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Recovered Images: Medieval Echoes in C. S. Lewis's Space Trilogy

Nathan Earl Houston Fayard
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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Recovered Images:
Medieval Echoes in C. S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

Nathan Earl Houston Fayard
Samford University
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2006
University of Illinois, Springfield
Master of Arts in English, 2011

December 2019
University of Arkansas

This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

William Quinn, Ph.D.
Dissertation Director

Joshua Smith, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Mary Beth Long, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Abstract

C. S. Lewis has begun to garner more scholarly attention in the last few decades, but his first novels, his science fiction or Space trilogy, continue to be largely ignored by academia. Yet, these three novels are deserving of more serious study, as they are pioneering works of literary science fiction, and even more surprisingly, of literary medievalism. Though long derided as mere reactionary attacks on Modernism and science, when properly understood, these strange and wonderful tales actually reveal the complexity and nuance of Lewis's response to his times. In them, the Inklings author creates a unique combination of the medieval and the modern, never merely repeating his medieval sources and inspirations and never merely rejecting the modern ideas and texts to which he was responding. Instead, he creates a hybrid, a blending of the two that is greater than the sum of its parts. This project explores the unique perspective that results from this blending, placing Lewis's texts in the context of the science fiction of their day and revealing the revolutionary repurposing of many of the tropes of the genre along with the traditions of medieval literature and philosophy. It examines Lewis's combination of the interplanetary romance with a medieval sense of wonder to create nearly unprecedented tales of non-acquisitive exploration that stand in stark contrast to those produced in the early days of science fiction. It also traces the medieval origins of many of the other unique features of the trilogy, including the combination of quest and pilgrimage in the form of the Irish *immrama* that may form the basis of the structures of both the individual books and the series as a whole.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Jenn,
Whose unfailing, translunar love and never-ending support have been my North Star,
The fixed point for my own journeys among the heights and depths of this adventure.

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Introduction

C.S. Lewis: Re-Mythologizer

“Multa renascentur qua jam cecidere, cadentque / Quae nunc sunt in honore”¹

Space has been described as the final frontier, and indeed, it may seem like the last place to go, however boldly, if one is in search of the medieval, but such conventional wisdom is ill-matched to the strange and fascinating texts that make up C. S. Lewis’s Space Trilogy. These neglected novels are an intriguing mélange of the modern and the medieval, science fiction tales that shade into fantasy and in which a medieval cosmology, complete with angelic guides for its planets and demonic threats to its peace, shares the page with space ships, aliens, and strange new worlds. More importantly, this unusual mixture produces some of the very first literary science fiction of the 20th century, as well as one of the first serious uses of medievalism in the genre. These texts, long ignored by literary scholars in both fields, are worth reading and studying, both on their own merits, and for their fascinating mixture of the medieval and the Modern.

Though largely ignored for most of their history, the Space Trilogy novels have begun to receive more critical attention in the last several decades as the acceptance of C. S. Lewis as an author worthy of serious consideration has grown. They have been the subject of three book-length studies and a number of articles. David Downing’s excellent overview of the series, *Planets in Peril* (1992), though providing a survey of many different approaches to the books, focuses on a biographical reading and remains the starting point for any serious work on the Ransom novels. Jared Lobdell’s breezily erudite later study, *The Scientifiction Novels of C. S.*

¹ Horace, quoted in C. S. Lewis’s *Allegory of Love*.

Lewis (2004), looks at the novels as a form of “satirical pageant,” but despite the intriguing premise, it does not seem to have had much of an impact on the study of the series. The latest treatment of the entire Trilogy is Sanford Schwartz’s *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier* (2009), which examines the thoughtful, nuanced ways in which Lewis was responding to the science and ideology of his day. Although each of these studies has picked up on some of the medieval echoes that ring throughout the novels, many of the medieval underpinnings of the texts remain unexplored. Yet, an understanding of the medieval character of the novels is necessary to fully grasp the way they represent Lewis’s unique response to his era and the process of invention, perhaps better termed *re-invention*, by which he opened a doorway between the Middle Ages and the Modern period, one which remains open today in the three Ransom novels.

To understand the books, we must first understand the unique perspective that created them. C.S. Lewis was one of the most influential writers of the 20th Century, a man who engaged the *Zeitgeist* of his age in lively fashion at almost every level, yet he routinely described himself as being out of sync with his time, in fact, of being a refugee from earlier eras. When Lewis gave his inaugural lecture for the newly created chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University, he employed an unusual rhetorical gambit. He declared that he was a “native speaker” of the cultural language of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which he termed “Old Western,” for which he was to act as guide for his students. He compared himself to a Neanderthal or a dinosaur, a relic from a bygone era, and he remarked that his presence in the classroom was comparable to seeing a creature from the Jurassic “dragging its slow length” into the hall.² Despite these claims of being a man out of time, he wrote in almost every modern genre. He was a poet, a children’s author, a science fiction pioneer, a Christian

² C. S. Lewis, "De Discriptione Temporum," *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 1-14. 13.

apologist, a popular theologian, a philosopher, a cultural critic, and more. He was, definitively, a man of his times, but what his rhetorical flourish reveals is Lewis's love for the medieval or the "Old Western," which animated all the varied and diverse elements of his life. Lewis the scholar, Lewis the theologian, Lewis the fiction writer, and Lewis the lover of adventure, all came together in his fascination with the Middle Ages.³

In truth, C. S. Lewis was possessed of an intense imaginative sympathy for the literature and thought of the Middle Ages, the outlines of which he sketched in his deeply learned overview of medieval thought and philosophy, *The Discarded Image*. Though Lewis was undoubtedly one of the best-read men of his generation and unquestionably an expert in his field, it is worth noting that he had a tendency to generalize about his "Old Western" period, to gloss over difference and to overly homogenize a thousand years of history and a continent that was more culturally diverse than he allowed. Despite these issues, his vision of the Middle Ages remains a powerfully imaginative and evocative one that continues to be a useful introduction to the period for many of his readers.⁴ Indeed, it might be said that Lewis had a "medieval imagination," in his own, expanded sense, so steeped was he in the literature, philosophy, and history, of the "Old Western" world. He not only possessed a love for the medieval, its cultural landscape was inscribed underneath the terrain of his own imaginative faculty, and its hills, valleys, and mountains lie beneath the landscapes of his own fictional worlds.

It is this "imaginative sympathy" with the medieval and the ancient that is, perhaps, the definitive quality that underlies all of Lewis's thought and writing, and he sought to use this unique perspective to bridge what he saw as a chasm between the past and the present. In his

³ For an in-depth analysis of Lewis's life-long love affair with the Middle Age, see Robert Boenig's comprehensive *C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages*.

⁴ Robert Boenig, *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages* (Kent: Kent State U. P., 2012), 29.

inaugural address, he argued that the modern world was divided by a rift of cultural change from that of the pre-Industrial centuries that preceded it, yet he found a high degree of continuity between the ancient and medieval and between the medieval and the pre-modern.⁵

To put the matter in anachronistic but nevertheless useful terms, the divide was between a materialist, what Lewis and his contemporaries referred to as “progressivist,”⁶ world and one which still accepted and employed what Jean Lyotard termed “Grand Narratives,” or “metanarratives,” a totalizing narrative that orders and explains all facets of life (xxiv).⁷ Lewis himself forged a grand narrative, essentially based on that of medieval Christianity, in continuity with the Christianized traditions of the ancient world, centered around a Foundationalist Morality and composed of many facets from what Lewis, in the *The Discarded Image*, termed the “Medieval Model” of thought.⁸ Yet, it was always a medieval filtered through the modern, a medievalism structured as a response to modern concerns, modern questions, and modern doubts and fears.

The presence of Lewis’s medieval imagination in the first half of the 20th century raises interesting questions about the Middle Ages as a passé period, as he was committed to being a *current* apologist and not just an archeologist. He also anticipated modern scholarly thought in seeing, as he put it, “The present itself as a ‘period,’” one which, in time, would be subject to the

⁵ In so doing, as David Downing noted, Lewis anticipated modern post-structuralist historiography by nearly half a century, noting that history is not self-interpreting and is always read through presuppositions. He also fired one of the opening salvos of the ongoing debate about the classification of the Renaissance as a period.

⁶ Lewis wrote extensively of what he termed the great modern myth of “progressivism” or “universal evolution,” the idea of spontaneous and inevitable improvement of humanity, human civilization, and the human condition, an essentially progressive view of history, like that suggested by H.G. Wells’ *The Outline of History*. This view, often tied into a great, cosmic destiny of mankind, in which the human race expands to the stars, posits that historical change is improvement and not mere change, tending ever ‘upwards.’ Lewis addressed the concept specifically in his “Funeral of a Great Myth,” and much of his work is focused on shaking the grip he felt this ideology had on early 20th Century culture.

⁷

⁸ Lewis capitalized his term “Medieval Model,” and I will follow his example to clarify the reference.

same scrutiny and questioning that was applied to any period of the past, and he sought to examine the unstated assumptions of his era.⁹ He was not overwhelmed by the present, and he refused to bow down before what he termed, “the idols of our own marketplace.”¹⁰ Knowledge of the past was the lever with which he sought to unseat those idols.

Lewis endeavored to keep what he considered the spirit of the “Old Western” culture alive, especially as he saw it as an antidote to the ills of the modern world. This was the role he set himself in the classroom and in his writings, to be an evangelist of vanished days, but it also shaped his fiction and even his philosophy as well. He endeavored to recreate the lost unifying principles of the pre-industrial centuries, principles that he felt no longer had traction in the modern world. His work, in many ways, serves as a rehabilitation of such old ideas, since disregarded, or as Lewis might put it, “discarded.” As David Downing argues, “Though Lewis is often credited with mythopoesis, (or mythmaking), it might be more accurate to describe him as a ‘re-mythologizer,’ one who takes old myths that have been largely discarded in the modern world and revitalizes them with his unique blend of intellectual and imaginative ingenuity.”¹¹

It is Lewis the re-mythologizer that is at work in the Space Trilogy, as he recasts stories and ideas from the Middle Ages for a modern audience. The Trilogy’s novels are medieval in spirit, right down to their bones, and yet, they are very much a product of their time and intimately engaged with the major issues of their day. That is because, to borrow Lewis’s terminology, “Old Western” works form the basis of the Trilogy in specifics. Lewis reworks and reimagines them, blending them carefully into those of his own era. This is an important distinction, as Lewis was not simply writing medieval novels in the modern day, turning away

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), X.

¹⁰ Lewis, “Description,” 12.

¹¹ David Downing, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*, (Amhurst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 155.

from zeitgeist of the 30s and 40s and fleeing back into the past. Instead, he was reworking both modern forms, like science fiction, and modern ideas, like evolution and space travel, remolding the ideology of the early 20th century by blending it with his medieval vision. Lewis took the Augustinian view that “bad things are good things perverted,” and thus, even modern concepts with which he disagreed should not be merely discarded, but should instead be “corrected.”¹² Sanford Schwartz explored this element of Lewis’s work, and he described this process as Lewis attempting to “transfigure” his materials, setting out to correct corrupted ideas into better forms.¹³ The term is a good representation for how Lewis approached his sources and influences, both modern and medieval.

Lewis rarely employs medieval or classical elements without modification, and he almost never does so for his more modern sources. Instead, he “transfigures” them into new shapes, shapes that are more in line with his own ideology, combining the medieval and the modern and creating a greater, more unified whole out of the individual pieces of medieval and ancient lore. The movement in his adaptations is almost always from conventional to unconventional, constantly forging connections between disparate elements and encouraging his readers to look at the familiar in a new way. It is in this sense that Lewis himself works in the fashion of a medieval *auctor*, or author, freely drawing from and adapting a range of sources.¹⁴

Lewis, like medieval authors, reworked Christian and pagan thought in his fiction, creating a synthesis and not merely a repudiation. As Chad Wriglesworth described the process, “In the tradition of theologians and artists of the Middle Ages who Christianized pagan symbols into biblical narrative, so too, Lewis reenacts this imaginative-theological process by reshaping

¹² C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 66.

¹³ Sanford Schwartz, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

¹⁴ Boenig, 79.

medieval thought into his fiction and poetry.”¹⁵ He did the same thing with Modernist thought, reworking it and blending it with medieval ideas in order to “transfigure” what he saw as the flawed copy into the true original.

Schwartz reads this process of “transfiguration” as the unifying theme of the Trilogy, which he identifies as focusing on Lewis’s reworking of the scientific thought of his era and its attendant ideological baggage. His argument is compelling, but in addition to his program of “transfiguring” the science of his day, Lewis was also offering an alternative vision of creation and human interaction with it through the lens of science fiction. He offers his readers a world of wonder that exists for its own sake, and he offers them a model of the interplanetary journey which is spiritual rather than material in its goals. In so doing, he gradually draws his protagonist to an understanding of the universe that rejects anthropomorphism and biological centrism and accepts every element of creation as beautiful and worthwhile on its own terms. In each of these “transfigurations,” Lewis draws on his vision of the “Old Western” tradition to correct the course of modernist fiction and thought where he saw it going astray, and the values they represent are drawn from the philosophy, religion, and literature of the Middle Ages. Such a reading of the novels helps to reveal a thematic and structural unity to a Trilogy that has often been viewed as disjointed and uneven.

0.1 Publication Background and Reception

The Ransom novels were published between 1938 and 1945, and that same period saw C.S. Lewis rise from an obscure academic to one of the most famous authors and Christian apologists in the English-speaking world. It was only a decade after beginning the series, in

¹⁵ Chad Wriglesworth, "Myth Maker, Unicorn Maker: C. S. Lewis and the Remaking of Medieval Thought," *Mythlore* 25 no. 1-2 (2006): 29-40. 29.

1947, a few years after the publication of his final science fiction novel, that the middle-aged Oxford don found himself pictured on the cover of *Time Magazine*, with an angel upon one shoulder and a devil perched upon the other. Yet, his newfound fame had relatively little to do with his space-traveling hero, Ransom, and much more to do with a devil of his own, named Screwtape, as well as with his massively popular wartime BBC radio broadcasts. Those BBC talks, which the author would eventually combine to form his most famous work of Christian apologetics, *Mere Christianity*, in 1952, were an unassuming lightning bolt into the wartime culture of Britain and, to a lesser extent, the rest of the Allied nations. It was these talks that made C. S. Lewis a household name and made the unlikely figure of an Oxford academic synonymous with apologetics and modern Christianity. Yet, his science fiction books played their role in his rise as well.

Before the Space Trilogy, Lewis's fame was limited to the small coterie in his field, among whom he was recognized for the engaging literary criticism of his *The Allegory of Love* (1936), which was his first major professional publication. His fiction writing career began with the rather poorly received allegory, *Pilgrim's Regress* (1933), a few years before. His next try met more success, and he published *Out of the Silent Planet* in 1938. The early years of the war saw the publication of his beloved treatise on a perennial theological quandary, *The Problem of Pain* (1940), where he wrestled with the problem of evil and its relationship to belief in a God who was both powerful and good. That book was quickly followed by several more theological works, with 1942 producing *Broadcast Talks*, which collected his first two radio series, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, and the very popular *Screwtape Letters*. In 1943 he released another collection of radio talks in *Christian Behaviour*, his second science fiction novel, *Perelandra*, and *The Abolition of Man*, his philosophical critique of moral relativism that would become the

basis for his third novel. The final set of broadcast talks came in 1944 in *Beyond Personality*, while *That Hideous Strength* itself arrived in 1945. The science fiction novels were followed by *The Great Divorce*, Lewis's dizzying, Dantean journey from Hell to Heaven, in 1946 and by *Miracles*, his defense of the supernatural, in 1947. Yet, despite this plethora of publications, Lewis's fame as a writer of fiction was not really secured until he published *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* in 1950, which introduced the world to his *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Ultimately, the Space Trilogy has been overshadowed by the *Chronicles*, Lewis's vastly more popular creations from the post-war years, as they were overshadowed by his radio talks and apologetics during the conflict. The *Chronicles of Narnia*, a set of deceptively simple yet surprisingly compelling children's fantasy books featuring Christian allegory, quickly became an international sensation during the era of their publication, and that fame has endured, even grown, since the death of their author. That wildly successful series has become so synonymous with its author's name that many fans of Lewis have never even heard of his earlier works, knowing him only for the *Chronicles* and occasionally his Christian non-fiction. In fact, as Sanford Schwartz observes, "the Space Trilogy owes much of its resilient shelf life to the reflective glow of *The Chronicles of Narnia*."¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Ransom stories attracted a fair amount of attention after their publication, drawing both commendation and criticism. Yet, whether critics praised or panned the novels, they were generally regarded as being books that *mattered*.

