



Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 2 - Out of the Silent Planet

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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.

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Part 2 – C.S. LEWIS' OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET

Out of the Silent Planet is the first of a science fiction trilogy by C.S. Lewis that also includes *Voyage to Venus* and *That Hideous Strength*. It is the story of how a philologist named Ransom is kidnapped during a walking holiday, by a physicist, Weston, and his collaborator, Devine. Ransom is bundled into a spaceship that Weston has constructed, which takes off for 'Malacandra' or Mars. Malacandra, it turns out, has intelligent inhabitants called *sorns*; and these have asked for a human being to be brought to their leader, Oyarsa, before Weston and Devine can be permitted to continue their activities – acquiring gold in Devine's case, and, in Weston's, preparations for some grand but obscure design

involving the extermination of Malacandra's current inhabitants to make room eventually for man.[1] Weston and Devine suspect that no good will come to the man who goes to Oyarsa; and this is why the kidnapping of Ransom has occurred.

Ransom, however, escapes from them when they are unexpectedly attacked by a shark-like marine creature called a *hnakra*. In his escape he encounters another intelligent race, the *hrossa*; and while living among them he comes to realise that Malacandra is an unfallen, utopian world whose inhabitants live together, in unselfish harmony. Oyarsa turns out to be, not a *sorn*, but a non-material entity 'put into Malacandra to rule it when Malacandra was made'[2], by 'Maleldil the Young', the deity of Malacandrian belief. Ransom learns that his own planet is unique among the worlds of the solar system in that it does not know such a ruler: 'It alone is outside the heaven, and no message comes from it', Oyarsa tells him when eventually they meet.[3] Earth, in fact, is the 'Silent Planet' of the book's title.

The book's narrative is much more concerned with what Ransom sees and learns from his various encounters than with dramatic action. But it concludes with the capture of Weston and Devine by the *hrossa*, their defence of their actions to Oyarsa, Oyarsa's response and its decision that all three human beings should be returned to Earth. The return journey is given an element of somewhat meaningless suspense by a race against time, resulting from Oyarsa's arrangement that the spaceship will destroy itself at the end of the ninety days predicted by Weston for the return journey; meaningless, to this reader at any rate, because although the destruction of the spaceship would seem to be a reasonable move on Oyarsa's part (even if it cannot and does not hinder Weston from building another), yet the time limit is something for which no real reason seems to exist.

Into this story Lewis builds a theological framework. The categories of 'fallen' and 'unfallen' are essential to an understanding of how Earth came to be 'Thulcandra', the Silent Planet, and why Malacandra is so different. The causes of Earth's Fall are traced beyond human history to the rebellion of the 'Oyarsa' of Earth, or the 'Bent One' as he becomes known ('bent'

being the only word corresponding to 'evil' in the language of unfallen Malacandra):

It is the longest of all stories and the bitterest. He became bent. That was before any life came on your world... It was in his mind to spoil other worlds besides his own. He smote your moon with his left hand and with his right he brought the cold death on my harandra before its time; if by my arm Maleldil had not opened the handramits and let out the hot springs, my world would have been unpeopled. We did not leave him so at large for long. There was great war, and we drove him back out of the heavens and bound him in the air of his own world as Maleldil taught us. There doubtless he lies to this hour, and we know no more of that planet: it is silent.[4]

The theological framework consists of more than quasi-angelic beings, however. As he learns from the *hrossa* about the divine 'Maleldil', Ransom is introduced to a Malacandrian doctrine of the Trinity:

Then Ransom, following his own idea, asked if Oyarsa had made the world. The hrossa almost barked in the fervour of their denial. Did people in Thulcandra not know that Maleldil the Young had made and still ruled the world? Even a child knew that.

"Where did Maleldil live", Ransom asked.

"With the Old One."

"And who was the Old One?" Ransom did not understand the answer. He tried again.

"Where was the Old One?"

"He is not that sort", said Hnobra, "that he has to live anywhere," and proceeded to a good deal which Ransom did not follow. But he followed enough to feel once more a certain irritation... He found himself being treated as if he were the savage and being given a first sketch of civilized religion.[5]

This works fairly well: the sudden appearance of well-known religious concepts in strange guise has its own interest (there is a subtle difference between the connotations of 'the Old One' and the connotations of the traditional terminology of Christian doctrine), and its own internal logic (if what any religion has to say about God is true, then it is only reasonable to expect that God might have revealed the same facts about Himself to other civilizations that might exist in the

universe). Lewis nowhere explicitly equates the Malacandrian cosmology with Christian dogma, but the parallelism is too obvious to miss.[6] It is reinforced by more subtle allusions. The passage quoted above on the 'Silent Planet' concludes:

We think that Maleldil would not give it up utterly to the Bent One, and there are stories among us that He has taken strange counsel and dared terrible things, wrestling with the Bent One in Thulcandra. But of this we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into.[7]

Lewis gives no footnote or direct reference, but the allusion is obviously to the Authorised Version translation of 1 Peter 1:11-12, where Peter speaks of 'the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow... which things the angels desire to look into.' *Out of the Silent Planet*, then, is clearly a 'Christian fantasy'.

