewis had a strong distaste for Freudian psychoanalysis, but an equally strong sense of the deviations of the moral will. The reader recognises the twistings and turnings of Ransom's rationalisations.

All this time the 'darkness' has not sounded at all like the mouthpiece of didacticism. For one thing, anything resembling 'preaching' in the book hitherto has either been placed in Ransom's mouth or in the general narration; and the 'darkness' is in direct confrontation with Ransom and the 'cheerful, rational piety' in which he takes refuge. [92] It is worth noting, too, how the 'darkness' is presented solely as a voice or as a crisp expression of ideas; to this Lewis adds adverbs or adverbial phrases, not to explain the mode of communication but to emphasise the sense of confrontation and hence of otherness: 'relentlessly, unmistakably'.

'The Presence in the darkness, never before so formidable, was putting these truths into his hands, like terrible jewels.' [93] There is a fine economy here: Lewis wastes no efforts filling out

our picture of the nature of the dialogue; he emphasises its irreducible, uncompromising facticity and leaves our imaginations to do the rest. Extraneous factors are ruled out by setting the dialogue in the total darkness of the Perelandran night; it seems 'realistic' because it might all be going on inside Ransom's head – and yet the voice of the 'darkness' remains external and objective.

There comes a point when Ransom decides his horror had been premature... All that was being demanded of him was a general and preliminary resolution to oppose the Enemy in any mode which circumstances might show to be desirable... 'What bugbears we make of things unnecessarily!' he murmured, settling himself in a slightly more comfortable position. [94]

But immediately the possibility arises of the temptation being ended in the 'mode' of physical combat:

Hullo! What was this?.... His thoughts had stumbled on an idea from which they started back as a man starts back when he has touched a hot poker... The voluble self... became for some seconds as the voice of a mere whimpering child begging to be let off, to be allowed to go home. Then it rallied. It explained precisely where the absurdity of a physical battle with the Un-man lay. It would be quite irrelevant to the spiritual issue... The thing was patently absurd!

Here again it is the uncompromising honesty of the Darkness that appears to be grappling with reality, rather than making mental postures. And Ransom's experience of the Darkness' 'silence' has again a definite realism: the sense of following through a line of thought and finding it peter out, revealing itself perhaps as egoism and self-deception, is one many of Lewis' readers will recognise.

The watching presence that Ransom encounters is very much the presence of deity as Christian belief understands it: something all-knowing ('gradually you know that it knows'), gentle ('never interrupts'), and emotionally involved ('not without sadness'). These attributes are, indeed, the presupposition of the dialogue that is taking place.

From this point on the dialogue alters. Hitherto, Ransom's perceptions have been limited to one

side of the question, while Lewis has been building up the 'thereness' of the voice of the 'darkness'. But once that has been achieved, Lewis can present Ransom himself perceiving the answers to his questions: 'Every minute it became clearer to him that... At the same time he also perceived that...' [99] But it is also a silence that can accompany moral decision on Earth.) As he grapples with these issues, Ransom's personality becomes more distinct, of greater moral stature: yet his whole internal drama is played out in the presence of a God who speaks. It is not that conscience is being imagined as an external voice; rather, the point is being made that conscience can be the mouthpiece of a God who is objectively there – in any part of the universe. This is how the presence of God may operate in our world.

Having established this sense of realism, Lewis can modify the nature of the Voice away from its terrestrial nature, giving it a more directly revelatory character, supplying information that is new to Ransom, to focus the issue raised by his wish for a guarantee of safety:

'It is not for nothing that you are named Ransom,' said the Voice.

It is a fine model of providence; no direct miracle is involved, but nonetheless the disparate purposes of God come together for a particular configuration. The metaphor of 'void' and 'wings' is excellent: the reader's thought too is being invited to hover above an abyss with no bottom.

'My name also is Ransom,' said the Voice.

Lewis is so close to blasphemy. And yet not. For the whole process of what he is describing – moral decision in a context of prayer, leading to combat against evil that may well involve death – must be directly related, for the Christian, to what happened at Calvary. 'This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers', writes John in 1 John 3:16. Calvary is the paradigm, the model; Lewis is using the Perelandran setting to make a terrestrial issue starkly plain. He continues the passage in a way which demonstrates that Ransom's situation is

not qualitatively different from earthly discipleship: 'His hands had been reddened, as all men's hands have been, in the slaying before the foundation of the world; now, if he chose, he would dip them again in the same blood.' Of course to introduce such a theme in a piece of shallow hack narrative would be horrific. But Lewis has rebuilt the structure of the archetypal Fall – the paradise and unfallen innocence at stake, the presence of evil, the presence of God – with sufficient imaginative power to make this further extension seem not inappropriate. The facts of Perelandra are the dogma of Christianity: the convergence is total.

And in the light of that, Ransom accepts his duty of combat with the Un-man. Lewis simply states Ransom's realisation that 'about this time tomorrow you will have done the impossible'. [103]

The calm, universalising sentences, while distancing us from the edge of Golgotha and bringing us nearer the everyday, nevertheless reinforce the sense of the mythic, the archetypal, in what Lewis is describing; Ransom's experience is not unlike every man's, but for that reason he is Everyman, alone in combat against evil.