The Space Trilogy's reputation has waxed and waned over the years, rising and sinking in the esteem of critics and creators of science fiction and fantasy alike. In the years following their publication, the books were recognized as important works, but in the decades since they

¹⁶ Scwhartz, 3.

have suffered something of a loss of prestige and profile, becoming by the modern day largely forgotten footnotes to Lewis's career. One reason for their cooling reception is their apparently didactic nature. While the Space Trilogy novels have always received criticism for their didactic elements, critical culture has certainly not grown more tolerant or welcoming of anything smacking of didacticism. Yet, the most important factor in the failing fortunes of the Ransom novels is likely the dominance of a flawed understanding of their premises.

The books have been plagued by an enduring misreading, a simplistic understanding of the trilogy as a simpleminded and reactionary attack on modernism and rationalism. Many critics have failed to realize the sophistication of Lewis's response to his time and its dominant ideas, the innovation he brought to the burgeoning science fiction genre, or his unique blending of that genre with medievalism, one of the first examples of such a mixture that was anything more than simply superficial. What's more, these texts take on even greater significance in the modern moment, as in them the supposedly reactionary Inklings reintroduced and revitalized medieval principles, like the syncretizing spirit of the Middle Ages, the universal brotherhood of rational beings taught by Augustine and Isidore, and the responsibilities of humans for the care of Creation, among others. Many of these ideas cut against the grain of modern attempts to co-opt the Middle Ages for political and ideological uses, especially by groups on the far right of the political spectrum who wish to find in the medieval period justifications for their positions. This ideological difference is particularly ironic coming from an author that is often characterized as being cut from similar reactionary cloth.

0.2 Series Summary

The first entry in the series, *Out of the Silent Planet* introduces readers to Elwin Ransom, a Cambridge philologist and the central character of the trilogy. The hapless academic is kidnapped to Mars by a pair of interplanetary imperialists who plan to offer him as a human sacrifice to the natives of that world. Yet, once arrived on the red planet, called Malacandra by its inhabitants, Ransom escapes and falls in with its three intelligent races. He learns much through his adventures among them, including the fact that, far from being a civilized man among savages as he expected, he is an uncouth refugee from *The Silent Planet*, Thulcandra, the only savage part of an otherwise orderly and peaceful universe. The extraterrestrial academic discovers that the Malacandrans are unfallen beings, living in harmony with each other and with God, who they call “Maledil,” though their world was damaged ages ago during the rebellion of the angelic guiding spirit of Earth, identified with the Christian Satan. Finally, after several adventures in which Ransom rediscovers his courage, the angelic governing intelligence of Malacandra banishes Ransom’s two selfish erstwhile companions but offers him the choice of whether or not to stay. Deciding that his own world needs him, the newly enlightened philologist returns home to bring the lessons of his experiences to Earth.

The novel was reasonably well received by its contemporary audience and critics, and, along with *Perelandra*, has in retrospect often been praised for its mythopoetic imagination and vivid imagery. Its ideological significance, however, has not always been either apparent or welcomed. Ironically, in a letter from 1939 about *OSP*, Lewis reported to one of his correspondents that, “You will be both grieved and amused to learn that of about 60 reviews,

only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of a fall of the Bent One was anything but a private invention of my own?"¹⁷

Such a claim must certainly sound like hyperbole given the seemingly unmistakable ideological thrust of the novel and its easily detectable Christian subtext, but David Downing's survey of reviews has borne it out.¹⁸ One critic even went so far as to opine that "Out of the *Silent Planet*, beautifully written as some if it is, does not seem quite to have grown from any conviction."¹⁹ It is hard to imagine how anyone could make such a mistake, but perhaps the era's generally low view of science fiction contributed to the seemingly willful obtuseness of reviewers. Who would expect to find gold among the dross of the pulp fiction of the era?

The second book, *Perelandra*, had a rather more uneven reception. The book delivers the next chapter in the adventures of the series' exceptional academic and sees Lewis's fighting philologist carried off to Venus in order to prevent a second fall in an extraterrestrial Garden of Eden. In a memorably rendered liquid landscape of endless seas and floating islands, Ransom meets the Green Lady, Tindril, a new Eve, and engages in a debate with Weston, his nemesis from the first novel, who has now become possessed by the Devil in a new attack on an as yet unfallen world. Finally, the earthly hero engages his demonic antagonist physically, killing him in a battle that ends deep beneath the surface of the planet. In the novel's conclusion, Ransom witnesses the crowning of Venus's Adam and Eve and experiences a vision of the order and interrelatedness of Creation. At last, he returns reluctantly to Earth to continue the fight against more terrestrial evils.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume II, Ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 262.

¹⁸ Downing, 36.

¹⁹ Frank Swinnerton, "Our Planet and Others," *Observer* 27 (Nov. 1943): 255.

This second novel seemed destined for a poor showing in the early days after its publication, at least if its author is to be believed. In a letter to Owen Barfield in 1943, Lewis declared that *Perelandra* had received a rather lackluster responses from critics, writing that “all reviews of *Perelandra* so far have been unfavourable or non-committal,” and though he was perhaps a bit oversensitive, the reviews were far from being universally complimentary.²⁰ In fact, one reviewer, anticipating much of the criticism that would follow, opined of the author that, “as an interplanetary novelist, he should read more Verne and less Aquinas.”²¹ Nonetheless, even the most negative reviews took pains to praise Lewis and the imaginative power of his world-building, as well as the subtlety of his theological disputations. While the *Spectator* argued that his goals were beyond the reach of prose and better left to the realm of poetry, however poetic his language, *The New York Times* tempered its critique by noting “if the book contains disappointments, it is only because its brilliant beginnings tempt us to raise our standards.”²²²³ Most of the criticisms of the novel focused on the extensive debate between Ransom and the possessed Weston, or as Lewis terms him, the Un-Man, and the seemingly incongruous turn to violence for the conflict’s resolution. Yet, *Perelandra* eventually received a great deal of praise. A particularly glowing review from 1945 described the book with great approbation, its author writing, “To some, [its] sheer imaginative power will be enough to rank the novel among the great works of invention.”²⁴

That Hideous Strength received the rockiest reception of all the Space Trilogy books, though even it was also recognized as a significant work at the time. This third novel takes the

²⁰ Lewis, *Letters II*, 574.

²¹ Alan Pryce-Jones, "New Novels," *The Observer*, April 25, 1943, 3.

²² Kate O'Brien, "Fiction," *The Spectator*, May 14, 1943, 458.

²³ Marjorie Farber, "Imperfect Paradise," *New York Times*, March 26, 1944, 4.

²⁴ Victor M Hamm, "Mr. Lewis in *Perelandra*," *Thought*, June 1945, 276.

action from the far reaches of the solar system back down to Earth, specifically to the fictional Bracton College and its surroundings in the English countryside, where the long promised terrestrial incarnation of the first two novels' cosmic struggle finally manifests itself. The readers follow the progress of two young academics, Mark and Jane Studdock as they become embroiled in an earthly battle between good and evil. Mark is swept into the machinations of the National Institute for Co-Ordinated Experiments, or N.I.C.E., an evil and ruthless group aiming at control over humanity under the guise of scientific planning. Meanwhile, Jane finds herself thrown in with a beleaguered company of Christians, led by the returned Ransom, which opposes those plans.

Lewis traces the parallel spiritual journeys of his protagonists, as Jane comes to a reluctant encounter with God and Mark to a much darker destination. As Mark progresses into the inner ring of the N.I.C.E., he discovers that any pretense of science or rationalism in the group is just a smokescreen hiding the organization's literally diabolical motivations. Along the way, the Christian resistance wins a race to discover the ancient sorcerer Merlin, asleep for centuries, and the climax of the story features the heavenly powers Ransom had previously encountered descending on the N.I.C.E. headquarters through the returned Merlin and bringing a surprisingly bloody end to their plans. The novel concludes at last with the reunion of the estranged Mr. and Mrs. Studdock and a celebration of both earthly and heavenly love in the Manor of St. Anne's.

That Hideous Strength met with generally mixed or negative reviews, but like those of its immediate predecessor, many were more a matter of qualified commendation than dismissal. Despite Lewis's lament to Dorothy Sayers that the book "got a more unanimous chorus of unfavourable reviews than any book I can remember," those reviews tend to damn with faint

praise rather than condemn the work outright.²⁵ A common theme among them was a rejection of Lewis's attempt to mix the realistic and the supernatural, a practice that has become much more accepted in the modern day. The success of subgenres like urban fantasy and the popularity of supernatural thrillers in multiple mediums might indicate that Lewis's "modern fairytale" was ahead of his time, however flawed his execution of such themes.

Despite winning acclaim for its intellectual depth, scholarly accomplishment, and the quality of its prose, *THS* initially garnered criticism for its almost literal deus ex machina resolution, described by one reviewer as "perilously like farce," unevenness of tone and structure, and surprisingly violent conclusion.²⁶ So shocking was the novel's bloody climax that the *Manchester Guardian* described Merlin's destruction of the N.I.C.E. as not only excessive, but accomplished with "brutal, quite unethical force, by, in fact, mass murder."²⁷ Added to these criticisms are more modern complaints of sexism for Lewis's portrayal of Jane and focus on a hierarchical understanding of marriage, which have further complicated the book's reception.²⁸ The common assessment of the novel could be summed up in the words of Theodore Spenser from the *New York Times*, who argued that "Mr. Lewis tries to do too many things at once," but however flawed the final product, most of the author's contemporary critics still praised the valiancy of the attempt.²⁹

Lewis himself considered *THS* his least favorite book, even writing during its composition that he feared it was "all rubbish" and "bosh," and the novel is still often considered to be the weakest of the trilogy, even by some of the series' champions.³⁰ Despite the novel's

²⁵ Lewis, *Letters II*, 682.

²⁶ J. D. Beresford, "Five Novels," *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August, 1945, 3.

²⁷ Beresford, 3.

²⁸ See David Downing's *Planets in Peril* for an overview and analysis of these criticisms (148—150), in which he finds a more nuanced understanding of Lewis's treatment of women in the series.

²⁹ Theodore Spenser, "Symbols of Good and Bad in England." *New York Times*, 7 July 1946: 10.

³⁰ Lewis, *Letters II*, 571, 574.

less than sterling reputation, it is still beloved by many fans of the Ransom books, and beginning with David Downing's study of the trilogy in 1995, it has seen some reevaluation in recent years. The book remains an ambitious and groundbreaking work, despite its flaws, and continues, in company with the other books of the Ransom series, to be worthy of study for those qualities.

0.3 *Anti-Science Accusations*

In addition to their varied reviews, all three novels received some measure of pushback from the science fiction community as well, as writers and critics tended to object to the novels' lack of scientific rigor and accuracy. The 20s through the 40s, or The Pulp Era of science fiction, was dominated by a predilection for "hard" sci-fi, more realistic tales based on real science, and the major editors and publishers of the day, like Hugo Gernsback, helped to inform and enforce this taste.³¹³² As a result, Lewis received criticism for the scientific inaccuracies in his novels and his general disregard for the "harder" elements of the genre.

The author himself was quick to dismiss these critiques, pointing out that his intention had never been to create accurate portrayals of science fact but instead accurate portrayals of spiritual fact. In his 1955 essay "On Science Fiction," he declared that "I took a hero once to Mars in a space-ship, but when I knew better I had angels convey him to Venus," positing that his informed attempts at scientific rigor were less effective than an openly supernatural solution.³³ He argued that in the type of story he wanted to tell, which might profitably if

³¹ Science fiction is often viewed as spanning a continuum, from 'hard' to 'soft', with more scientifically plausible and technically-minded stories on the hard end, like those of Jules Verne and Arthur C. Clarke and those tending more to the fantastic and less scientifically arcuate, like the *Star Wars* movies or Lewis's novels, on the soft end.

³² Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 176-177.

³³ C. S. Lewis, "On Science Fiction." *On Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1982), 55-68. 64.

anachronistically be dubbed “Science Fantasy,” the focus is not on the science of the setting, but on its fantastical elements. In such a tale, Lewis reasoned, “The most superficial appearance of plausibility—the merest sop to our critical intellect—will do. I am inclined to think that frankly supernatural methods are best.”³⁴ Nonetheless, even in the modern day there remains something of a debate about whether or not the Space Trilogy can really be considered science fiction. Given the broadening of the genre after the wild success of science fantasy film franchises like *Star Wars* and *The Guardians of the Galaxy*, which include many fantastical elements, Lewis’s novels appear safely at home being counted among the ranks of literary science fiction.

Among those who criticized the science in Lewis’s fiction was one of the founders of Golden Age science fiction. Future genre luminary Sir Arthur C. Clarke wrote to Lewis in 1943 to take the older author to task for his treatment of science and the possibilities of space travel in *Perelandra*. His real concern, however, was with what he felt to be not just Lewis’s poor handling of the science of his fiction but a generally defamatory attitude to science at large. Describing a seemingly slighting reference to space travel enthusiasts and scientists, Clarke wrote:

The whole passage seems to be an outburst of unreasoning and emotional panic rather surprising after the acute penetration of “The Screwtape Letters” which, incidentally, appealed considerably to me notwithstanding the fact that I have never felt much sympathy towards the Christian tradition.³⁵

Lewis responded, finding common ground but defending his views, and from this dubious beginning, the two struck up a lasting correspondence and an unlikely friendship. It seems likely that Clarke never entirely accepted Lewis’s explanations of his intentions, but that makes his later assessment of the other author’s novels all the more telling.

³⁴ Lewis, 64.

³⁵ Bodleian Library, MS. ENG. lett. c. 220/4, fol. 8.

In an interview on science fiction in 1963, Clarke claimed very rarefied status for the Space Trilogy, stating that it contained “two of the very few works of space fiction that can be classed as literature.”³⁶ By 1963, Clarke was far from alone in such a pronouncement, as the books had, at least among those in science fiction circles, risen in the popular estimation. Their accomplishment was clearer in retrospect, and by the 1960s the Space Trilogy novels were often regarded as significant and pioneering works of science fiction, particularly notable for being among the first ‘serious’ literary works of the genre. In 1960, Mark R. Hillegas sang the praises of the novels, writing that “many would agree that in C.S. Lewis’s trilogy science fiction has up to now reached its highest level as literature.”³⁷

This popularity did not last, however, and the novels are largely forgotten today outside of Lewisian studies. They do not even receive a mention in the Cambridge Companions either to Science Fiction or to Medievalism, and they are given short shrift by many science fiction scholars. Increasing animosity to anything that smacks of didacticism in literature may play a part in this decline, but likely more significant is the perennial charge of reactionary, irrational anti-science bias that characterized Clarke’s initial criticism of the novels.³⁸ While early reviewers might have accused Lewis of writing with too little conviction, later critics argued that he wrote with far too much and of entirely the wrong kind. This charge has dogged the novels since their publication, rearing its head from time to time in their history. In 1958 Philip Desay described the trilogy as “a total and unrelenting attack on science.”³⁹ This opinion endures today

³⁶ Arthur C. Clark, “Armchair Astronauts,” *Holiday Magazine*, May 1963.

³⁷ Mark R. Hillegas, “Science Fiction and the Idea of Progress.” *Extrapolation* 1 (1960): 27.

³⁸ This recurring criticism was examined by Sanford Schwartz in his 2009 book, *C. S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*, wherein he undertook a thorough and comprehensive examination of Lewis’s relationship to science in his fiction and philosophy. Schwartz traced the evolving critique of “scientism” in the Space Trilogy, drawing sharp distinctions between Lewis’s treatment of actual science and scientists and the author’s criticism of what he saw as the deification of “the progressive development of Man.”

³⁹ Philip Desay, “God, Space, and C.S. Lewis,” *Commonweal*, 68 (25 July 1958), 422.

and has increasingly colored perception of the Trilogy as the sense of its pioneering genre importance has faded. In one of the more recent histories of science fiction, Adam Roberts described the final novel as little more than an attack on Materialism and science, writing “For Lewis, spiritual realities are true: the material world is a kind of aberration, and dedication to it (as, for instance, by modern scientists) is mere blasphemy.”⁴⁰ Such a misreading of the novels would likely shock anyone familiar with them, especially given Lewis’s explicit rejection of dualism and emphasis on the importance of worth of the material world, but it is far from uncommon.

The most famous, and perhaps the cleverest, critique of the Space Trilogy along these lines was delivered by Professor J.B.S. Haldane shortly after the arrival of the last novel. In 1946, Haldane published a biting and witty, though at times poorly reasoned, review of the Ransom books in an essay entitled “Auld Hornie F.R.S,” where he strongly criticized Lewis for his poor science and especially for what he considered the author’s rejection and condemnation of scientists and scientific planning. In many ways, Haldane set up the model for most condemnations and dismissals of the Space Trilogy to follow when he identified the novels as Lewis’s biased treatment of the conflict between religion and science. Yet, Haldane was right in observing that there is an ideological conflict at the heart of the Trilogy, but it is not between “science” and “faith,” as later scholars have recognized.