(i) 'Widening the World'

The book commences as a fairly standard piece of science fiction, written very much with one eye on H.G. Wells. However, Lewis is intending to use the traditional motifs of science fiction for an original purpose, and he refers to the use Wells made of them to emphasise his own departure from the norm. For example, when Ransom first learns he is to be handed over to the *sorns*:

But what was a sorn?... His mind, like so many minds of his generation, was richly furnished with bogies. He had read his H.G. Wells and others. His universe was peopled with horrors such as ancient and medieval mythology could hardly rival. No insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable, no twitching feelers, rasping wings, slimy coils, curling tentacles, no monstrous union of superhuman intelligence and insatiable cruelty seemed to him anything but likely on an alien world.[8]

When he meets the *sorns*, his initial reaction is indeed of 'Giants – ogres – ghosts – skeletons'[9]. But on further acquaintance this changes to 'It was more grotesque than horrible'[10], and finally, as his categories become attuned to the realities of the unfallen world, "'Titans" or "Angels"'. [11] The landscape, likewise, is deliberately set against the worlds of early science fiction:

Before anything else he learned that Malacandra

was beautiful; and he even reflected how odd it was that this possibility had never entered into his speculations about it. The same peculiar twist of imagination which led him to people the universe with monsters had somehow taught him to expect nothing on a strange planet except rocky desolation or else a network of nightmare machines. He could not say why, now that he came to think of it.[12]

The motivating force behind these departures is clearly Lewis' worldview. Wells' science fiction is that of a humanist for whom the immensities of the cosmos must inevitably be (at best) alien, indifferent to man. For Lewis, in contrast, the cosmos is the domain and dwelling-place of a God who may be called 'Father'. This is basic to his fiction; in seeking to 'widen' his reader's notions of what the universe might possibly be conceived as including, he is aiming to make room for the Christian cosmology, along with much newly-imagined material. This is fiction with an apologetic purpose, even if it is much more than apologetics. The 'fictional hypothesis' is related to the author's worldview more directly than in Tolkien. As Lewis said of the second novel of the trilogy, *Voyage to Venus*, 'It wouldn't have been that particular story if I wasn't interested in those particular ideas on other grounds.'[13]

However, Lewis' first efforts to 'widen the world' are not so specifically Christian. Neither are they offered particularly seriously. After being hit on the head during the kidnapping, Ransom has a peculiar dream. He, Weston and Devine are standing in a 'bright and sunlit' garden surrounded by a wall topped with broken bottles; and although the garden is sunlit, 'over the top of the wall you could see nothing but darkness.' Weston insists on their climbing over the wall; Ransom is the last to do so, and while he is astride the wall Weston and Devine are ushered back into the garden by 'the queerest people he had ever seen'. Ransom finds he cannot get down from the wall, and remains there, feeling uncomfortable because his right leg, which was on the outside, felt so dark and his left leg felt so light. 'My leg will drop off if it gets much darker,' he said. Then he looked down into the darkness and asked, 'Who are you?' and the Queer People must still have been there for they all replied, 'Hoo – Hoo – Hoo?' just like owls.[14]

This is whimsical, amusing, and, considered as a narrative tactic, very effective. It is comparable to some of the dreams in Graham Greene's novels: it does not bear a directly meaningful, one-to-one relationship to the events of the narrative (the reference to Ransom's leg, and the concluding 'just like owls', make sure of that); yet it seems to reinforce the movement of the narrative as a whole. The reader is being presented with the image of an uncertain journey out of the security and certainty of a limited world into an unknown *but inhabited* darkness. (It is a little like the journey out of Tolkien's Shire at the beginning of *The Lord of the Rings*.) The sense that the journey is dangerous (it is 'into the darkness'), and possibly prohibited (in view of the broken bottles), both safeguards the suspense and is sufficiently different from the 'Seek and you shall find' ethos of Christian cosmology to help the book away from the direction of single-level allegory; yet it does this without jeopardising the framework Lewis intends eventually to set up (it is only a dream). This is an amusing piece of 'sub-creation' which nonetheless prepares the reader's imagination – and, by its whimsy, his curiosity – for the shape of a universe that includes other powers besides man.