Different readers will react to this section in different ways; but to this reader at any rate it is one of the most striking evocations of man in the presence of God to be found anywhere in the novel. The presence of Maleldil is deliberately veiled but emphatically 'there'; while the 'mechanics' of Ransom's decision, the shifts, evasions, and rationalisations, the fears and the demands for an assurance of 'safe conduct', are entirely recognisable, entirely accurate. Each position in the process is stated and its implications drawn out clearly, accurately and economically. The total reality of decision-making as the Christian understands it, including the areas of prayer and conscience, are presented in a manner virtually unparalleled elsewhere. At this point realism and fantasy meet, and the 'baptism of the imagination' becomes possible: whether or not we believe in the 'presence of the Lord', if it should be true it could well be like this.

(vii) The Great Dance

There are many excellent passages still to come.

The fight between Ransom and the Un-man is stark and bloody, though cleanly fought (no-one employs the kick in the groin), and moves smoothly from a passage where the Un-man speaks clearly as the Satan of Christian belief to one giving a brutally detailed account of the fighting, and from an overpowering sense of evil at the start of the fight to near-delirium at the close. Weston makes two final, well-delineated appearances as a crumbling consciousness that is apparently neither the human scientist nor the Un-man, that suffers human terror and yet has passed through death. Ransom's wanderings underground after the fight contain several fine imaginative touches (especially the opening to Chapter Fifteen). However, space demands that we restrict our attention to the final section, where Lewis presents a vision of the Great Dance, an enactment of what supernatural causality must mean on a universal scale.

When Ransom faces the presence of Maleldil in the darkness, he perceives the crucial importance of the decisions of the small: 'Thus, and not otherwise, the world was made. Either something or nothing must depend upon individual choices.... A stone may determine the course of a river. He was that stone.' [107]

Ransom's wanderings underground help him understand that 'the inside of this world was not for man, but it was for something.' [108] Still, at the end of the book, he meets with the Lady, her husband, and two eldils, and gains the impression that they see the whole of Earth's history since the Fall as 'a failure to begin.' He enquires,

Is the enemy easily answered when he says that all is without plan or meaning? As soon as we think we see one it melts away into nothing, or into some other plan that we never dreamed of, and what was the centre becomes the rim, till we doubt if any shape or plan or pattern was ever more than a trick of our own eyes, cheated with hope, or tired with too much looking. [109]

In response, Lewis takes the narrative out of dialogue altogether into something more like ritual in which all present participate – or, indeed, ecstasy:

Another said, 'Never did He make two things the same; never did He utter one word twice. After earths, not better earths but beasts; after beasts, not better beasts but spirits. After a falling, not a

recovery but a new creation. Out of the new creation, not a third but the mode of change itself is changed for ever. Blessed be He!'

And so on for several pages. It is a difficult section to assess critically. This writer recalls reading it for the first time and finding it overwhelming; as a series of fictional analogues for the divine purposes to which nothing is superfluous and everything is crucially significant, it seemed peerless. Brian Aldiss, on the other hand, writes that this 'psalm-singing ending' makes him 'squirm with embarrassment'. [112] may well have a meaningfulness that is less available to the non-Christian. Worship is something that occurs rarely in fiction, and therefore may seem alien to the novel-reader. But to concede that is to abandon hope of a 'baptism of the imagination'. And surely a passage like this has its own power, even viewed as a myth of the irreducible 'otherness' of nature:

Though men or angels rule them, the worlds are for themselves... Times without number I have circled Arbol while you were not alive, and those times were not desert. Their own voice was in them, not merely a dreaming of the day when you should awake. They also were at the centre. Be comforted, small immortals. You are not the voice that all things utter, nor is there eternal silence in the places where you cannot come. No feet have walked, nor shall, on the ice of Glund; no eye looked up from beneath on the Ring of Lurga, and Ironplain in Neruval is chaste and empty. Yet it is not for nothing that the gods walked ceaselessly around the fields of Arbol. Blessed be He! [113]

The parallelisms ('No feet have walked... Yet it is not for nothing...') play a part in building up the sense of ritual, of a symphonic structure as speaker succeeds speaker. The sense of the significance of each participant in the Great Dance, balanced with the emphasis (enforced by the unfamiliar names – Glund, Lurga, Neruval) that there is much more to the pattern than anyone has seen or can see, bring to a climax the providential patterns that have marked the book as a whole.

It may, admittedly, be a final gamble on Lewis' part that has not worked in the case of some of his readers. If so, it is a pity. For Voyage to Venus

is an impressive achievement. Its introduction of the eldils; its evocation of an unfallen paradise; its union of the symbolic and the geographical in its treatment of the Fall; its presentation of evil; and above all its depiction of Ransom's moral decision in the presence of God, add up to something unique in contemporary fiction. Evidently supernaturalism and providentialism can be raw material even for the contemporary teller of tales, and *Voyage to Venus* points one possible way.

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References:

[113] *Ibid*, p.200.

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