Lewis penned but never published a response to Haldane’s critique, and in this essay, published after his death, he defended his novels, articulating the points that later critics have reaffirmed. The main thrust of the piece was a refutation of Haldane’s primary contentions, and in it Lewis offered answers to the most common anti-science charges against his novels. Instead,

⁴⁰ Roberts, 166

of a reactionary condemnation of science as a whole, the author saw his novels instead as a an attempt to help shape the nature of the burgeoning genre of science fiction itself, especially in regard to how the field viewed humanity and its place in the universe. Critics such as Bruce R. Reichenbach in 1983, David Downing in 1995, and more recently, Stanford Schwartz in 2009, have defended the Space Trilogy from its perennial critique, offering more nuanced understandings of Lewis's scientisim attack and his relationship to the genre of science fiction at large.

The next chapters will examine the circumstances that prompted Lewis to write the Space Trilogy and how his reworking of medieval sources and the medieval "model" of thought made the novels groundbreaking, both as science fiction, and as works of medievalism. Most previous studies (Downing, Myers, Schwartz) that have considered the context of Lewis's entry into the science fiction genre have focused more on the specific texts to which he was responding (Myers) or the ideological framework with which he was in contact (Schwartz), but it is extremely informative to see Lewis's trilogy in the context of the genre at large.

Chapter 1

Scientism and Science Fiction: The Genre Background to Lewis's Trilogy

The Space Trilogy has its most immediate beginnings, not in a moral crusade or a reactionary diatribe against science, but, of all things, in a bet made between C.S. Lewis and his friend and fellow Inkling, J.R.R. Tolkien. As Tolkien would later recount it, the pair were discussing contemporary fiction when Lewis said to him “‘Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.’”⁴¹ That fateful exchange led to a famous wager, in which the two then largely unknown academics dared one another to write science fiction tales to suit their tastes. Tolkien's effort, *The Lost Road*, a time-travel adventure entailing a visit to the Middle Ages, fizzled out, eventually driving him to turn to *The Lord of the Rings*, but Lewis's offering became *Out of the Silent Planet* and helped to launch him on a successful fiction writing career.

The rest is, of course, history, and while Tolkien's account makes for an entertaining anecdote, it also illustrates how the state of the science fiction stories of the day helped spur Lewis into creating his own. What was lacking in the tales the Inklings were reading was a combination of subject, outlook, and execution. Neither of the friends had much interest in the focus on hard science that predominated in many of the pulp magazines, “the fiction of engineers” as Lewis would later call it.⁴² He preferred stories about men rather than machines, though he acknowledged such fiction as legitimate despite his lack of taste for it.⁴³ In general Lewis opined that the quality of science fiction in his era was usually dreadful, but he had greater

⁴¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien: A Selection*, Ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 378

⁴² Lewis “On Science Fiction,” 58

⁴³ Lewis, 58

respect for the ideas that filled them, writing in “On Stories” that “The execution was usually detestable; the conceptions, sometimes worthy of better treatment.”⁴⁴ It was not just higher standards of prose he wanted, however. Lewis and the other Inklings watched the development of the science fiction genre with interest, and they saw great potential in the new style of stories, recognizing that they had power to creatively explore both new ideas and old themes in new ways, and they wished for it to be put to good use, to see stories written that were “good” in more ways than one. This was all the more pressing to Lewis because in the contemporary stories he read, he found a troubling undercurrent that had little to do with their science and much to do with their ideology. He saw in most of the genre a perspective largely out of sympathy with his own, with little that was compatible with his Christian philosophy and much that he saw as dangerous to society at large.

Writing in 1938, shortly after his first novel’s publication, Lewis acknowledged that this disconnect was a major factor in his deciding to write *OSP* in the first place. He declared that he liked “the whole interplanetary idea as a *mythology* and simply wished to conquer for my own (Christian) pt. of view what has always hitherto been used by the opposite side.”⁴⁵ Despite his simplistic description of his motivations, Lewis’s contributions to the genre of science fiction were not simply an attempt to Christianize the interplanetary plot. What started as a desire for stories that he and his friends could enjoy, fiction to suit their tastes, developed into something much more as the novel and then the trilogy that followed grew. What resulted was a sophisticated, nuanced response to the fiction and philosophy of his day. This chapter shall explore some of the major themes in early 20th century science fiction to which Lewis was responding.

⁴⁴ Lewis, “On Stories,” 55.

⁴⁵ Lewis, *Letters II*, 237.

1.1 C. S. Lewis and Scientism

The country Lewis sought to conquer, the science fiction of the 30s, was a world still in its infancy. When he published the first book of his trilogy in 1938, the nascent field looked remarkably different from the varied, diverse, and well-established genre of the modern day, which counts among its continuous flood of new material best sellers and blockbuster movies, as well as a few recognized literary lights. This was still the era of the pulp “scientifiction” magazines, what might be called an intermediary period or perhaps, to borrow some Renaissance self-importance for the modern era of the genre, a “Middle Ages” of science fiction, between its early growth in the 19th Century and its explosion into the mainstream of American and European culture in the 50s. In 1938 the genre was still finding its feet, with even its name still an open question. Yet, amid the clamor and chaos of the growing genre, there was a core of materialist assumptions that tended to unify the stories that populated it, and in these Lewis observed the growth of an ideology which troubled him.

It was this principle, he explained in his unpublished “Reply to Professor Haldane,” which was the true target of his Space Trilogy. His novels were indeed an attack, as the professor had accused, he confessed, yet an attack, not on scientists, but as he declared, “on something which might be called ‘scientism,’” which he defined as “the belief that the supreme moral end is the perpetuation of our own species, and that this is to be pursued even if, in the process of being fitted for survival, our species has to be stripped of all those things for which we value it—of pity, of happiness, and of freedom.”⁴⁶

“Scientism,” or Wellsianity, as Lewis’s fellow Inklings dubbed it, coining the name in “honor” of H.G. Wells, whose work promoted such views, though they did not originate with

⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis, “A Reply to Professor Haldane.” *On Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1982), 71-72.

him, was used by Lewis and his coterie in both a general and a specific sense. Lewis used it most commonly in the specific sense mentioned in his “Reply,” which might be described as a materialist perspective with faith, not in a higher being, but in the “developmental” or “evolutionary” future of humanity at large. Such “Evolutionism” was a philosophy that saw the survival of the human race and its possible evolution into a terrestrial divinity as the source for hope and meaning and thus, a goal worth almost any sacrifice. Sanford Schwartz described the effect of this ideology as transferring “the focal point of creation from a transcendent God to the progressive development of Man.”⁴⁷

Yet, Lewis’s use of the term “Evolutionism” in his discussions of “scientism” has caused a certain amount of confusion over the years. Critics from Haldane to the modern day have held up such passages as evidence that Lewis was opposed to the findings of modern science, including evolutionary biology. Even modern fundamentalist Christian writers have attempted to find space in Lewis’s opposition to “scientism” for a perspective compatible with their own battles against evolution, like John West and the other scholars who are behind a recent book on the subject, *The Magician’s Twin*. Yet Schwartz, in line with most Lewis scholars, dismisses these ideas, carefully drawing the distinction between Lewis’s acceptance of the actual theory of evolution and his opposition to the philosophy of “Evolutionism.” Schwartz notes Lewis’s own intentional differentiation between his target, “scientism” or “evolutionism” and evolution itself. While referring to the former as a Myth, Lewis insisted that “I do not mean that the doctrine of Evolution as held by practising biologists is a Myth. [...] It is a genuine scientific hypothesis.”⁴⁸ In fact, as Myers notes, Lewis’s fiction is comfortably in-line with modern science on this topic.

⁴⁷ Schwartz, 6

⁴⁸ C. S. Lewis, “The Funeral of a Great Myth.” *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 102-116. 103.

This is clearest in Perelandra where he presents a world organized on the assumed truth of evolution and which is itself in a constant state of development.⁴⁹

Instead, Schwartz argues that Lewis feared that the philosophy spawned by the theory's ignorant reception in the broader culture would be used to justify overriding traditional morality in the pursuit of the bright future promised for humanity. Schwartz convincingly argues that Lewis is really unconcerned with humanity's ancestry but rather is focused on how "scientism" could serve as "a conceptual apparatus that consigns other human beings to subhuman status, or summons up an 'evolutionary imperative' to legitimate the suspension of time-honored ethical norms."⁵⁰ In other words, it is the philosophical fallout from its misuse, not the science itself, which concerned the Inklings.

Lewis also tended to employ the more general definition of the term "scientism" without explicit clarification, using it more as an assumed context for his commentaries on popular attitudes towards science and philosophy, and especially the conflation of both. In this sense, Lewis used "scientism" to refer to the attitude, employed most commonly, he argued, by lay people rather than real scientists, which made the adherence to a somewhat imaginary sense of "science," in the abstract, a type of religion and insisted on the application of its forms to every aspect of human life. As Thomas Peters summarized the general form of the idea, "scientism is an ideology in which the model of the natural sciences is seen as the only acceptable test of the validity of all things and all ideas,"⁵¹ a philosophy which naturally devalues all non-empirical

⁴⁹ Doris T. Myers, *C. S. Lewis in Context* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013), 56.

⁵⁰ Schwartz, 6.

⁵¹ Thomas C. Peters, "The War of the Worldviews: H.G. Wells and Scientism versus C.S. Lewis and Christianity," *The Pilgrim's Guide: C.S. Lewis and the Art of Witness*, Ed. David Mills (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 203-220. 207.

knowledge and principles. In Lewis's usage, belief in the general philosophy seemed to lead to adherence to the specific concept.

Lewis saw this philosophy of "scientism" as a major trend in the intellectual life of the early and mid-20th century, though he imagined its origins as being much earlier, and he observed that this progressivist or "evolutionary" concept was the central ethos of science fiction in his era, while "scientism" in its more general sense formed the unexamined foundation for the genre. He characterized "scientism" in both of its senses as "The Great Myth" of the 19th and 20th centuries, and in his essay, "The Funeral of a Great Myth," he most clearly articulated his conception of the concept. Probably written after 1945, though not published until 1967, after his death, this essay is both Lewis's love letter to and critique of the power and origins of the "Myth" of "scientism" or the religious attitude towards an abstracted concept of science. In the opening paragraphs of the piece, he clarifies his use of the term "Myth" for the phenomenon, writing that "I call it a Myth because it is, as I have said, the imaginative and not the logical result of what is vaguely called 'modern science'."⁵² He described that vague concept as distinct from actual sciences, which he argued could not be discussed so monolithically, writing that:

what the Myth uses is a selection from the scientific theories—a selection made at first, and modified afterwards, in obedience to imaginative and emotional needs. It is the work of the folk imagination, moved by its natural appetite for an impressive unity. It therefore treats its data with great freedom—selecting, slurring, expurgating, and adding at will.⁵³

Central to his conception of the Myth is the idea that, although constituting a sort of worship of science and rationalism themselves, it is not, in fact, either scientific or rational, instead, exhibiting all of the traits of exactly the types of mythologies from which it supposedly provided freedom. Lewis felt he knew the lure of this "Myth" first hand, and in both his autobiography

⁵² Lewis, "Funeral," 103.

⁵³ Lewis, 103.

and his essay on the subject, he attributed his youthful turn to atheism in part to the seductive beauty of “scientism.” Remarking upon its emotional power, he wrote that “I grew up believing in this Myth and I have felt – I still feel – its almost perfect grandeur.”⁵⁴ Thus, he knew firsthand how successful a contender for emotional fealty the Myth could be. He would bring that knowledge to bear in his treatment of Ransom’s encounter with this ideology.

The Oxford academic saw the specter of “scientism” seeping into the Western imagination through the works of several science fiction authors and science writers, though he clarified that he was “not sure that you will find this belief formally asserted by any writer: such things creep in as assumed, and unstated, major premises.”⁵⁵ Ironically, it was the Space Trilogy’s most strident critic, Professor Haldane himself, who had, in part, popularized the perspective that became the target of Lewis’s novels. In 1938, Lewis confessed to Roger Lancelyn Green that “What immediately spurred me to write was Olaf Stapledon’s *Last and First Men* [...], and an essay in J. B. S. Haldane’s *Possible Worlds* both of wh. seemed to take the idea of such travel seriously and to have the desperately immoral outlook wh. I try to pillory in *Weston*.” The following year, he explained to another of his correspondents that what prompted him to write that first novel:

what set me about writing the book was the discovery that a pupil of mine took all that dream of interplanetary colonization quite seriously, and the realization that thousands of people, in one form or another depend on some hope of perpetuating and improving the human species for the whole meaning of the universe – that a ‘scientific’ hope of defeating death is a real rival to Christianity.⁵⁶

Lewis’s language is hardly hyperbolic, and there are definite religious overtones in both author’s visions of humanity’s stellar expansion. In addition, each of them argues that it was necessary to

⁵⁴ Lewis, 110.

⁵⁵ Lewis, “A Reply to Professor Haldane,” 72.

⁵⁶ Lewis, *Letters II*, 262.

move past traditional morality in order for humanity to achieve its full potential. As J. B. S. Haldane put it, in language that seemed to confirm Lewis's fears, "We must learn not to take traditional morals too seriously. And it is just because even the least dogmatic of religions tends to associate itself with some kind of unalterable moral tradition, that there can be no truce between science and religion."⁵⁷ For the adherents of "scientism," nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of the march of progress, and that was precisely what worried Lewis.

Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*, published in 1930, features that author's prophetic dream about the future of humanity, stretching across two billion years and 18 evolutionary revisions of mankind. The story follows the history of the species through laboratory "improvements" and evolutions as civilizations rise and fall and the seed of humanity colonizes the solar system, often at the genocidal expense of the native life inhabiting its worlds. Stapledon's vision would go on to become a significant influence in science fiction for decades to come. His predictions about human evolution, with mankind developing into creatures of great intellectual capacity with their other organs eventually atrophying away, became one of the standard tropes during the Golden Age of science fiction and remains influential today. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Arthur C. Clarke, who would go on to explore very similar themes in his own work, would later declare of this novel that "No other book had a greater influence on my life," and he was far from alone.⁵⁸

In the book, one of the final "men," who is just such an evolved figure, almost pure intellect, offers this explanation for the driving force behind humanity's near endless expansionism: "The task that was undertaken had to be completed. For the Scattering of the Seed has come for every one of us the supreme religious duty. Even those who continually sin

⁵⁷ J. B. S. Haldane, *Daedalus: or Science and the Future* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1930) 90.

⁵⁸ Robert. Crossley, *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1994).

against it recognize this as the last office of man.”⁵⁹ Lewis admired the book’s imaginative grandeur, even as he abhorred its philosophy, and it is not hard to see Stapledon’s influence in *The Space Trilogy*, even without his note in the preface of *THS*, where he declared that he had encountered in Stapledon’s work ideas similar to those at the center of his own novel and that “I admire his invention (though not his philosophy) so much that I should feel no shame to borrow.”⁶⁰ That borrowing is especially recognizable in the philosophy of Professor Weston as he proudly declares it before the Oyarsa of Malacandra in the first book:

‘It is in her right,’ said Weston, ‘the right, or, if you will, the might of Life herself, that I am prepared without flinching to plant the flag of man on the soil of Malacandra: to march on, step by step, superseding, where necessary, the lower forms of life that we find, claiming planet after planet, system after system, till our posterity—whatever strange forms and yet unguessed mentality they have assumed—dwell in the universe wherever the universe is habitable.’⁶¹

The same sense of a biological imperial imperative that is found in Stapledon’s various “men” is found in Weston’s words, and his focus on the evolution of humanity as it spreads among the stars is very indicative of Stapledon’s work. Lewis feared that such a philosophy could, and with Weston clearly does, justify any type of atrocities committed in the pursuit of its star-spanning goals, and this idea was abhorrent to the Christian writer.

J.B.S. Haldane’s *Possible Worlds* evoked a comparable reaction from Lewis, containing as it does a very similar view of the future destiny of mankind. The essay in Haldane’s collection that seems likely to have evoked the strongest response from Lewis was “The Last Judgement,” which dramatically recounts the death of the planet Earth in epic fashion and vivid detail, as millions of years in the future, the Moon at long last crashes into its surface. Yet, this event does not entail the destruction of the human race, which, after denying its inevitable fate

⁵⁹ Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1988), 322.

⁶⁰ C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 8.

⁶¹ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 136.

for eons, finally undertakes the arduous process of colonizing Venus in order to save itself. In the majestic, dramatic beauty of Haldane's account of the Earth's slow death and humanity's gradual escape from its cosmic cradle, there is one of the clearest articulations of the grand narrative Lewis admiringly dissected in his "Funeral for a Great Myth."