To this we can compare Ransom's reactions to his experience of weightlessness:

He felt an extraordinary lightness of body: it was with difficulty that he kept his feet on the floor. For the first time a suspicion that he might be dead and already in the ghost-life crossed his mind. He was trembling, but a hundred mental habits forbade him to consider this possibility. Instead, he explored his prison.[15]

Indeed, he is not a ghost, and the book never suggests anywhere that ghosts exist (just as the earlier dream is only a dream). But the 'hundred mental habits forbade' suggests a sense of confinement; he has rejected this idea for emotional rather than rational reasons. Ghosts and Queer People may indeed belong in dreams, but still the reader's imagination is being stimulated to make room for considering whether there might not be more things in heaven and earth than in Horatio's, or his own, philosophy.

The next step is a little different. In a descriptive

tour de force, Lewis presents Ransom's experience of the radiance of space:

The Earth's disk was nowhere to be seen, the stars, thick as daisies on an uncut lawn, reigned perpetually with no cloud, no moon, no sunrise to dispute their sway. There were planets of unbelievable majesty, and constellations undreamed of: there were celestial sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pin-pricks of burning gold; far out on the left of the picture hung a comet, tiny and remote: and between all and behind all, far more emphatic and palpable than it showed on Earth, the undimensioned, enigmatic blackness. The lights trembled: they seemed to grow brighter as he looked. Stretched naked on his bed, a second Dana, he found it night by night more difficult to disbelieve in old astrology: almost he felt, wholly he imagined, 'sweet influence' pouring or even stabbing into his surrendered body.[16] .

Again, Lewis is not inviting his reader to believe in astrology; in fact he suggests that Ransom is benefiting from 'rays that never penetrated the terrestrial atmosphere[17], creating a 'severe delight'.

But the 'old astrology' is shown to bear a closer relation to reality than more recent mythologies that had made the heavens a bleaker and more alien place:

A nightmare, long engendered in the modern mind by the mythology that follows in the wake of science, was falling off him. He had read of 'Space': at the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now – now that the very name 'Space' seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. He could not call it 'dead'; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment.[18]

This is a notion that matters very much to Lewis. At the end of the book he introduces himself into the fiction as 'the author', learning of Ransom's concern for the continued struggle against the forces behind Weston in the light of his Malacandrian experience:

What we need for the moment is not so much a

body of belief as a body of people familiarized with certain ideas. If we could even effect in one per cent of our readers a change-over from the conception of Space to the conception of Heaven, we should have made a beginning.[19]

What Ransom refers to here is the 'baptism of the imagination' that was to Lewis the goal of the Christian fantasist. The hope is not so much to convince the novel-reader of the formulations of Christian dogma as to impress on his imagination a particular shape, with which (as in the parallelism of Maleldil and Christ) Christian beliefs about the nature of the real world can later coincide. It was Lewis' solution to a problem that faces any contemporary Christian apologetics: unbelief too often arises not from an informed awareness of the evidence, but from a completely closed imagination that cannot conceive of the universe having the added Godward dimension, and so is incapable of giving the matter serious consideration. Lewis felt that the conception of the outside universe as an utterly indifferent 'black, cold vacuity' was an important imaginative obstacle of this kind. It was one he encountered frequently, and assaulted several times in his books.[20]

Hence, therefore, the significance of Lewis' conception here. The remarkably sensuous warmth that he succeeds in putting into his description of the 'sweet influence' plays a major part in his overall aim. It enables him to suggest, too, that Malacandra is not an exception, a utopian Shangri-la tucked away in a forgotten corner of a broken universe; rather, the 'abundant life' of Heaven and (in a different tonality) Malacandra is the norm, and Earth, the 'silent planet', the planet of barrenness, is the exception. The cosmos is not a vast, alien, impersonal emptiness[21]; rather, it is 'the womb of worlds, whose blazing and innumerable offspring looked down nightly even upon the Earth... Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens – the heavens which declared the glory...'[22] Here Lewis hints subtly at the framework of belief that underlies his imaginative conception. Thus far he has included no explicitly Christian reference, despite the fact that his Christian belief is the reason why he is depicting space in this manner. But here, presumably, he could rely on many of his readers completing the quotation from Psalm 19: 'The heavens declare

the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork.'