In Haldane's essay, humanity's great undertaking explicitly replaces religion as the main focus and motivator for humanity, just as in Stapledon's book, and the future humans of his account become willing to sacrifice all, including their very nature, in order to achieve it. He describes humanity's dedication to their new faith with heroic language, writing that "Confronted once more with an ideal as high as that of religion, but more rational, a task as concrete and as infinitely greater than that of the patriot, man became once more capable of self-transcendence."⁶²

To accomplish its goal, humanity forcibly evolves itself into a form suitable for this task, and in the process entirely does away with much that we might recognize as human, including individuality, the capacity for many emotions, including pity, and the desire for personal happiness. Of course, it is no accident that Lewis's description of "Scientism" uses just these examples of what it means to sacrifice the race's humanity. Eventually, these future beings become merely components of a super-organism, and they completely subjugate free-will to the broadcast thoughts of their rulers, a signal which they have no choice, biologically, but to receive. The constant signals that its members receive inform them that they are "components of a super-organism or deity, possibly the only one in space-time, and of its past, present, and future," and force in upon them their role in the whole.⁶³

⁶² J. B. S. Haldane, *Possible Worlds and Other Essays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927). 302.

⁶³ Haldane, 304.

In the essay, humanity has succeeded in creating its own deity, as it has its own religion, which is its own exalted survival and communal existence. The parallels to Lewis's *THS* are clearly apparent, where he presents a twisted, nightmare version of this possibility. The creature at the center of the N.I.C.E., referred to blandly enough as "the Head," is indeed a head, and only a head, intellect detached from a body, and supposedly free from human frailties like sympathy and pity. It is also central to the philosophy of the N.I.C.E.'s Inner Circle, the deity of their new religion, and in their monstrous creation, they find hope for immortality and omnipotence. As the defrocked minister Straik raves to Mark when he is brought to see the creature, "Don't you see [...] that we are offering you the unspeakable glory of being present at the creation of God Almighty? [...] It is a man—or a being made by man—who will finally ascend the throne of the universe. And rule forever."⁶⁴ Just as with Haldane's story, the inhabitants of the N.I.C.E. think they have created their own deity, and it is a being which, in the end must completely dominate all others.

Just as with the adherents of "scientism" in the Space Trilogy, Haldane's evolved beings have little regard for individuals, who according to their philosophy, can and should be sacrificed for their grand purpose. Haldane's evolved Venusian narrator casually explains that when "the crew of the last projectile to reach Venus were incapable of fertile unions with our inhabitants, [...] they were therefore used for experimental purposes."⁶⁵ Later, when colonization of Jupiter is being planned, ruthless scientific efficiency is applied to the creation of suitable creatures for such a mission. Rather than trust to simple breeding and genetic manipulation to create beings capable of surviving the gas giant's intense gravity, successful subjects "are selected by spinning

⁶⁴ Lewis, *Hideous*, 176.

⁶⁵ Haldane, 305.

them round in centrifuges which supply an artificial gravitational field, and destroy the less suitable members of each generation.”⁶⁶

The final goal of Haldane’s human descendants is the same as that of Stapledon’s last “men,” as well as Professor Weston and company, the complete and total colonization of the universe by “humanity.” As the narrator declares in “Last Judgement,” “it is our ideal that all the matter in [the galaxy] available for life should be within the power of the heirs of the species whose original home has just been destroyed. If that ideal is even approximately fulfilled, the end of the world which we have just witnessed was an episode of entirely negligible importance. And there are other galaxies.”⁶⁷

The influence of this essay on Lewis’s work in general and the Space Trilogy in particular is both self-evident and profound. We find the collectivist philosophy of Haldane’s evolved humans clearly reflected in Weston’s first speech to Ransom. When his prisoner demands to know why he has been drugged and kidnapped, the callous explorer replies grandly:

I admit that we have had to infringe your rights. My only defense is that small claims must give way to great. [...] infinity, and therefore perhaps eternity, is being put into the hands of the human race. You cannot be so small-minded as to think that the rights or the life of an individual or of a million individuals are of the slightest importance in comparison with this.⁶⁸

One can easily imagine Weston having read Haldane’s work with approbation, sagely nodding at the rational sacrifices of the few for the many, even when it is a few millions for many billions. That attitude is found throughout the trilogy, and never more clearly than in the final novel, as when Weston’s erstwhile companion from the first book, now known as Lord Feverstone, casually describes how the N.I.C.E. will fulfill its agenda:

⁶⁶ Haldane, 308.

⁶⁷ Haldane, 309.

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 29.

Quite simple and obvious things, at first – sterilization of the unfit, liquidation of backward races (we don't want any dead weights), selective breeding. Then real education, including pre-natal education. By real education I mean one that has no 'take-it-or-leave-it' nonsense. A real education makes the patient what it wants infallibly: whatever he or his parents try to do about it. Of course, it'll have to be mainly psychological at first. But we'll get on to biochemical conditioning in the end and direct manipulation of the brain."⁶⁹

The program is very similar to that followed by Haldane's evolved humans, utilizing nearly the same progression of processes, in fact. Yet, while Haldane's future Venusian looks back dispassionately on a *fait accompli*, with most of the sacrifices and compromises in the narrator's past, Lewis's characters look forward to their future accomplishment, or in the case of *THS*, plan for their implementation in the present.

Lewis also never allows his readers to lose sight of the impact of these vast and impersonal philosophies upon individuals, in contrast to the collectivist perspectives of Haldane and Stapledon. Through Mark's encounter with Feverston's philosophy in that *THS*, Lewis emphasizes the real, human cost of such policies, stressing the disconnect of such plans for general categories of people from their effect upon the individuals who make up those categories. Despite the fact that Mark intellectually supported the N.I.C.E.'s agenda and "recommended that certain classes of people should be gradually eliminated," Lewis assures his readers that "he had never been there when a small shopkeeper went to the workhouse or a starved old woman of the governess type came to the very last day and hour and minute in the cold attic. He knew nothing about the last half cup of cocoa drunk slowly ten days before."⁷⁰

When Studdock finally faces the reality of the N.I.C.E.'s work, he cannot escape the sense of its

⁶⁹ Lewis, *Hideous*, 40.

⁷⁰ Lewis, *Hideous*, 182.

wrongness, despite the fact that his mind had “hardly one rag of noble thought, either Christian or Pagan,” upon which to draw to assess the morality of the situation.⁷¹

While Lewis’s fears about the philosophical consequences of the “scientism” espoused in the works of Stapledon, Haldane, and others, with his visions of vast, impersonal forces exercising a coldly rational yet horribly inhuman will over helpless individuals, may seem overblown for modern audiences, a distant and unlikely nightmare, it is important to remember that when he was writing the Trilogy, there was much more fact than fiction to such dreams. As Sanford Schwartz describes the situation:

These issues were increasingly acute in the early twentieth century, when projects for the ‘transformation of humanity’ turned from speculative fictions into real-life legislative agendas for the improvement of the species, and at their most extreme, into lethal crusades to secure the future of the evolutionary process itself.⁷²

Of course, the entire series is set against the backdrop of the eugenics programs undertaken by the Western nations in the early 20th century, which were endorsed by authors like Haldane and underwritten by the developmental paradigm, but that is not all.⁷³

The first novel took shape in the looming shadow of World War II, and when it arrived in the U.K. in April of 1938, Hitler’s legions were already planning their invasion of Poland. The infamous Kristallnacht, or Night of Broken Glass, was only a few months away, and the first concentration camps had already been in operation for years. Though the death camps were yet to come, the ideologies that made them possible were already well ensconced in the Western imagination. The second novel appeared in 1943, in the midst of the conflict, when the Holocaust was well under way and millions of people in Europe faced just such a cold and efficiently horrific fate, delivered with the same dispassionate detachment that had been heralded

⁷¹ Lewis, 182.

⁷² Schwartz, 6.

⁷³ Schwartz, 30.

by the evolutionary pioneers of Haldane's and Stapledon's fiction. In fact, the ongoing reality of the war is a topic raised several times by Ransom, as he contemplates his own adventure. As he struggles with the necessity for violent action in his conflict with the Un-Man, Ransom's thoughts of the war help to confirm him in his task, as he realizes that:

at that moment, far away on Earth, as he now could not help remembering, men were at war, and white-faced subalterns and freckled corporals who had but lately begun to shave, stood in horrible gaps or crawled forward in deadly darkness, awaking, like him, to the preposterous truth that all really depended on their actions.⁷⁴

The final book arriving after the war helped to emphasize that, although that struggle was over, the ideas that had spawned it were not necessarily defeated. The war remains a specter in *THS*, a ghostly presence that hovers in the background of the entire story. Occasionally it also drifts into the foreground to ensure that it is not forgotten, as in Mrs. Dimble's remark after having been thrown out of her house by the N.I.C.E.'s "police." She confesses to Jane that "Cecil and I both thought the same thing: we thought, it's almost as if we'd lost the war," linking the image of jack-booted thugs trampling through the English countryside to wartime anxieties about invasion.⁷⁵⁷⁶ Lewis uses the memory of the World War, a more distant memory in the novel than at the time of its publication, to remind the characters and the readers that the struggle within the book's pages is not, in fact, new, but merely a continuation of an older conflict. For Lewis, however, the war and the menace of Nazism is more than just a backdrop. He explicitly linked Nazism to the dangers of the developmental paradigm in his "Reply to Professor Haldane," pointing out that his fears about programs for the advancement of the human race being used for the brutal mistreatment of some humans by their fellows was quite well realized in Hitler's regime.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 121.

⁷⁵ Lewis, *Hideous*, 74.

⁷⁶ Downing, 54.

⁷⁷ Lewis, "Reply," 74.

Yet, dehumanizing elements of the “Great Myth” did not die with the Nazi dream of a thousand year Reich, as the Myth was firmly embedded in the literary imagination of the West both before and after the war. While the works of Haldane and Stapledon may have been the ones to spur Lewis into writing, their ideas were far from isolated. They captured the spirit of their age and both went on to influence much of the fiction that would follow. Their two books, along with much of H. G. Wells’s work, especially his forward-looking future history, *The Shape of Things to Come*, popularized “scientism” in both of its senses.

1.2 Science Fiction and Scientism: No Peace Between Human and Alien

In this way, the genre was still heavily influenced by the long shadow cast by its Early Modern origins and by one of its early luminaries, H.G. Wells. It is hard to overstate Wells’ importance in the genre. As Patrick Parrinder puts it, Wells is “the pivotal figure in the evolution of scientific romance into modern science fiction. His example has done as much to shape SF as any other single literary influence.”⁷⁸ Wells’s fingerprints are clearly visible in early 20th century science fiction and through its Golden Age.⁷⁹ The bulk of the writers of the day, especially those turning out sci-fi thrillers in the pulps, tended to follow the patterns their predecessor established around the turn of the century. The science fiction stories of this era possessed a strong streak of imperialism and xenophobia, supported by the influence of “scientism,” with its materialist assumptions and promises of the destiny of mankind. The cosmic journeys that proliferated in the pulps and novels of the day were predominately voyages of exploitation and conquest, in which brave human explorers encountered savage alien hordes or an intrepid human resistance

⁷⁸ Patrick Parrinder, *Science Fiction: its Criticism and Teaching* (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 10.

⁷⁹ Roberts, 153.

opposed a superior alien invasion. Lewis's anxiety about the potential moral pitfalls of ideologies influenced by "scientism" found some confirmation in the way the burgeoning genre of science fiction tended to treat non-human characters and, at times, fellow humans who authors did not believe sufficiently "evolved." The relationships between humanity and the alien Others that filled their pages tended to be overwhelmingly antagonistic and competitive.

The clearest examples of this trend come, unsurprisingly, from H. G. Wells. The pattern of military conflict between humans and aliens was set in his genre defining novel, *War of the Worlds*, which depicts a technologically superior alien civilization's attempt to colonize the Earth, making explicit parallels to the Western world's own treatment of the native population of Tasmania. Its imperialistic overtones and the nightmarish portrayal of the alien Other are obvious to even a casual observer and have long been the subject of critical analysis. Darko Suvin captures the power of Wells' xenophobic vision in his description of the novel's monstrous Martians:

The Martians from *The War of the Worlds* are described in Goebbelsian terms of repugnantly slimy and horrible 'racial' otherness and given the sole function of bloodthirsty predators (a function that fuses genocidal fire-power – itself described as an echo of the treatment meted out by the imperialist powers to colonized peoples – with the bloodsucking vampirism of horror fantasies).⁸⁰

There can be no peaceful exchange or coexistence between humanity and Wells' Martians, who are monstrous in both appearance and conduct. Their relationship is solely and savagely one of competition and conflict. Their world is dying, and the Earth has the resources they need.

The novel, published in 1898, at the end of science fiction's first great flowering in the 19th century, spawned a host of imitators. This nightmarish image of the horrifying otherness of alien

⁸⁰ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 78.

life became the standard for science fiction well into middle of the 20th century, establishing the prototypical Bug Eyed Monster of popular imagination.

Wells' later novel, *The First Men in the Moon*, from 1901, provides another, though no less pessimistic, perspective on contact between species, as his two hapless turn of the century astronauts travel to the Moon with dreams of imperialistic grandeur and economic exploitation, only to see their plans wrecked by contact with a technologically superior native culture living in caverns below the surface. Not only was Wells foundational to early 20th century science fiction, his work was also a major influence on Lewis as well, not only or even primarily as a champion for the philosophy to which the scholar objected, but also as an inspiration to his fiction in general. In fact, *OSP* begins with a note insisting that "certain slighting references" to the earlier author are meant only for dramatic effect and that Lewis admired and was indebted to his predecessor's work.⁸¹ That was no exaggeration either, as Wells' space voyage was perhaps the most direct inspiration for Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, however much other texts may have contributed to its composition.

First Men provided the model for the much of the plot, characters, and various details of Lewis's first novel. The parallels are most obvious in Well's two spacefarers, which include Bedford, a somewhat shifty young entrepreneur, and Cavor, a single-minded scientist. Lewis translated Wells' protagonists into dark reflections, creating his own sneering version of Bedford in Dick Devine and exaggerating Cavor's myopic focus on science into the coldly brilliant yet fantastical physicist Dr. Weston. Lewis's debt to Wells, especially in his first novel, is well

⁸¹ Lewis, *Silent*, Forward.

known, having been examined by Hillegas, Filmer, Boenig, and most recently and in greatest depth, by Doris Myers in her book, *C. S. Lewis in Context*.⁸²

Though Lewis critiqued Wells' vision in many ways, his was one of the only dissenting voices. Most science fiction of the era followed in the footsteps of that father of the genre and shared a Wellsian view of reality. The model Wells popularized, in which encounters between different species were always framed from the perspective that the most basic element of reality is "the struggle for existence," and thus such meetings must, perforce, be instances of competition and conflict, dominated the materials of the new era that followed, that of the pulp magazines.

Of course, Wells' novels were not just forbearers of this period of fiction but contemporary influences. Not only did he continue publishing work throughout the Magazine Era, *War of the Worlds* and *First Men in the Moon* were reprinted in the early years of Hugo Gernsback's influential *Amazing Stories*, which is often regarded as the real launching point of the modern genre. Obviously, the impact of these tales of interplanetary invasion and exploitation did not end there, spawning as they have dozens of adaptations in multiple media genres. In fact, Lewis's novel was published the same year that Orson Well's infamous radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* supposedly panicked millions of American listeners.

Yet, Wells' novels were far from alone in those years. During the heyday of the pulps, magazines like Gernsback's many science fiction titles printed hundreds of tales of savage alien invaders or noble humans and their efforts to colonize and "civilize" the stars.⁸³ Even among the

⁸² For a full analysis of the connections between the two novels, see the "What Lewis Really Did" chapter of Robert Beonig's *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages* and Myers' *C. S. Lewis in Context*, 40-51. Myers argues that Lewis elevated what was, essentially, a simple adventure tale, into a novel with greater moral and psychological depth.

⁸³ Roberts, 176-8.

flood of similar, though simpler, stories, there are those, like the Martian adventures of Edgar Rice Burroughs, that have their subtleties. Nonetheless, a similar model of competition and underlying imperialistic assumptions about the relationships between different races and species dominated the genre.

The two giants of the era, Edgar Rice Burroughs and E. E. “Doc” Smith, built their careers on such tales, rendered in pulse-pounding, two-fisted fashion for the tastes of the pulps’ adventure-seeking audience. One of Burroughs’ most successful series was set on Mars, which he populated with savagely vicious and cruel Green Men, noble but violent Red Men, and many other, equally fierce inhabitants. It was a setting completely defined by “the struggle for existence,” a dying world where the hand of every being was raised against his or her neighbor in the competition for ever-dwindling resources, and it was far from unique in that portrayal of its alien subjects.