The full theological implications begin to emerge at the end of the chapter; Malacandra's atmosphere seems only a 'pallid, cheerless and pitiable grey' compared to the 'splendour' of space/heaven:

Nothing in all his adventures bit so deeply into Ransom's mind as this... Now, with a certainty which never after deserted him, he saw the planets... as mere holes or gaps in the living heaven - excluded and rejected wastes of heavy matter and murky air, formed not by addition to, but by subtraction from, the surrounding brightness. And yet, he thought, beyond the solar system the brightness ends. Is that the real void, the real death? Unless... he groped for the idea... unless visible light is also a hole or gap, a mere diminution of something else. Something that is to bright unchanging heaven as heaven is to the dark, heavy earths.[23]

He does not follow the implications through. He simply hints that there might be a 'wider world' beyond the physical cosmos; and that the relation between the sensuously radiant interplanetary space that he has drawn so vividly, and the world we know, can be contemplated as a metaphor for the relations between physical and supra-physical realities. It is not his purpose to give evidence for the existence of such realities; he seeks merely to offer a way of thinking about them to the reader's imagination. Considered as a deliberate expression of the Christian worldview, this section functions to challenge the reader to think of the 'wider world' beyond or above human society not as empty and impersonal, but as radiantly alive.

(ii) New World, Old Supernaturalism

On arrival in Malacandra, there is a whole new world for Ransom to explore and for Lewis to describe.

We note elsewhere in this study the curious paradox that where a 'realist' such as Flaubert can be marked by a nauseated hatred of the 'unworthy reality' he depicts, the Christian fantasists Lewis and Tolkien seem to delight in reality even though their subject matter is far from mundane. This is not just a feature of Lewis'

fantasy, but of his whole pattern of thought. His work contains several enthusiastic references to the variegated, concrete 'thereness' of the universe that God has created, akin to the spirit of Hopkins' 'Glory be to God for dappled things':

It will be agreed that, however they came there, concrete, individual, determinate things do now exist: things like flamingoes, German generals, lovers, sandwiches, pineapples, comets and kangaroos. These are not mere principles or generalities or theorems, but things – facts – real resistant existences.[24]

The same hungry love for reality appears at the end of *Out of the Silent Planet* as the space travellers attempt to get back to earth before the destruction of their spaceship:

Wild, animal thirst for life, mixed with homesick longing for the free airs and the sights and smells of earth – for grass and meat and beer and tea and the human voice – awoke in him.[25]

There would seem to be a kinship rather than an opposition between this delight in created things and the 'sub-creative' impulse that makes Lewis' fellow-fantast Tolkien elaborate the geography, genealogy and linguistics of an imaginary world in page after page of appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*; and that sets Lewis himself effoliating what are perhaps some of the most attractive 'imaginary worlds' in the history of prose fiction:

He tried hard, in such stolen glances as the work allowed him, to make out something of the farther shore. A mass of something purple, so huge that he took it for a heather-covered mountain, was his first impression.... It looked like the top of a gigantic red cauliflower – or like a huge bowl of red soapsuds – and it was exquisitely beautiful in tint and shape.

Baffled by this, he turned his attention to the nearer shore beyond the shallows. The purple mass looked for a moment like a plump of organ-pipes, then like a stack of rolls of cloth set up on end, then like a forest of gigantic umbrellas blown inside out. It was in faint motion. Suddenly his eyes mastered the object. The purple stuff was vegetation... The huge plants opened into a sheaf-like development, not of branches but of leaves, leaves large as lifeboats but nearly transparent. The whole thing corresponded roughly to his idea

of a submarine forest: the plants, at once so large and so frail, seemed to need water to support them, and he wondered that they could hang in the air.[26]

Lewis is enjoying himself, and his enjoyment is communicated to his reader. The mixture of the unexpected homely images – cauliflower, soapsuds, umbrellas – with the more conventional 'submarine forest', and the visually-striking 'leaves large as lifeboats', serve to create a world at once vivid and surprising. The imaginative force Lewis puts into his 'sub-creation' gives it a robust reality. And this carries over into its inhabitants, the *hrossa* and *sorns*, and – an important point for our purposes – to their attitudes and beliefs, including their cosmology / theology.