Even texts that don’t fit the conventional model exactly, instead depicting alien races as superior to humanity in moral as well as technological dimensions, often still ultimately regard humanity and their fictional races as bound for conflict. One of the most famous examples, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s influential *The Coming Race* (1871), hails from the end of the 19th century, a period that had more of a taste for utopia than the 20th.⁸⁴ Yet, many stories like this one, where the protagonist discovers a philosophically and spiritually advanced race living in massive subterranean caverns, still fall into the patterns of imperialism. In the case of Bulwer-Lytton’s tale, the end of the novel carries a warning about this super race’s eventual invasion of the surface world. The pulp era continued the trend in its own, rather less optimistic fashion, with a number of false utopias, like that found in Burroughs’ *Gods of Mars*, where the seeming

⁸⁴ Roberts, 115.

moral superiority and peaceful existence of the book's Martian "heaven" is only a mask for oppression, inhuman cruelty, and of course, that favorite of pulp science fiction's horrors, cannibalism.

Lewis recognized this tendency of contemporary science fiction to reduce all contact between humans and the Other to a Darwinian "struggle for existence" like that popularized by Wells. He saw the genre's tendency to, as he would later remark, begin with the "assumption that we, the human race, are in the right, and everything else is ogres," and he realized that this perspective was a natural outgrowth of the materialist and Darwinian assumptions at the heart of the "scientism" that formed the genre's unexamined ideology.⁸⁵

Modern scholarship has vindicated Lewis's contemporary reading of the 'Matter of Space,' recognizing the deep connection of science fiction to Darwinian visions of reality and colonialist and imperialist ideologies.⁸⁶ As John Rieder argued in his book on the subject, colonialism is "part of the genre's texture, a persistent, important component of its displaced reference to history, its engagement in ideological production, and its construction of the possible and the imaginable."⁸⁷ Even texts that question imperialist assumptions and 'turn the tables' on the traditional colonial powers, like Well's *War of the Worlds*, still posit a reality in which the only relationship between different intelligences is one of conflict.

In fact, these are common traits for the genre at large, even before its codification as a genre. As Rieder observes, a focus on conflict between races has been the general trend of science fiction stories since the dawn of the Age of Exploration, and the genre has been closely

⁸⁵ C. S. Lewis, "Unreal Estates." *On Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1982), 143-153. 147.

⁸⁶ John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 2.

⁸⁷ Rieder, 15.

bound to the imperialistic ideologies that proliferated in that era.⁸⁸ He argues that the genre took shape around justifications for and criticisms of colonial realities and ideologies, and he notes a consensus among scholars that the 19th century, the period of the greatest imperialist expansion, was also the most formative period for the genre as a whole.⁸⁹ In the pulp era, a new wrinkle develops, and the focus shifts from an imperialistic destiny of some men to the imperialistic destiny of mankind at large, coalescing into the “scientism” or Wellsianity that was such a concern to Lewis and the Inklings. In a sense, this ideology is a natural outgrowth from the myths of racial destiny that characterized the Age of Exploration, which lies deep in the genre’s bones.

Yet, Lewis rejected this view of reality, but not, as his critics and detractors maintained, because he rejected the science which was used to support it. Indeed, Lewis’s novels present a universe wherein both evolution and the struggle for existence are present, though it is also a universe that is not reducible to those qualities. Lewis felt that such a view of reality was too limiting in perspective and too prone to just the types of abuses represented by the impact of imperial and colonial ideologies on normal human history. He made the comparison between the xenophobic and colonialist tendencies of science fiction and the culture that created it explicit in his post-Sputnik (1963) meditation on the possibility of contact between humanity and alien races, “The Seeing Eye.” He argued that what was needed to recognize the alien Other as brother creatures as opposed to monsters or slaves was “a certain faculty of recognition,” the same capacity needed to recognize the divine in the universe, that was incompatible with the “scientism” that dominated the era.⁹⁰ He lamented that such a meeting was apt to become tragic,

⁸⁸ Rieder 2

⁸⁹ Rieder 3

⁹⁰ C. S. Lewis, “The Seeing Eye.” *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans' Publishing Company, 1967), 206-217. 212-213.

as “I observe how the white man has hitherto treated the black, and how, even among civilized men, the stronger have treated the weaker,” noting the historical impact of such ideologies.⁹¹ He prophesied that “We shall enslave, deceive, exploit or exterminate; at the very least we shall corrupt [a new race] with our vices and infect it with our diseases.”⁹²

Lewis goes on to assert that these concerns were part of what motivated him “to make my own small contributions to science fiction,” in an effort to offer an alternative view of the universe, one which embraced the science of the day but insisted that there was more to reality than the “war of all against all.”⁹³ He adds that one of his specific intentions was to rehabilitate the relationship between fictional man and alien Other, noting that “In those days writers in that genre almost automatically represented the inhabitants of other worlds as monsters and the terrestrial invaders as good. Since then the opposite set-up has become fairly common. If I could believe that I had in any degree contributed to this change, I should be a proud man.”⁹⁴ In fact, his reinvention, his “transfiguration,” of the stock plot and the standard perspective of the science fiction journey is much more profound and intricate than that self-effacing statement reveals. The next chapter will investigate just how Lewis accomplished that reinvention and what sources he drew from to achieve that goal.

⁹¹ Lewis, “Seeing Eye,” 214.

⁹² Lewis, 214.

⁹³ Lewis, 214.

⁹⁴ Lewis, 214.

Chapter 2

Journeys of Discovery: Ransom's Voyages as Medieval Journeys of Exploration

Lewis was one of the first authors to challenge this status quo, which endured for nearly half a century, and in so doing, he actually anticipated the future of science fiction, perhaps even helping to create it. Either way, peaceful journeys of exploration would become much more common in the decades following the publication of his science fiction novels, while they were exceedingly rare before. Twenty-eight years before *Star Trek's* Enterprise set out on its peaceful five year mission for its utopian Federation, there was Lewis's interplanetary voyage with its much more primitive spaceship and rather more unassuming protagonist. Ransom went where no man had gone before, if not boldly, at least nobly, and without need of phasers. Lewis's interplanetary stories present an alternative mode of interaction with the marvels of a new world and with the alien Other than the standard model of imperialistic competition and colonization common to early 20th Century science fiction, and that innovative approach arises from the unique perspective he brought to the genre.

The primary qualities that set Lewis's science fiction apart from the era that spawned it are his use and understanding of the fantastic. For Lewis and his fellow Inklings, the fantastic and specifically, the wonder response it generated, were forces of powerful potential. Although Lewis embraced the entertainment and escapist values of the fantastic, defending both vigorously in his various essays on the subject of faerie and adventure stories, or "romances" as he would often describe them, he also saw it as an incredibly useful tool for sharing Christian ideas and exposing readers to what he felt were the transcendent realities of the faith. Such ideas could not easily function in realistic fiction, but Lewis believed they could, ironically, serve to create a

sense of a world that, although imagined, nonetheless felt more “real” because of its fantastic elements.

As David Downing describes the approach, “Throughout the Ransom trilogy (as well as the Narnia chronicles), Lewis’s strategy is to make readers sense that his fantasy world is more real than they might have supposed—and that their ‘real world’ is more filled with the fantastic than they might have supposed.”⁹⁵ Lewis made this connection between the fantastic and the instructive explicitly in a 1939 letter about *OSP* to his regular correspondent, Sister Penelope. Writing about the failure of critics to recognize the theological element of the novel, he opined “this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelization of England: any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people’s minds under cover of romance without their knowing it.”⁹⁶ Lewis believed that the fantastic and entertaining elements of romance tales and, in the modern day, science fiction stories specifically, could be an avenue for slipping spiritual instruction in past the “watchful dragons” of familiarity and preconception, a practice that he famously took to new heights in his Narnia series.

Yet, even more than the capacity of the fantastic for “smuggling theology,” Lewis attached special importance to its role in evoking what the Inklings referred to as *Sehnsucht* and which he himself famously termed Joy or “Sweet Desire” in his autobiography. Lewis described his concept of *Joy* or *sehnsucht* as an inconsolable form of longing that finds its fulfillment in God.⁹⁷⁹⁸ As David Downing puts it, *sehnsucht* is “the longing for some lost paradise that is itself a kind of paradise to feel.”⁹⁹ Lewis was careful to distinguish *sehnsucht* from other types

⁹⁵ Downing, *Planets in Peril*, 47.

⁹⁶ Lewis, *Letters II*, 262.

⁹⁷ For a thorough examination of the origins of the concept and Lewis’s understanding and usage of it, see Corbin Scott Carnell’s *Bright Shadow of Reality: Spiritual Longing in C.S. Lewis*.

⁹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1955), 72.

⁹⁹ Downing, 23.

of desire by stressing that “In the first place, though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight.... In the second place, there is a peculiar mystery about the object of this Desire.”¹⁰⁰ For Lewis, though this romantic understanding of longing had religious overtones, it was also something innate in every person and experienced often in contact with the fantastic in stories.

In the same way, the fantastic was, to Lewis and his fellows, one of the primary avenues for exposure to what they, adopting the terminology of theologian Rudolf Otto, called *the numinous*, which could be described as the feeling of awe evoked by coming into contact with something (or someone) wholly other than oneself. In fact, this was one of the primary functions of the fantastic elements of romance for Lewis, and he saw it entering the modern world through genres like children’s fairy stories and science fiction. As he described the process of encountering *the numinous* and triggering *sehnsucht*, the writer who employs the fantastic:

arouses a longing for [his reader] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with a dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all woods a little enchanted.¹⁰¹

For Lewis, the modern author of fantastical fiction was engaged in the same work as their medieval predecessors who composed romances and other marvelous tales, and for many of the same reasons. They evoked the fantastic in order to conjure an encounter with the *numinous*, which in turn would instill in their readers a sense of *sehnsucht*, awakening an awareness of their need for spiritual fulfillment, which was a power he believed almost wholly reserved for the fiction of the fantastic.

¹⁰⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 209-210.

¹⁰¹ C. S. Lewis, "On Three Ways of Writing for Children." *On Stories* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc., 1982), 31-44, 38.

While Lewis's perspective on the fantastic bears the trace of his trademark romanticism, it has its origins in medieval philosophy and literature. While the term *numinous* is not often employed by medieval scholars, Lewis explicitly linked the phenomenon with a more familiar word, *wonder*, an association shared in part by Carnell in his study of the subject in Lewis's works.¹⁰² The Inklings used the term *wonder* as indicative of if not entirely synonymous with encounters with the *numinous*, but his usage is actually similar to the way medieval scholars have viewed the role of the wonder response in the Middle Ages. Lewis's view of the instructive and spiritual power and use of the fantastic and the wonder response is similar to that shared by Augustine and many medieval thinkers, who often saw in the marvelous a tool to trigger contemplation and spiritual growth, though they also saw it as a function of the instructive use of figurative expressions at large. For Lewis, as for Thomas Aquinas: "wonder is the best way to grab the attention of the soul."¹⁰³ This is part of the overriding medieval taste in allegorical and instrumental approaches to literature mapped by Lewis and Durant Robertson. As Robertson explains, drawing on the teachings of Augustine, medieval and even Renaissance authors believed that "enigmas" including marvelous events, characters, or sights, were "designed to lead the mind through exercise to a spiritual understanding."¹⁰⁴

For Lewis, these positive, enlivening experiences of wonder may occasionally be accompanied by a tinge of fear, but they are marked by a recognition and acceptance of the otherness of their objects as well as a desire for them.¹⁰⁵ This stands in marked contrast to the much more charged mixture of fear and exhilaration so often present in the Magazine Era of

¹⁰² Corbin Scott Carnell, *Bright Shadow of Reality: Spiritual Longing in C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 19.

¹⁰³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Vol. 3. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947), Ia IIae, q. 32, art.

¹⁰⁴ Durant Waite Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1962), 60.

¹⁰⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 5-6.

science fiction, where the “Bug Eyed Monster” and the terrors it represented waited alongside the joys of discovery and the possibilities of the future, always lurking in the background of strange new worlds. Lewis’s poem, “An Expostulation (Against too many writers of science fiction),” illustrates the quality of experience that he believed was lacking in the genre.

Why did you lure us on like this,
 Light-year on light-year, through the abyss,
 Building (as though we cared for size!)
 Empires that cover galaxies
 If at the journey's end we find
 The same old stuff we left behind [...]

Why should I leave this green-floored cell,
 Roofed with blue air, in which we dwell,
 Unless, outside its guarded gates,
 Long, long desired, the Unearthly waits,
 Strangeness that moves us more than fear,
 Beauty that stabs with tingling spear,
 Or Wonder, laying on one's heart
 That finger-tip at which we start
 As if some thought too swift and shy
 For reason's grasp had just gone by?¹⁰⁶

“Strangeness that moves us more than fear,” the brush with the Otherworldly presence of the *numinous* and its resultant pang of *sehnsucht*, which Lewis recognized in older authors, was in rare supply in his era. The wonder in the stories of Wells, Burroughs, and their fellows is usually the avaricious wonder of the conqueror or the fearful wonder of the victim. When Bedford looks out over the Moon, he sees resources to be used, and when John Carter looks out over Mars, he sees a wilderness to be tamed. Lewis recognized this disconnect between the medieval and modern approaches to wonder, especially as it related to contact with the Other and his conception of the *numinous*.

¹⁰⁶ C. S. Lewis, "An Expostulation (Against too many writers of science fiction)," *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2015), 394-395.

He believed that the great chasm that he saw dividing the modern day from the cultural continuity he found in the medieval and ancient worlds was bound up, not only with the industrial revolution and the rise of the machines, but also with the Age of Exploration and its colonial aftermath. In his mammoth *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century*, Lewis, made clear his views on the Age of Exploration, the cradle of science fiction and its enduring themes, which were about as grim as his view of the future of space exploration. He wrote that the voyages of that era “merely ushered in a period during which we became to America what the Huns had been to us.”¹⁰⁷ Yet, he also argued that Europe’s surrender to a perspective that made such rapine and abuse morally acceptable was a lengthy process, involving a change from an earlier and better state. He claimed that “the best European consciences still had to undergo a long training before they reached the untroubled nineteenth-century acquiescence in imperialism.”¹⁰⁸ It is, of course, no coincidence that Lewis places a widespread acceptance of imperialistic ideology in the same century that he asserts saw the great heyday of “scientism,” as to his mind the one is not really possible without the other.¹⁰⁹ It is in this period, he believed, that the rise of the machines finished training the Western world to accept the myth of progress and, in turn, gave it the justification to treat human beings as means to progressive ends.

As he continues his analysis of the era, Lewis marshals contemporary and later sources to illustrate the moral divide he claimed, and his star witness is the French Renaissance philosopher, Montaigne. The passage Lewis adapts, from the scholar’s *Essais*, III, is telling, and perhaps more revealing about the 20th century Inkling than the 16th century thinker. Lewis summarizes, “The best European minds were ashamed of Europe’s exploits in America.

¹⁰⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Poetry and Prose in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1990), 16.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, 16.

¹⁰⁹ Lewis, “Funeral,” 104-105.

Montaigne passionately asks why so noble a discovery could not have fallen to the Ancients who might have spread civility where we have spread only corruption.”¹¹⁰ Given Lewis’s generalizing impulse and his belief in the continuity of the classical and medieval periods, it is no surprise that he presents the moral dilemma of the “new geography” as a departure, not simply from the civilized heights of Roman antiquity, but from the moral center he believed was maintained by the Western world from the classical to the medieval period. As Robert Boenig recognizes, Lewis identified the classical and medieval past with a greater moral strength than the post-Columbian era, a strength, or perhaps merely a perspective, that may have been sufficient to the temptations provided by such encounters with the Other.¹¹¹

Despite the fact that Lewis’s romantic view of the past might call into question this reading of history, modern scholars have actually found evidence of a similar shift in attitudes between the medieval and pre-modern world. It seems that Lewis’s analysis of the break between medieval and modern approaches to wonder and encounters with the Other actually anticipated modern scholarship on the subject. In the past few decades, there has been an increase in scholarly analysis of medieval and modern attitudes towards the marvelous, and scholars have recognized a division between them like that which Lewis suggested. They have found evidence for the growth of an appropriative sense of wonder starting in the Pre-Modern period and coinciding with the explosion in overseas exploration, reaching its peak in the codification of colonial and imperial ideologies.¹¹² Scholars like Paula Findlen, Oliver Impey, and Arthur MacGregor, have traced this attitude in the creation of early (or proto) museums, exemplified by the Wunderkammer

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Poetry and Prose*, 16.

¹¹¹ Boenig, 18.

¹¹² Caroline Walker Bynum, "Wonder," *The American Historical Review* 102.1 (1997): 1-26. 4.