Lewis soon faces an old problem in a new guise: the difficulty of presenting in a compelling way a good or saintly character, or, in this case, an unfallen one. His other-worldly setting proves to offer various ways of evading the difficulty. Characters that will turn out to be good can be made imaginatively striking by emphasising aspects that are apparently alarming or obnoxious at the first encounter. This is the case with his first sight of the *sorns*:

He had a momentary, scared glimpse of their faces, thin and unnaturally long, with long, drooping noses and drooping mouths of half-spectral, half-idiotic solemnity. Then he turned wildly to fly and found himself gripped by Devine.[27]

This element is present in his first encounter with a *hross* too:

In its hand (he was already thinking of its webbed fore-paw as a hand) it was carrying what appeared to be a shell. Then it held the shell to its own middle and seemed to be pouring something into the water. Ransom thought with disgust that it was urinating in the shell.[28]

Added to this is the simple element of curiosity. There is a neat piece of psychological observation when Ransom – a philologist – first hears the *hross* talking:

It had language. If you are not yourself a philologist, I am afraid you must take on trust the

prodigious emotional consequences of this realization in Ransom's mind... The love of knowledge is a kind of madness. In the fraction of a second which it took Ransom to decide that the creature was really talking, and while he still knew that he might be facing instant death, his imagination had leaped over every fear and hope and probability of his situation to follow the dazzling project of making a Malacandrian grammar... The very form of language itself, the principle behind all possible languages, might fall into his hands. Unconsciously he raised himself on his elbow and stared at the black beast.[29]

Lewis moves deftly from intellectual curiosity to action and emotional involvement:

Ransom rose to his knees. The creature leaped back, watching him intently, and they became motionless again. Then it came a pace nearer, and Ransom jumped up and retreated, but not far; curiosity held him. He summoned up his courage and advanced holding out his hand; the beast misunderstood the gesture. It backed into the shallows of the lake and he could see the muscles tightened under its sleek pelt, ready for sudden movement. But there it stopped; it, too, was in the grip of curiosity. Neither dared let the other approach, yet each repeatedly felt the impulse to do so himself, and yielded to it. It was foolish, frightening, ecstatic and unbearable all in one moment. It was more than curiosity. It was like a courtship... The creature suddenly turned and began walking away. A disappointment like despair smote Ransom.[30]

The reader too has had his curiosity sharpened about the inhabitants of another world, about other possible life-forms; and Lewis continues to feed that curiosity with details about the *hross*' culture, food, huts, poetry, agriculture, conviviality, body-temperature, droppings and life-expectancy. And in the middle of this he introduces *hross* religion, if religion it can be called: the fact that Malacandra is ruled by a deathless being named Oyarsa but was made and is in the final analysis controlled by Maleldil the Young, and that Maleldil lives with 'the Old One' who is 'not that sort that he has to live anywhere'.[31]

This element might have come as a shock, particularly given the parallels with Christian

belief. That it does not is partly due to Lewis' occasional allusions to a Christian framework as a normal way of looking at the world:

If escape were impossible, then it must be suicide. Ransom was a pious man. He hoped he would be forgiven.

It was no more in his power, he thought, to decide otherwise, than to grow a new limb. Without hesitation he stole back into the galley and secured the sharpest knife.[32]

Weston grew grimmer and more silent than ever. Devine, a flask of spirits ever in his hand, flung out strange blasphemies and coprologies and cursed Weston for bringing them. Ransom ached, licked his dry lips, nursed his bruised limbs and prayed for the end.[33]

At the same time, the disabling panic of the first moments was ebbing away from him. The idea of suicide was now far from his mind; instead, he was determined to back his luck to the end. He prayed, and he felt his knife.[34]

He drank again and found himself greatly refreshed and steadied... He was quite aware of the danger of madness, and applied himself vigorously to his devotions and his toilet.[35]

In each of these cases the Christian allusion has appeared in a context of crisis or action – Ransom's decision to ensure he can kill himself; the entry into Mars' atmosphere; Ransom's escape; his attempts to come to terms with his situation on first awakening the next day. The reader is not confronted with the idea of prayer in the foreground; it appears in passing while other more important things are taking place. Again, just as the unfallen *hross* were given unpleasant characteristics, so prayer now appears in seemingly inappropriate contexts – the intention or desire for suicide, the fear of madness, the decision to 'back his luck'. The sense that a prayerful attitude is something commonplace, scarcely requiring comment, is conveyed successfully; even if it is a slightly muddle-headed prayerfulness – or, indeed, because it is. And if this is a world where it is reasonable for a man to think in religious terms, it cannot be too unreasonable for a *hross* to do the same. When Ransom is introduced to the *hross* beliefs, Lewis inserts a sentence to the effect that 'Ever since he

had discovered the rationality of the *hross* he had been haunted by a conscientious scruple as to whether it might not be his duty to undertake their religious instruction'[36]; it is a reasonable idea to be concerned about, given the cast of mind Ransom has already been shown to possess. (It is also important to note that this cast of mind has not been presented in a way that singled Ransom out as 'the religious character' in the novel, different from the other 'normal' characters whose attitudes define the 'normal' point of view.) Lewis does not depict Ransom wondering whether his religious beliefs and those of the *hross* should be in competition. No theological argument develops; rather the convergence is simply assumed[37], and Lewis moves the narrative onto another subject:

It became plain that Maleldil was a spirit without body, parts or passions. 'He is not a hnau', said the hrossa.

'What is hnau?' asked Ransom.

'You are hnau. I am hnau. The seroni are hnau. The pfifltriggi are.'

'Pfifltriggi?' said Ransom.

The existence of a utopia poses a question in more than one direction, of course. Considering the *hrossa's* harmonious sexual behaviour, Ransom reflects:

At last it dawned upon him that it was not they, but his own species, that were the puzzle. That the hrossa should have such instincts was mildly surprising; but how came it that the instincts of the hrossa so closely resembled the unattained ideals of that far-divided species Man whose instincts were so deplorably different? What was the history of Man? But Hyoui was speaking again.[38]

Again, Lewis hints at the Christian framework and then moves the reader rapidly onwards – in fact to a consideration of the place of danger in his paradise. Hyoui, Ransom's *hross* friend, tells him, 'I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes.' Hence the *hnaakra*, the shark-like creature that the *hrossa* love to hunt, is not an evil that they would wish to see exterminated from the world, even though he occasionally kills some of them:

They will not wish that there were no hneraki; nor do I. How can I make you understand, when you

do not understand the poets? The hnakra is our enemy, but he is also our beloved. We feel in our hearts his joy as he looks down from the mountain of water in the north where he was born; we leap with him when he jumps the falls... We hang images of him in our houses, and the sign of all the hrossa is a hnakra.[39]

Here Lewis hints at the place that suffering might acceptably retain in a paradisiac world – and perhaps in the universe as a whole. (Later on Ransom finds a carving representing the early history of the Solar System, in which, Lewis notes without comment, the 'Bent One' is presented as 'a fantastic *hnakra-like* figure'.[40])

With these passages Lewis introduces important aspects of the Christian framework; the Fall as the historical explanation of evil, the fact that the presence of evil in a divinely-ordained universe might be something out of which good might come. These ideas are presented without stepping outside his descriptions of the *hrossa's* beliefs and attitudes.

When Ransom finally meets Oyarsa, the convergence between Malacandran and Christian belief is assumed to be complete. One of Oyarsa's questions concerns what has happened on Earth 'since the day when the Bent One sank out of heaven into the air of your world', and 'what Maleldil has done in Thulcandra'; Ransom begins a reply based on the – presumably theological – 'traditions' of Earth.[41] (Ransom does not complete his answer, since the colloquy is interrupted at that point – having served Lewis' purpose for it – by the reappearance of Weston and Devine. Lewis is careful not to be more explicit about his Christian content than is necessary.)

Of course this encounter is the book's climax, towards which its entire movement has pointed: the meeting, regarded first with fear and then awe, with the ageless overlord of the planet. Lewis' success in creating the new races of *hrossa* and *sorns* encourages the reader to give a hearing to that which these races accept as the locus of authority; if Malacandra has been accepted imaginatively at all, then what Oyarsa has to say will tend to be accepted imaginatively as part and parcel of it. Lewis' 'sub-creation' has

served to open ('baptise') his reader's imagination to receive – instead of rejecting immediately – Oyarsa's account quoted earlier describing how Earth became the 'silent planet'; the more so since what Christian theology knows as the 'Fall of Satan' is presented less as part of Earth's history (an area in which Oyarsa remains uninformed) than as part of the history of Malacandra, in connection with Oyarsa's story of how its surface came to be wrecked and turned into the Mars that Lewis' readers knew about.[42]

There are points in the presentation of Oyarsa in this scene and in the following one (with Weston) where Lewis' touch falters. There is a jarringly inappropriate note when Oyarsa tells Ransom that Weston and Devine 'stuffed as much as they could into the sky-ship'.[43] Likewise, when Ransom finally answers Oyarsa's questions about Maleldil's deeds on Thulcandra:

All that afternoon Ransom remained alone answering Oyarsa's questions. I am not allowed to record this conversation, beyond saying that the voice concluded it with the words: 'You have shown me more wonders than are known in the whole of heaven.'