(wonder cabinet), and the attendant focus on possession and ownership that accompanied these developments.¹¹³¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, Stephen Greenblatt has found a similar attitude in the manifold voyages to new lands during this period, especially the New World, which were specifically associated with acquisitive goals like conquest and exploitation.¹¹⁵¹¹⁶

In contrast, the medieval approach to wonder, as Caroline Walker Bynum convincingly argues, is essentially non-appropriative, one of study and reflection rather than exploitation. She stresses that “to wonder is emphatically not to consume and incorporate; it is, as Bernard of Clairvaux said, to give back the goblet after draining the potion” (73). Bynum’s description of medieval conceptions of wonder has a great deal in common with Lewis’s own understanding of the phenomenon, both in terms of its moral dimension and in terms of how it is created. Despite her careful acknowledgement of the many different theories of wonder abounding in the Middle Ages, Bynum notes that there are common threads that all share. In addition to their non-appropriative flavor, she argued that, “All theories of wonder saw it as a significance-reaction: a flooding with awe, pleasure, or dread owing to something deeper, lurking in the phenomenon,” a description that is reminiscent of Lewis’s characterization of the reaction to the *numinous*.¹¹⁷

Furthermore, Bynum points out that, for many medieval thinkers, wonder was relative to the viewer rather than an absolute quality, especially when it came to customs or peoples that were strange to the viewer. As she puts it, “The wonderer was situated; wonder was

¹¹³ Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy*, (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2010).

¹¹⁴ Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, eds, *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹¹⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹¹⁶ See also J. H. Elliott *The Old World and the New, 1492-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹¹⁷ Bynum, 24.

perspectival.”¹¹⁸ Instead of emphasizing the central, universal quality of the author’s perspective, medieval understandings of wonder were “a reaction of a particular ‘us’ to an ‘other’ that is ‘other’ only relative to the particular ‘us.’”¹¹⁹ Thus, medieval concepts of wonder included not only awe-filled encounters with the *numinous* and an emphasis on admiration rather than possession, but also an impetus to consider the perspective of the Other when encounters with it brought out that sense of wonder. Clearly, the medieval perspective stands in marked contrast to the developing field of science fiction before Lewis, with its “Wellsian” emphasis on appropriative and xenophobic approaches to wonder.

Yet, Bynum also points out that the medieval concept of wonder allowed for both a relative and an objective sense of its objects. While medieval authorities often stressed that wonder was “a situated response to what is unusual or ‘other’ to a particular viewer,” they also allowed that wonder was a natural and proper response to both the miraculous and the marvelous complexity and nature of the universe.¹²⁰ Medieval thinkers, she argues “suggested that human beings wonder at the regularity, structure, and beauty of the universe,” and drawing on Augustine, saw wonder as an objective response to the miraculous.¹²¹ Lewis also shared this perspective, and Bynum’s description might well seem familiar to readers of Lewis, reminding them of his examination of just such a principle in his critique of moral subjectivism in *The Abolition of Man*. In that book, wherein Lewis articulated the philosophy that he would later explore in *THS*, he observed:

Until quite modern times all teachers and even all men believed the universe to be such that certain emotional reactions on our part could be either congruous or

¹¹⁸ Bynum, 24.

¹¹⁹ Bynum, 14.

¹²⁰ Bynum, 8.

¹²¹ Bynum, 8.

incongruous—believed, in fact, that objects did not merely receive, but could *merit*, our approval or disapproval, our reverence or our contempt.¹²²

This is hardly surprising considering Lewis’s significant philosophical debt to Augustine, but it is noteworthy that his own conception of the wonder response features just such a double nature. While he argued for the objective moral quality of some elements of creation, especially in terms of humanity’s response to the universe itself, he also stressed the perceptual nature of wonder in his descriptions of contact between physically or culturally different humans or even between different species. This is clearest in his rigorous challenge to human-centric thinking in his essay “Religion and Rocketry,” where he emphasizes that physical or even cultural dissimilarity is vastly less important than “spiritual kinship.”¹²³

2.1 Lewis’s Medieval Wonder: Romance and Pilgrimage

Thus, seeking an antidote to the imperialistic mindset and other qualities that he saw as the attendant ills of modern “Wellsian” science fiction journeys, with their appropriative and xenophobic responses to wonder, Lewis turned to the literature and philosophy of the Middle Ages and a concept of the phenomenon more in line with his own ideals. It is this medieval perspective on wonder and contact with the Other that Lewis seeks to conjure and “remythologize” for his modern audience in his science fiction novels. This is true in the broad strokes, where his beloved “Medieval Model” of the cosmos forms the backdrop of the series, but also in the nature of the adventures themselves and the themes they embody.

Working in his typical fashion as a medieval *auctor*, he sought extant texts to reshape for his own purposes. Beginning with H.G. Wells’ *First Men in the Moon*, Lewis combined Wells’

¹²² C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 14-15.

¹²³ C. S. Lewis, "Religion and Rocketry," *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012), 83-92. 91.

plot and characters with a more medieval sense of wonder and contact with the Other. Medieval texts offered not only a source of incidental details or plot points that he freely adapted, like the Ptolemaic nature of Lewis's solar system or his planet's guiding intelligences, but also a source of motifs and narrative elements that would serve as a corrective to the Wellsian tendencies of the fiction of the day.

In his reworking of the interplanetary voyage, Lewis's Trilogy resembles two closely related medieval genres that mirror his own approach to wonder, quest romance and pilgrimage tale, especially those that feature Otherworld journeys. The novels share romance's taste for the fantastic and its focus on adventure and marvels over character, yet they also share the specifically spiritual goal of a pilgrimage narrative. Of course, the boundary between the two types of tales has always been rather porous and ill-defined, as Helen Cooper points out in her study on romance, and Lewis's novels share similarities with texts that straddle that border, combining the two to create spiritual quests that explore and portray benevolent reactions to wonder.¹²⁴ This combination is not terribly surprising, as Lewis had already adapted one of the most famous marriages of the genres, reworking Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in his *Pilgrim's Regress*, his first work of prose fiction. *Regress*, like *Progress*, combines the romance quest and its trappings with the spiritual goal of pilgrimage.¹²⁵ However, unlike those pilgrims' tales, Lewis's science fiction novels abandon allegory and portray a physical quest with spiritual dimensions.

Lewis himself called his science fiction novels "romances," linking them to the medieval genre.¹²⁶ He also argued for continuity between medieval and Renaissance romances and the

¹²⁴ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffry of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73, 102.

¹²⁵ Cooper, 98.

¹²⁶ Lewis, *Letters II*, 262.

science fiction and fantasy of the 20th century, seeing the latter as simply an extension of the former.¹²⁷ For Lewis, drawing on medieval texts for inspiration for a science fiction story seemed like a natural fit, as he pointed out in “On Science Fiction.” Lewis argued that the wondrous science fiction journey “represents simply an imaginative impulse as old as the human race working under the special conditions of our own time.”¹²⁸ His focus in this passage is specifically on tales that involve travel to otherworldly settings, so it is not surprising that his books also share many similarities to journeys to the Otherworld, like those that populate medieval romances. In fact, in a letter to a reader, the author acknowledged that Otherworld tales had been an influence on his first novel.¹²⁹

While his Trilogy’s romance roots are perhaps most obvious in the traces of the Arthurian “Matter of Britain” found throughout the novels, culminating in the appearance of Merlin in the final book amid a panoply of Arthurian trappings, the romance influences can be felt in many other elements of the stories.¹³⁰ A few critics like W. R. Irwin and Kathryn Hume have recognized and explored the similarities the trilogy shares with medieval quest romances in structure and themes, but Lewis’s use of romance materials is more complex than has yet been recognized, especially in regards to how he uses them to portray encounters with the fantastic and his emphasis on the spiritual element of his adventures.¹³¹¹³²

¹²⁷ Rose Marie Beston, “C. S. Lewis’s Theory of Romance,” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 15, no. 1 (January 1984): 3–16. 5-6.

¹²⁸ Lewis, “On Science Fiction,” 63.

¹²⁹ Lewis, *Letters* II 629-30

¹³⁰ For more on the Arthurian elements in the trilogy, see Margaret Hannay’s “Arthurian and Cosmic Myth in *That Hideous Strength*.”

¹³¹ W. R. Irwin, “There and Back Again: The Romances of Williams, Lewis, and Tolkien,” *Sewanee Review* 69 (1961): 566-578.

¹³² Kathryn Hume, “C. S. Lewis’s Trilogy: A Cosmic Romance,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 20.4 (1974): 505-17. 505.

Obviously, Lewis's novels are not a simple redressing of medieval quest romances with their settings shifted to space. The Ransom books lack the clearly defined goals of a romance quest, which, though often accompanied by many digressions and interludes, are at least ostensibly focused on the object of the quest. In the first novel, Ransom is kidnapped against his will, and in the second, he does not truly understand his mission until well into the novel, while Jane is equally unfocused in her adventure. In the same vein, his protagonists are not the average romance heroes, being fearful and passive. Neither Ransom nor Jane are anyone's idea of a questing knight, and they are unlikely to be mistaken for Galahad or Britomart.

Instead of being creatures of pure romance or pilgrimage, Lewis's Ransom books share a number of similarities with a medieval genre that combined the wondrous Otherworld journey of romance with a spiritual purpose, the Irish *immram*. In his essay "On Science Fiction," Lewis actually linked *immrama* with stories of the titular genre, particularly the type built around a voyage to another world, which he saw as a natural outgrowth of the same impulses of storytelling that had originally created the Irish tales.¹³³

The books themselves can be read as a series of cosmic *immrama*, adventurous pilgrimages that visit wondrous locations in pursuit of spiritual growth but which ultimately lack a fixed destination. Like the practice of *peregrinatio* itself, the adventures of the Ransom series are about the journey rather than the destination, and having no known goal, the journey becomes that unique mixture of quest and pilgrimage that is an *immram*. With quests, though there may be a goal, the heroes do not know where or how it can be found. The finding and the achieving comprise the story. In a pilgrimage, the goal is spiritual growth, whether the actual destination be Jerusalem, Canterbury, or anything in between. In *immrama*, the goal is both

¹³³ Lewis, "On Science Fiction," 63.

physical and spiritual, and its location is a mystery. I will explore this larger structural similarity in the next chapter, but first we will examine the ways in which Lewis's treatment of wonder sets his novels apart from the science fiction of his day and resembles medieval attitudes found in similar texts.

There are three main lines of resemblance between the Space Trilogy and its medieval influences: its overt spiritual purpose and focus, its non-appropriative sense of wonder, and its treatment of the alien Other. In each of these qualities, Lewis's "re-mythologizing" of ancient and medieval ideas is part of what sets his work apart from his contemporaries, yet his usage of these concepts is never a simple translation or repudiation. Instead, he adapts the medieval to serve the modern. His work is both a response to and a transfiguration of modern science fiction tales and the ideologies that undergird them, as his books are always in contact with both the past and the present. The following analysis will explore how he accomplishes this balancing act to create a unique hybrid, one of the first works of literary science fiction, as well as one of the first modern works of literary medievalism.

There are also two particular medieval texts that can serve as useful points of comparison to illustrate the ways in which Lewis captured the medieval spirit of wonder, *Mandeville's Travels* and the *Voyage of Saint Brendan*, each of which also straddles the line between pilgrimage and romance. The two likely served as influences on the Space Trilogy, but they were certainly influential in shaping Lewis's attitude towards the fantastic and his understanding of romance at large. Dante's *Comedia*, itself a spiritual quest of sorts, is another useful text for reading the Trilogy and had great influence upon it, but Lewis's debt to Dante has been well mapped by Marsha Daigle-Williamson.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ For a full examination of Dante's influence on Lewis, see Marsha Daigle-Williamson's *Reflection the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C. S. Lewis*.

This is not to say that these works are direct models for the Space Trilogy, though in some details they very well may be, but instead to establish that in his science fiction books, Lewis did what he often did in his fiction, adapting what he recognized as the particular and peculiar beauty of medieval concepts, qualities he believed were lost in the modern day, for the benefit of contemporary audiences. The author endeavored to remind his readers of ways of looking at the world that their forefathers had known, especially those that he thought were particularly efficacious in the modern moment.

Both the *Navigatio* and *Travels* have connections to Lewis and similarities to his novels. The *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, with its purely explorative journey in search of enlightenment among a fabulous collection of islands, filled with all manner of *mirabli*, shares much with Lewis's cosmic pilgrimage, including a strikingly similar structure. Lewis knew and enjoyed Brendan's tale, and later used it as a source of inspiration and model for *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Like Ransom's spiritual quests, Lewis described the Narnian novel as being essentially about "the spiritual life (especially in Reepicheep)," who is on his own pilgrimage to the Utter East in a similar combination of romance quest and spiritual pilgrimage.¹³⁵ Lewis also seems to have had the 10th century tale in mind when describing a parallel between the Irish genre of *immrama* and modern interplanetary romances in his essay "On Science Fiction."¹³⁶ It is entirely likely that the text was looming in the background while he was working on his Space Trilogy.

It is also likely that Mandeville had some impact on Lewis's own wonder-journeys. While a student, Lewis read through the inventive medieval pilgrimage story, writing to his father in 1916 to note that such reading might have more value than its sillier elements might

¹³⁵ David Downing, *Into the Wardrobe: C. S. Lewis and the Narnia Chronicles*, (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 43.

¹³⁶ Lewis, "On Stories," 63.

indicate. In his letter, he mentions that he read an article *The Times Literary Supplement* in defense of Richard Hakluyt, the 16th century English travel writer, declaring that “a good deal of it might stand as an apology – in the Newman sense of course – for my hours spent on poor Mandeville.”¹³⁷ Maria Ceceire argues that the Newman-ish apology for “poor Mandeville” Lewis mentions could be understood as a vindication of the value of the likely fictional author’s imaginative but inaccurate tale of pilgrimage and exploration.¹³⁸ Despite Mandeville’s lack of historical truth or reality, he, like the *Times* article declared of Hakluyt, served to bring his readers into imaginative contact with “scenes of wonder, strangeness, extremity, and beauty beyond the dreams of the Opium Eater or the fantasies of a Scheherazade.”¹³⁹ It is likely that Lewis saw in Mandeville the same benefits of the fantastic that he would later describe in his essays. Years later, Lewis would introduce Mandeville and his fanciful journey to another generation, as it was part of the curriculum he taught while he was a don at Oxford, as well as drawing on it as a source for the same book that also saw contributions from St. Brendan and his band, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*.¹⁴⁰

At first glance, Lewis’s Malacandra bears little in common with either St. Brendan’s strange and wonderful islands or Mandeville’s exaggerated account of the mysterious regions beyond the Holy Land, yet while there are few direct parallels in terms of situations or characters, there is a great deal these works share in terms of the way they present their worlds, and the medieval texts can help to illuminate the particular medievalisms that Lewis is bringing to bear in his science fiction series. The outlooks, both of the 10th century immram and of the

¹³⁷ Lewis, *Letters* I, 243.

¹³⁸ Maria Sachiko Cecire, “English Exploration and Textual Travel in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*,” *Space and Place in Children’s Literature, 1789 to the Present*, Ed. Hannah Field, Kavita Mudan Finn, Malini Roy, Maria Sachiko Cecire (New York: Routledge, 2016), 111-128. 111.

¹³⁹ Walter de la Mare, “The Great Adventures,” *Times Literary Supplement* 26 (Oct. 1916): 505.

¹⁴⁰ Cecire, 112.

14th century pilgrimage tale, as well as the other members of their genres, have much more in common with these 20th century novels than we might expect. First and foremost, Lewis's novels are nearly unique among their contemporaries in sharing the spiritual focus of pilgrimage tales and spiritual romances.

2.2 *Spiritual Purpose*

Lewis may have chosen to adapt the popular stock plot of the interplanetary voyage, but he brought a very unusual twist to it by mixing the conventional journey to a distant world with something rare in the stories of the day, a spiritual element. In so doing, Lewis engaged in what would become his common practice, of reworking or “transfiguring” an element current in Modernist culture. His choice, despite its medieval trappings, was largely inspired by David Lindsay's 1920 novel, *Voyage to Arcturus*, which he read in 1934. Lewis described *Voyage*, which employed an interstellar voyage as the setting for a spiritual journey, as “the real father” of his Space Trilogy.¹⁴¹ It was from Lindsay's novel that Lewis learned the peculiar benefit of setting a story on another world. He credited Lindsay with being “the first writer to discover what ‘other planets’ are really good for in fiction.”¹⁴²

Nonetheless, once Lindsay had planted the seed in Lewis's imagination, it flowered in typically Lewisian hybridity, combining the modern with the medieval and the classical. For the Inklings, “what ‘other planets’ are really good for” came down to the ability to capture true *otherness*, an experience that is actually alien and not merely unusual. As he described it, “No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realise the idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space: you must go into

¹⁴¹ *Letters II*, 630.