After that they discussed Ransom's own future.[44]

The convergence is acceptable, and Oyarsa's consuming interest in the topic usefully suggestive of something corresponding to emotion. But there is an inescapable note of the over-portentous – switching suddenly and bathetically to the boardroom-style discussion of Ransom's own future. Weston, too, is portrayed displaying little curiosity when Oyarsa speaks of 'the lord of the silent world' in terms matching Christian theology; one would have thought that no scientist, no matter how eminent, would have failed to pause for consideration before replying (in pidgin Malacandrian), 'Me think no such person – me wise, new man – no believe all that old talk.'[45] But Lewis' portrayal of the sacred place of Meldilorn, where Ransom meets Oyarsa, makes up for much of this; and Oyarsa's inability to comprehend human evil – 'This explains things that I have wondered at... I did not think any creature could be so bent as to bring another of its own kind here by force'[46] – is an excellent touch. Fictional angels are seldom willing to admit

their ignorance. Still, it is really on the strength of his depiction of Malacandra as a whole that Lewis' further expression of the Christian framework through Oyarsa gains access to his reader's imagination.

(iii) The Bridge to the 'Primary World'

One other matter is worthy of attention. As Weston's spaceship leaves Malacandra, Ransom reflects on what he has learned:

Or was that only mythology? He knew it would seem like mythology when he got back to Earth (if he ever got back), but the presence of Oyarsa was still too fresh a memory to allow him any real doubts. It even occurred to him that the distinction between history and mythology might be itself meaningless outside the earth.[47]

This merging of the categories of myth and history is fundamental to Lewis' fiction, as we shall see in the following chapter. Obviously he is not postulating a state of being in which all mythology is indistinguishable from history, where every legend, no matter how ludicrous, trivial or corrupt, is true. Rather, he is suggesting that our classification of the two categories should not be too hard and fast, that perhaps what we call 'mythology' might be 'true' in more ways than we know. The fantasy mode is ideal for presenting such possibilities. In the closing section, however, Lewis attempts to blur the borders between the categories on Earth itself:

At this point, if I were guided by purely literary considerations, my story would end, but it is time to remove the mask and to acquaint the reader with the real and practical purpose for which this book has been written... Dr Ransom – and at this stage it will become obvious that this is not his real name – soon abandoned the idea of his Malacandrian dictionary and indeed all idea of communicating his story to the world This is where I come into the story. I had known Dr Ransom slightly for several years...

A good many facts, which I have no intention of publishing at present, have fallen into our hands; facts about planets in general and about Mars in particular, facts about medieval Platonists, and (not least in importance) facts about the Professor to whom I am giving the fictitious name of

Weston... And we have also evidence – increasing almost daily – that 'Weston', or the force or forces behind 'Weston', will play a very important part in the events of the next few centuries, and, unless we prevent them, a very disastrous one... It was Dr Ransom who first saw that our only chance was to publish in the form of fiction what would certainly not be listened to as fact.[48]

It is a little hard to see what Lewis is trying to do here. Presumably it is something of the kind that Tolkien describes at the close of his discussion of the fantasy form, *On Fairy Stories*:

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be "primarily" true, its narrative to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed.[49]

But simply stating that a story is "primarily" true' does not create this effect; it merely confuses the issue, turning a good fantasy into an implausible realistic novel. If Lewis' readers receive any aspect of his work as "primarily" true', it will be because the strength of his earlier presentation of Malacandra has resulted in something of a 'baptism of the imagination', opening the mind to new possibilities, rather than because of an odd and rather meaningless gesture at the close. It seems Lewis sensed that; for, having raised this apparent red herring, he closes the book with a postscript including two sensuously evocative scenes from Malacandra, indeed two of the most well-conceived in the book. Thus his novel closes with the reader plunged in the depths of Lewis' imaginative vision. It seems that the 'baptism of the imagination' is more secure if the imagination is left to itself, than if a rickety bridge is constructed across to this-worldly reality. Tolkien's most striking instances of providential causality require nothing of the kind.

At the same time, the forces that Lewis' readers encounter on Malacandra are capable of effective presentation in a terrestrial setting, albeit without any claim to being "primarily" true'; as we shall see from the opening of *Voyage to Venus*.

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[1] To read Lewis – especially his apologetic works such as *Miracles* and *Mere Christianity* – is to become aware of how far the climate of ideas, and particularly the popular objections or alternatives to Christianity, have altered between the 1930s and our own decade. Many of the notions Lewis combats have no currency now; this conception that Weston represents is an example – and one that seems today an implausible quirk. Nevertheless, Lewis himself speaks of it as 'circulating all over our planet in obscure works of "scientification", in little Interplanetary Societies and Rocketry Clubs, and between the covers of monstrous magazines, ignored or mocked by the intellectuals, but ready, if ever the power is put into its hands, to open a new chapter of misery for the universe... the idea that humanity, having now sufficiently corrupted the planet where it arose, must at all costs contrive to seed itself over a larger area.' (*Voyage to Venus* (1943; Pan edition of 1953), p.73). Of course such dreams now have an air of an exploitative, imperialistic spirit that seems distasteful. Still, Lewis' words 'at all costs' raise a perennially relevant ethical issue: whether – as Lewis strenuously denied and his contemporary J.B.S. Haldane seems to have suggested – the survival of humanity was an overriding priority justifying the abandonment of traditional morality (cf. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, 1970), p.311). Lewis touches on this question in *That Hideous Strength*, *The Abolition of Man*, and the short story 'Ministering Angels' (reprinted in *Of Other Worlds* and *The Dark Tower*).