¹⁴² George Sayer, *Jack: C. S. Lewis and His Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 152

another dimension.”¹⁴³ Yet, the real lesson that Lewis learned from Lindsay is that the space journey, in order to truly achieve that powerful sense of sidereal strangeness and grant readers what he believed they sought, must not merely rely on the material. Instead, he insisted that “to construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit.”¹⁴⁴ It is the world of the spirit that informs Lewis’s own science fiction tales, and his attempt to bring that spiritual world to an interplanetary journey was a fairly revolutionary approach for the time. This description with its “not merely physical strangeness” obviously invokes Lewis’s conception of encounters with the *numinous*, and brings us back to his search for “proper” wonder in science fiction.

While he does find an appropriate atmosphere of alienation and otherness in Lindsay’s novel, the type of wonder the reader discovers upon reaching the strange world of Tormance and entering into “the world of the spirit” which it conjures, is still not that for which Lewis thirsted. As he explained in a letter in 1944, Lindsay’s “spiritual outlook is detestable, almost diabolist I think [...]”¹⁴⁵ Yet, Lewis learned Lindsay’s lesson well, and he combined it with what he regarded as a healthier conception of the “world of the spirit,” one which had its origins in the classical and medieval imaginations. In the same letter, Lewis went on to list other influences on his novels, including Norse myth, Dante, and Augustine, situating his blending of the spiritual journey with science fiction on medieval grounds.¹⁴⁶ Even though Lewis includes Milton in this catalog as well, it is, as Jarred Lobdell puts it, “a very medieval Milton as interpreted by a late Victorian.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ Lewis, “On Stories,” 12.

¹⁴⁴ Lewis, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Lewis, *Letters II*, 630.

¹⁴⁶ *Letters II*, 630-1.

¹⁴⁷ Jared Lobdell, *The Scientifiction Novels of C. S. Lewis: Space and Time in the Ransom Stories* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2004), 22

Lewis's wondrous journeys each have a spiritual purpose that both supersedes and is served by the marvels encountered along the way, and that purpose is a more direct one than most medieval romances, sharing the explicit religious goal of pilgrimage fiction. Lewis's revolutionary combination of the spiritual journey with the interplanetary voyage displays its medieval roots from its first pages. Ransom himself is initially identified as "The Pedestrian" in the opening moments of *OSP*, which for a medievalist like Lewis might easily evoke the "wanderer for God" of an earlier era, going slowly and humbly on foot in search of his goal, though he does not yet know where his interplanetary Jerusalem lies.¹⁴⁸ Both the democratic nature and everyman characteristics of this unnamed wanderer and his humble mode of transportation are indicative of the pilgrimage tradition and help to establish that, though Lewis has called his tale a romance, it is not to be the traditional tale of the lone hero's quest.¹⁴⁹ The connection of pedestrian and pilgrim is likely not accidental, either.

This latter-day spiritual sojourner is, like Dante's Pilgrim, in the middle of life, being "about thirty-five to forty years of age" and increasing the parallels, he steps "into the middle of the road" and soon loses his way as he presses on into misadventure and away from the beaten path.¹⁵⁰ Marsha Daigle-Williamson has carefully mapped these and several other parallels between Ransom and his more famous forbearer, but in this instance, it is enough to note that these connections illustrate that the 20th century "Pedestrian" is embarking on a similar spiritual quest to one of his medieval models.

¹⁴⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 9.

¹⁴⁹ Cooper, 98.

¹⁵⁰ Lewis, 9-10

2.3 Non-Appropriative Wonder

The central division between Lewis's science fiction novels and their contemporaries lies in the medieval, non-appropriative sense of wonder captured by Ransom's adventures. Standing in such sharp contrast to the overwhelming majority of contemporary science fiction with its imperialistic undertones, Lewis's space traveler is of a very different sort, and in this, he shares much more with his medieval predecessors than his space-traveling contemporaries. For example, in the *Navigatio*, Saint Brendan and his crew travel for years, taking almost nothing from the various islands they visit during their voyage and certainly staking no claims to any of these mysterious lands. Brendan and his companion brothers take only what is provided for them during their travels. Again and again their meager supplies are granted by a holy hermit or divine provision, as in the uninhabited house they encounter, where a marvelous meal materializes before them. In fact, an acquisitive attitude is anathema to the ethos of the story. Attempts by the brothers to exploit their strange adventures are punished most harshly, as the first of the three latecomers to the voyage discovers when he steals a silver bridle from that very house.¹⁵¹ Even fresh water on the islands they visit is to be treated as a gift that must be given freely rather than a prize to be seized. Brendan corrects his followers, beseeching them not to "do a forbidden thing, that is, something without permission of the elders who live in this island. They will freely give you the water that you now want to drink in stealth."¹⁵² Of course, Ransom discovers a similarly generous spirit in the Malacandrans, and in the same way, the acquisitive quest of Lewis's villains, their "cosmic imperialism," is punished, though in a rather less severe manner.

¹⁵¹ John J. O'Meara, ed, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan: Journey to the Promised Land* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1991), 11-13.

¹⁵² *Brendan*, 26.

In similar fashion, Mandeville's traveler seems uninterested in claiming any lands for either England or God. Instead, the narrator is content to be an impartial observer, moving through his journey with enthusiasm and a surprisingly tolerant attitude towards different cultures and beliefs. He describes the wealth and power of the lands he recounts, palaces covered in gold and silver and rivers literally flowing with precious stones, but these are all sights of wonder and not objects of desire. They are passed by and observed with little more covetousness than the strange animals and creatures that accompany them. Their importance is their very marvelousness, not their practical value or utility. Mandeville even turns aside from his the looming subject of a reconquest of the Holy Land, focusing on the failings of Christendom and the wonders of the rest of the world. As Stephen Greenblatt observes, "Mandeville takes possession of nothing. This abstinence is not only a matter of insufficient power but also of self-definition, a way of aligning himself not with merchants and adventurers but with the great Franciscan voyagers like William Rubruck and Odoric of Pordenone."¹⁵³ He is, essentially, "the knight of non-possession."¹⁵⁴

Ransom's experience on Malacandra and Perelandra is similar to that of Brendan and his fellow voyagers. He constantly stands in wonder of the new worlds he is visiting, a wonder positively medieval in its character, carrying no selfish undercurrents. It is the *admiratio* of Caroline Walker Bynum's medieval wonder. It is also a wonder that, in medieval fashion, drives Ransom to reflection and leads him upward spiritually and intellectually in his contemplation. His reactions stand in contrast to the acquisitive, post-medieval wonder of his companions, which seeks to break its objects down into principles to be harnessed or commodities to be exploited. Weston views the marvels they discover with a scientist's detachment, but he also

¹⁵³ Greenblatt, 26.

¹⁵⁴ Greenblatt, 28.

sees them with an imperialist's superiority. He is always seeking a way to turn them to his great purpose, human domination of the stars. Devine, for his part, sees only the profits that the resources of Mars can bring him. Despite having traveled to the stars, he dreams of "ocean-going yachts, the most expensive women, and a big place on the Riviera," among other very earthly goals, all to be gained with the fruits of this virgin world. Yet, Ransom's interactions with Malacandra and all the marvels of his adventures are much less covetous.

From almost the first moments of his travels, Lewis's spacefaring hero finds himself with a bemused but joyful response to the strange and unfamiliar realm into which he has entered. Even the horrors of being cast adrift in space and shanghaied to another planet quickly give way to the pure wonder of the experience of space itself. Ransom finds himself strangely untroubled by his situation because of how entranced he is by his surroundings, where "There was an endless night on one side of the ship and an endless day on the other: each was marvelous and he moved from one to the other at his will, delighted."¹⁵⁵ The mere process of moving between them thrills him, and Lewis's description of the visions of the heavens that greet Ransom as "he lay for hours in contemplation of the skylight" drip with their own sense of breathless awe. With the Earth completely out of sight, and therefore the realm of the common and the known equally distant:

The stars, thick as daises on an uncut lawn, reigned perpetually with no cloud, no moon, no sunrise to dispute their sway. There were planets of unbelievable majesty, and constellation undreamed of: there were celestial sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pinpricks of burning gold [...]¹⁵⁶

This passage includes several of Lewis's favorite devices, including the use of a metaphor combining the humble and the magisterial, as well as the utilization of the common motif of

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, *Silent*, 33.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, 33.

otherworld journeys and visionary literature, precious stones to represent purity and transcendent value.¹⁵⁷ More importantly, it illustrates Ransom's fascination with the simple experience of the universe.

While Devine and Weston are blasé about the marvels of space travel, their unwilling passenger is completely absorbed in the process of awed observation. It is not only the stars to which he responds, as "Often he rose after only a few hours' sleep to return, drawn by an irresistible attraction, to the regions of light; he could not cease to wonder at the noon which always awaited you however early you went to seek it."¹⁵⁸ So absorbed is Ransom in worshipful focus on the phenomena of Creation that, even when he realizes the perils that their fragile craft faces from meteorites, he finds "he could not fear."¹⁵⁹ The only emotion that he discovers himself capable of is "severe delight."¹⁶⁰ The entire episode resembles the medieval wonder response to natural phenomenon, even when the phenomenon is properly understood, but it also evokes Lewis's own description of the effect of the Medieval Model of the universe on the imagination of the period in his *Discarded Image*.¹⁶¹

Contrasting the medieval sense of the cosmos with that of moderns, he wrote "The 'space' of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie;" as it initially does for Ransom, but "the spheres of old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony."¹⁶² While Ransom is not so ignorant of astronomy as to believe in the Ptolemaic model, he nonetheless manages to achieve the same type of awed, fearless response. That very fearlessness is important and a further marker of the

¹⁵⁷ Aisling Byrne, *Otherworlds: Fantasy and History in Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2016), 26, 32.

¹⁵⁸ Lewis, 33-4.

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, 33.

¹⁶⁰ Lewis, 33.

¹⁶¹ Bynum, 8-10.

¹⁶² C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 99.

intentionally medieval nature of Ransom's wonder response, as fear was a key component for Lewis to the modern response to the vastness of space. As he went on to explain in the *Discarded Image*, the different perspectives of the cosmos between the medieval and modern imagination "explains why all sense of the pathless, the baffling, and the utterly alien—all agoraphobia—is so markedly absent from medieval poetry when it leads us, as so often, into the sky."¹⁶³ Yet, he finds that same fearful wonder in abundance in "the meanest modern science-fiction."¹⁶⁴

Despite coming to his journey with a modern's understanding of space, Ransom is eventually freed from the modern fear of its vastness, largely because Lewis reinvents the common portrayal of space travel, which involved contact not merely with infinity, but with an empty and meaningless infinity, as realized by Wells and nearly all modern science fiction authors. Lewis reimagines this modern conception of space as a "mere extension to an earlier vision of a resplendent universe infused with the presence of its divine creator," that nonetheless still grasped the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of Earth in relation to it.¹⁶⁵ The science remains the same, but the ideology beneath it, and thus the imaginative response it engenders, is different. As Sanford Schwartz points out, "In his portrait of Ransom, Lewis acknowledges this intractable element of fear in the human heart, but he also endows his hero with a receptivity to 'otherness' ("On stories" *OS* 12) that mitigates the terror of infinite space and reveals that our fears are at least in part a function of our own distraught imaginations."¹⁶⁶ Schwartz's reference to "otherness" is in reference to Lewis's description of "what other planets are really for," which we might characterize as bringing readers into contact with the *numinous*.

¹⁶³ Lewis, 99.

¹⁶⁴ Lewis, 99.

¹⁶⁵ Schwartz, 34.

¹⁶⁶ Schwartz, 34.

Thus, the receptivity Schwartz finds in Ransom's reaction to space is a positive wonder response. The final result of this process of reinvention is Ransom's wondering response to space travel and its attendant marvels, a response that is medieval in its awed, yet fearless character.

Of course, in addition to the distinct nature of its depiction of wonder, this section of the novel is deeply medieval in general and perhaps the clearest expression in the Trilogy of Lewis's profound love and imaginative sympathy for his Medieval Model. All of the various elements of his depiction of Ransom's journey are mirrored in his descriptions of the medieval vision in various works, including his essay, "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," and of course, *The Discarded Image*.¹⁶⁷ Ransom himself references medieval and ancient ideas, contemplating the "sweet influences" of the stars and wondering about whether there might just have been something to the "old astrology after all."¹⁶⁸

Ransom's medieval-styled wonder finds its next expression when he reaches the surface of Mars, or Malacandra. In fact, his first sight of the world sets the tone for the rest of his sojourn there. When he steps out of the spacecraft and is hit by the realization that he is actually on an alien world, Ransom is initially so besieged by sensation that he is overwhelmed by the new world's riot of colors that "refused to form themselves into things."¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, after being pressed into service by his captors, stolen glances allowed him to really see the world for the first time, and "Before anything else he learned that Malacandra was beautiful."¹⁷⁰

Ransom's first experience of the alien world is one of enraptured and uncritical wonder, which once again drives the fear of his situation out of his mind. Notably, his awe-filled attitude to the extraterrestrial vista that greets him is described in terms that are intimately connected to

¹⁶⁷ Downing, *Planets*, 66.

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 33.

¹⁶⁹ Lewis, 43.

¹⁷⁰ Lewis, 43.

Lewis's own aesthetic taste and his history with those concepts that defined his understanding of positive wonder, the *numinous* and *sehnsucht*. When Ransom can finally interpret what he sees, "His first impression was of a bright, pale world—a water-colour world out of a child's paint-box."¹⁷¹ As David Downing has argued, this seemingly neutral description is one that would be infinitely attractive to its author, mirroring many details from his letters and biography and evoking powerful experiences of wonder from his childhood. Downing notes that the "image of a child's paint-box would surely rekindle memories of little Jack and Warnie [his brother] at home in Ireland before their mother's death, creating elaborate worlds and illustrating their creations with charming and surprisingly sure-handed watercolors."¹⁷² Those were some of Lewis's happiest memories, and in his autobiography he identified that period with his first discovery of wonder, leading to longing, or *sehnsucht*, which was so foundational to his aesthetic and spiritual experiences.

The source of that first discovery was itself partially medieval in origin and helped to ignite Lewis's life-long love of the Middle Ages. He describes the experience as his third glimpse of "Joy" or *sehnsucht*, which came to him through a scrap of poetry. In his autobiography he reminisced that he had been reading Longfellow's *Saga of King Olaf* when:

like a voice from more distant regions, there came a moment when I idly turned the pages of the book and found the unrhymed translation of Tegner's *Drapa* and read

I heard a voice that cried,
Balder the beautiful
Is dead, is dead—

I knew nothing about Balder, but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with almost sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold, spacious, severe, pale, and remote) [...] ¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Lewis, 43.

¹⁷² Downing, 105.

¹⁷³ Lewis, *Surprised*, 17

And with those words, the young Lewis discovered something that he termed “Northernness,” which was a particular flavor of “Joy” bound up with Norse mythology and visions of the Scandinavian North. The concept of “Northernness” influenced Lewis’s aesthetic tastes for the rest of his life and was intimately connected with his sense of wonder. Of course, such a spirit is the very substance of Malacandra, with its brisk temperatures, its austere beauty, its pastel landscapes, and its towering mountains.¹⁷⁴

Downing identifies Ransom’s reaction as with a “child’s sense of wonder,” which, with its connotations of wide-eyed, uncritical awe, is a fitting description.¹⁷⁵ He traces the connections between Lewis’s childhood hopes and fears throughout the Trilogy, arguing that the novels are, in many ways, connected with the tastes and experiences of the author’s youth. In fact, Lewis’s portrayal of positive wonder is often childlike throughout the series, and this trend obviously continues in his Narnian series, where his protagonists are literal children. He tends to associate positive wonder responses with innocence and greater imaginative capacity, so the connotations are natural. The childhood origins of Lewis’s sense of wonder are once again on display when he escapes from his captors and finds himself confronted with the towering mountains of Malacandra, though, at first he is completely at a loss to identify them.

Lewis’s description of Ransom’s experience moves from confusion and ignorance to the discovery of difference, which in turn gives way to a joyful wonder at that discovery:

They were enormously high, so that he had to throw back his head to see the top of them. They were something like pylons in shape, but solid; irregular in height and grouped in an apparently haphazard and disorderly fashion. [...] He noticed that the sides were rougher and more seamed with fissures than he had realised at first, and between two of them he saw a motionless line of twisting blue brightness—obviously a distant fall of water. It was this which finally convinced him that the things, in spite of their improbable shape, were mountains; and with

¹⁷⁴ Downing, 25.