[2] C.S. Lewis. *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), p.108. All references are to the 1952 Pan edition, henceforth referred to as OOTSP.

[3] *Ibid*, p.140.

[4] *Ibid*.

[5] *Ibid*, p.78.

[6] Or so one would have thought. One can only note with astonishment the statements recorded in Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (1974; Fount edition of 1979), pp.164-165, that numerous early readers and reviewers missed the parallelism in these passages.

[7] OOTSP, p.140.

[8] *Ibid*, p.39.

[9] *Ibid*, p.53.

[10] *Ibid*, p.106.

[11] *Ibid*, p.117.

[12] *Ibid*, p.47. Ransom's 'whole imaginative training' is likewise presented as a source of deception in pp.50, 67, 141.

[13] C.S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (New York, 1966), p.88.

[14] OOTSP, p.19.

[15] *Ibid*, p.24.

[16] *Ibid*, p.34.

[17] *Ibid*, p.35.

[18] *Ibid*.

[19] *Ibid*, p.180.

[20] In an essay on 'Christian Apologetics' in *God in the Dock*, p.99, Lewis presents the argument from the size and indifference of the universe as one of the two main popular objections to Christianity. Cf. also *The Problem of Pain* (1940; Fontana edition of 1957), p.1; *Fern-seed and Elephants* (1975), p.86; and *Miracles* (1947; Fontana edition of 1960), pp.52-58, where Lewis' argument includes a 'fantasy' (p.56) similar to *Out of the Silent Planet*.

[21] Once again, it needs to be stressed that Lewis is not writing a piece of apologetics concerned with scientific evidence and aimed at the intellect, seeking to prove that neighbouring stars or planets support intelligent (and God-believing!) life. Rather, in so far as he is concerned with apologetics here, he is aiming at the 'baptism of the imagination', whereby the Christian certainty that the cosmos as a *totality* is not empty and indifferent (even if the astronomical universe as a whole is lifeless, and 'other life' is to be found only in the spiritual world), and that humankind is not alone, can be offered as an imaginative possibility. This he does by presenting 'other life' as existing within the astronomical universe, although in actuality it might be necessary to look further afield. The presentation of realities of the spiritual universe as if they were part of the physical universe is a major aspect of the trilogy.

[22] OOTSP, p.35.

[23] *Ibid*, p.44.

[24] Lewis, *Miracles*, p.90.

[25] OOTSP, pp.173-74.

[26] *Ibid*, pp.48-49.

[27] *Ibid*, p.51.

[28] *Ibid*, pp.63-64.

[29] *Ibid*, pp.62-63.

[30] *Ibid*, p.63.

[31] *Ibid*, p.78.

[32] *Ibid*, p.40.

[33] *Ibid*, p.43.

[34] *Ibid*, p.53.

[35] *Ibid*, p.57.

[36] *Ibid*, p.78.

[37] Elsewhere in his writings Lewis expressed a fear that, if ever man encountered extra-terrestrial life in reality, he might be far less successful at sensing this 'convergence' of belief than Ransom is on Malacandra. (*Fern-seed and Elephants*, pp.92-93; *Christian Reflections* (1967; Fount edition of 1981), pp.217-18.)

[38] *OOTSP*, pp.85-86. The same question is perhaps raised obliquely when a *sorn* expresses surprise that men cannot tell the time without watches, and Ransom replies that while 'there are beasts that have a sort of knowledge of that... our *hnau* have lost it.' (*Ibid*, p.124.)

[39] *Ibid*, p.86.

[40] *Ibid*, p.128

[41] *Ibid*, pp.143-144.

[42] *Ibid*, p.140.

[43] *Ibid*, p.142.

[44] *Ibid*, p.165.

[45] *Ibid*, p.162.

[46] *Ibid*, p.141.

[47] *Ibid*, pp.168-169.

[48] *Ibid*, pp.177-79.

[49] Tolkien, *On Fairy-Stories*, p.72.

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