¹⁷⁵ Downing, 105.

that discovery the mere oddity of the prospect was swallowed up in the fantastic sublime.¹⁷⁶

Ransom's examination of the Malacandran landscape is another example of medieval *admiratio*, the admiring, non-covetous wonder that is often born from perplexity. He admires the strange shapes he sees, but he cannot, at first, resolve them into anything that he recognizes. It takes him quite some time to parse the unfamiliar, towering shapes on the horizon as the uniquely tall and slender mountains of Mars. Once he does, he revels in the discovery of their difference from earthly mountains, the *diversitas* that often drives medieval wonder.¹⁷⁷

In fact, in the departure from earthly norms, Ransom discovers not just a difference, but an expression of the concept of "mountain" that will forever change his understanding of his own world. The language of his discovery is once again full of joyful wonder and celebration of the strange.

Here, he understood, was the full statement of that *perpendicular* theme which beast and plant and earth all played on Malacandra—here in this riot of rock, leaping and surging skyward like solid jets from some rock-fountain, and hanging by their own lightness in the air, so shaped, so elongated, that all terrestrial mountains must ever after seem to him to be mountains lying on their sides.¹⁷⁸

Boenig finds a medieval connection in Lewis's description here as well. He links Lewis's usage of the word "perpendicular" to an art history term from Gothic architecture from late medieval England, referencing several of Lewis's letters where he employed the term with enthusiasm and approbation for the soaring structures it defined.¹⁷⁹ "The perpendicular" was most commonly associated with cathedrals, and there is an element of the graceful vaults and buttresses of the Gothic cathedral in the description that follows Lewis's use of the term. Whatever the case,

¹⁷⁶ Lewis, *Silent*, 54.

¹⁷⁷ Bynum, 7.

¹⁷⁸ Lewis, 54.

¹⁷⁹ Boenig, 85-6.

Ransom is once again awed by the shape of the natural world, both for its difference from his terrestrial experiences and because of its own inherent beauty. The experience is again positive and emotionally and spiritually restorative, as Ransom “felt a thrill and a lightening of the heart,” at his discovery.¹⁸⁰

2.4 Imaginative Education and Reeducation

Yet, despite his childlike receptivity to positive wonder experiences and the fact that his world may be medieval in flavor, full of marvels instead of horrors, he is still a modern, albeit a modern with one foot in the past. Ransom is not immediately prepared to respond to all of the marvels he sees in such fashion. Though he is already, by temperament and training, more prepared to greet the marvels he encounters in a positive fashion than his fellow earthmen, Ransom is still beset by a modern’s fears at the beginning of the novel, especially of the mysterious sorcs to which he was fated to be handed over. Just as he brought a modern understanding of astronomy to his encounter with space travel, so he brings a modern’s conception of extraterrestrial worlds and creatures to his encounter with Malacandra. Wonder has come to his rescue in moments of uncertainty and trepidation, but he must undergo an “imaginative reeducation” throughout his adventures to shake off the Wellsian education with its attendant fears that he brings to his adventure. The pattern Ransom follows throughout the novels is to experience fear in anticipation of his encounters with the Other, yet to experience joyful wonder once he actually comes face to face with the subject of his fears. Like Dante’s Pilgrim, whose vision must strengthen as he continues on his journey, Ransom must learn to see correctly in order to pierce the gloom of his own misconceptions.

¹⁸⁰ Lewis, 54.

As Lewis is careful to indicate, Ransom's initial fearful expectations for Malacandra are largely influenced by his imaginative training, by science fiction in general and Wells specifically. Like most people in his generation, Lewis informs his readers that Ransom:

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.¹⁸¹

This passage evokes the fearful modern sense of wonder to which Lewis was responding and sets up his critique and “transfiguration” of that imaginative inheritance. In fact, Lewis always positions Ransom's positive wonder responses in dialog with the fearful and covetous responses of his science fiction forefathers and his contemporary space-faring fellows. In his uncritical and continual appreciation of this alien world, Ransom surprises even himself, as he realizes “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.” Expecting a hostile, mechanistic environment among the stars, Ransom is pleasantly shocked to discover that, however strange and dangerous Malacandra may be, it is not utterly alien to human aesthetics, and with this discovery, he begins the path towards a revelation about the benevolent nature of the universe as a whole.

Yet, in this juxtaposition of perspectives, Lewis does not simply dismiss the modern view. Instead, his protagonist partakes of modern fears and anxieties, especially about the alien Other. It is through exposure to marvels and the resultant beneficent wonder responses that Ransom is able to leave those fears behind. Sanford Schwartz traces this process of Ransom's “reeducation” throughout his Malacandran adventure as part of his analysis of Lewis's

¹⁸¹ Lewis, 37.

“transfiguration” of the materialism of contemporary science fiction.¹⁸² He argues that Ransom is saved from falling into the familiar fearful, self-focused wonder responses of the genre because of his “good will and open-mindedness,” and while the errant earthman certainly possesses those qualities, it is perhaps certain aspects of his intellectual and imaginative training that most prepare him to have a positive response to Malacandra.¹⁸³

Ransom is a character as steeped in classical and medieval learning as his creator, and it is, in many ways, this background, that grants him the capacity to see the marvels he encounters with the eyes of an earlier era and produces his positive wonder responses. As Doris Myers points out in her analysis of the first novel, Ransom’s training and employment as a philologist means the reading of old texts and predisposes him not only to read, but also to sympathize, with the ideas they contain, as a certain sympathetic understanding of the material was necessary for the work.¹⁸⁴ This has resulted in an exposure to old ideas, including traditional morality and, presumably, older stories of the fantastic with their attendant medieval perspectives on wonder. It is this training that enables Ransom to see both the Martians and Mars itself for the benevolent creations they are when Weston and Devine cannot, and throughout the Trilogy we see the evidence of Ransom’s classical education and medieval sympathies. He knows the old astronomy, often interprets his experiences in terms of myth, and even quotes the “Battle of Maldon” during his confrontation with the Un-Man in the second novel. The material of such an education forms the lens through which he views his surroundings and prepares him for his strange adventures in two significant ways.

¹⁸² Schwartz, 19-52.

¹⁸³ Schwartz, 33.

¹⁸⁴ Myers, 41.

First, as Myers points out, this background of classical and medieval readings, his study of the past, provides Ransom with a certain freedom from the ideologies of the present.¹⁸⁵ As Lewis himself wrote, “to study the past does indeed liberate us from the present, from the idols of our own market-place.”¹⁸⁶ Ransom’s familiarity with older ideologies helps him to see the “scientism” of his era in context, as just one new ideology among many, as opposed to the natural and inevitable development of history, and it also empowers him to eventually see his own culture and preconceptions with the same relative perspective. In this way, Lewis critiques the modernist perspective of “scientism” that, as Myers puts it “simply assumed that scientific knowledge frees us from delusion and narrow-mindedness, brings uncounted material benefits, and makes traditional ideas of God and the soul unnecessary.”¹⁸⁷ Ironically, it is contact with the past and tradition that enables Lewis’s hero to deal successfully with the new and the unexpected, while the scientist of the novel is trapped by his own hyper-focus.

Yet, as always in the Trilogy, Lewis is not simply overturning or denigrating contemporary ideas, he is “transfiguring” them into something new. Lewis does not simply replace the scientist-heroes of Wellsian fiction with a medieval Christian. Instead, he replaces one type of scholar with another. This is the second way in which Ransom’s training prepared him for his adventures. Ransom, the philologist, though not an empiricist, employs rational and precise methodology to meet the challenges he faces on Malacandra. His training enables him to learn the language of the Martians and, in fact, to recognize in the first entrance that they were speaking a language at all.

¹⁸⁵ Myers, 41.

¹⁸⁶ Lewis, “Description,” 13.

¹⁸⁷ Myers, 41.

When Ransom first encounters Hyoui, the hross, it is the Malacandran's speech that convinces the earthman he has encountered a sentient being. He is startled when "The creature, which was still streaming and shaking itself on the back and had obviously not seen him, opened its mouth and began to make noises. This in itself was not remarkable; but a lifetime of linguistic study assured Ransom almost at once that these were articulate noises."¹⁸⁸ It is that same lifetime of study that equips the earthman for the difficult task of learning the Malacandran language and actually succeeding at communicating with the planet's inhabitants on a deep and meaningful level, a task that his erstwhile human companions never accomplish, despite their own scientific credentials. In this way, Lewis presents a hero whose special training and rational application of the resultant skills make him especially suited to the problems of his adventure, essentially reinventing the traditional science fiction motif of the scientist-hero, which was in many ways the standard in that era.¹⁸⁹ Ransom, in his way, brings the same skill and scholarly accomplishment to his journey as E. E. "Doc" Smith's Richard Seaton does to his, though rather less in the way of two-fisted heroics. The resultant "rational spirituality" is quite unique in the fiction of the day and remains rare in the modern era.

2.2.1 Social Harmony: Lack of Competition

Once Ransom has made the discovery of one of Malacandra's three rational species, he finds their social relations a mystery that his earthbound preconceptions are ill-suited to solve. Once again, his flawed imaginative training, influenced by both his science fiction reading and by the simple fact of his earthly experience, leads him to the wrong conclusions about his

¹⁸⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 56.

¹⁸⁹ Walter Hirsch, "The Image of the Scientist in Science Fiction a Content Analysis," *American Journal of Sociology* 63 no. 5 (1958): 506-512. 506.

surroundings. In this dissonance of experience and expectation, Lewis is once again transfiguring modern science fiction, while at the same time conjuring a world that is akin to the paradisiacal otherworlds encountered by romance travelers and the Christian enclaves encountered in wondrous pilgrim narratives.

Ransom expects at every turn to meet evidence of competition and domination in Malacandran culture, and yet he constantly finds his expectations happily disappointed. Throughout his sojourn with the hrossa, he repeatedly attempts to figure out what relationship they have with the sorns and the pfiflriggi, who is master and who is servant, and what their social hierarchy is. It never occurs to the earthman that the two races could exist independently and freely, neither requiring anything of the other but friendship and companionable neglect. His first thoughts on discovering the coexistence of three rational species on Malacandra are significant and illuminating for the reader. Ransom observes that “On Malacandra, apparently, three distinct species had reached rationality, and none of them had yet exterminated the other two. It concerned him intently to find out which was the real master.”¹⁹⁰ For, of course, one must be master, because creatures separated by so much difference could not possibly coexist peacefully in a universe organized along Wellsian principles that centered on the “struggle for existence.” Upon learning from the hrossa that the sorns, or séroni, are the most academically gifted of the Malacandrans, those who are “good at finding out things about the stars [...] and telling what happened in Malacandra long ago,” the Earthman begins to harbor a lingering suspicion that he has stumbled on the true state of things. He thinks to himself, “They must be the real rulers, however it is disguised,” and it is long before he is finally successfully disabused

¹⁹⁰ Lewis, 70.

of this notion, so firmly has his imaginative training prepared him to look for such a state of affairs.

Ransom has no better luck when he attempts to explain the concept of conflict or war over scarce resources. His efforts meet nothing but confusion from the unfallen *hnau*, or sentient beings, of Malacandra. The Earthman questions his hross companion, Hyoi, about the possibility of the other races wanting food, and the simplicity of his response is significant: Hyoi answers, “If the other hnau wanted food, why should we not give it to them? We often do.”¹⁹¹ The openness and generosity of spirit revealed by Hyoi’s response points to the unfallen nature of the hrossa, but it also serves to illustrate the disingenuousness of elaborate justifications for imperialism and the unexamined assumptions of naturalistic competition that lie beneath the surface of contemporary science fiction. For Ransom, the simplicity of the answers highlights the absurdity of humanity’s complication of the problem.

Despite the simplicity and openness of his hrossa hosts, Ransom is at first afraid to trust the Malacandrans with knowledge of Earth’s flaws, not knowing how little threat they posed to his terrestrial home. He worries that he will meet a fate similar to that which found H. G. Well’s Cavor on the Moon when his space-faring predecessor spoke too freely of his planet’s problems. Unlike Cavor, however, Ransom feels a prick of conscience. Thus, “He did not want to tell them too much of our human wars and industrialisms.” All of his imaginative training had prepared him to be cautious in such a moment, and the preponderance of contemporary science fiction echoed that lesson. From Wells to the pulps, the earthmen in such stories who spoke too freely often set in motion events that would see extraterrestrial ire turned against his own species. Yet,

¹⁹¹ Lewis, 73.

for Ransom, there is no danger other than the discovery of a degree of shame at the selfishness of his own race.

Even the way Lewis portrays Ransom's perception of Malacandran culture is a tool for reworking contemporary ideology and science fiction. As usual, Ransom's attempts to understand the hrossa begins from the standard science fiction perspective, which regarded technological and social development as evidence of progress along a universal and linear scale of "civilization" shared with the viewers' own culture. Ransom's evolving comprehension remains in dialog with that point of view, even though he quickly moves past it. As John Rieder argues, this perspective is based on the use of anthropology by the colonial powers to interpret the cultural present of the encountered Other as a stage of development in the colonial viewer's past.¹⁹² In fact, such an interpretive move, which denied the contemporaneity, and in a sense, the reality, of "primitive" cultures was a key component in the ideology that was used to justify colonial projects. This rendering of anthropological difference as difference not in space, but in time, is one of the major links between early science fiction and colonialism.¹⁹³ H.G. Wells famously inverted the pattern on his European readers, with his Martians taking the role of the advanced civilization for whom the humans are just an anachronistic anthropological throwback. Yet Wells maintained the basic structure and its attendant assumptions about "savage" and "civilized" cultures, even while questioning its use for the justification of colonial and imperialistic undertakings.¹⁹⁴

Lewis attempts a more complete reinterpretation of this colonial tendency of science fiction. At first, Ransom shares the anthropological assumptions of his contemporary

¹⁹² Rieder, 5-7.

¹⁹³ Rieder, 6.

¹⁹⁴ Rieder, 6-7.

interplanetary travelers, and he reads the hrossa's cultural development in light of human history. When he arrives in the hrossa village, "his first diagnosis of their culture was what he called 'old stone age,'" utilizing the language he and his genre inherited from 19th century anthropology.¹⁹⁵ This assumption certainly seems to be valid, judging by earthly standards. Ransom observes that "The few cutting instruments they possessed were made of stone. They seemed to have no pottery but a few clumsy vessels used for boiling, and boiling was the only cookery they attempted."¹⁹⁶ The hrossa have all the hallmarks of a culture at a stone age level of development, and Ransom assumes that their lack of technological progress reflects a lack of intelligence and sophistication, but his imaginative reeducation is underway almost at once. When his alien hosts ask him where he came from, Ransom answers that he came from the sky.

To his surprise, "Hnohra immediately asked from which planet or earth (handra)."¹⁹⁷ The earthman "had deliberately given a childish version of the truth in order to adapt it to the supposed ignorance of his audience," and despite his effort, he suddenly found himself being lectured to as his host began "painfully explaining to him that he could not live in the sky because there was no air in it; he might have come through the sky but he must have come from a *handra*."¹⁹⁸ Ransom quickly discovers that his earthly preconceptions are not born out in Malacandra and that he cannot judge these new creatures by his own standards. Before he has entirely grasped this truth, however, he makes a similar mistake in regards to the sorns. Ransom's conviction that the sorns must truly rule the hrossa, no matter how they spin it, springs almost entirely from his understanding that they are more technologically advanced.

¹⁹⁵ Lewis, 67.

¹⁹⁶ Lewis, 67.

¹⁹⁷ Lewis, 68.

¹⁹⁸ Lewis, 68.

Thus, he once again applies earthly standards to the relationships of the Malacandran races. In overturning these terrestrial expectations, Lewis is also undermining the most basic progressivist assumptions of the “scientism” that lies beneath the science fiction genre. The anthropological understanding of “primitive” societies growing into “civilized” cultures is based on such a relationship between technological and cultural development. Lewis, providing his readers with three different but equal cultures who exist on the same level of development despite their different levels of technology, breaks down the assumptions that Ransom and his contemporary readers likely share. Instead of the more technologically and socially “primitive” cultures being viewed as simple precursors to the readers’ own culture or even as suppositions of what it might eventually become, Lewis depicts all three as having their own unique values and benefiting from, in fact, relying upon, each other. This concept, that less developed cultures might have their own inherent values and identities, distinct from a linear scheme of cultural progress, was exceedingly rare in the 30s and 40s. Nonetheless, it calls to mind Mandeville’s note of caution to his Christian readers that such mysteries exist to show them that “we don’t know whom God loves or hates” and his quotation of John 10:16, reminding his readers that “And other sheep I have, that are not of this fold.”¹⁹⁹

On Malacandra, it is not just the native races that meet on uneven but equal terms. Ransom and his hosts also defy colonialist expectations. The science fiction traveler, according to Rieder, usually occupies the role of the scientific observer, the one who looks, analyzes, and theorizes. This perspective, which he terms the “colonial gaze,” grants the viewer a position of agency and power, while depriving its subject of the same.²⁰⁰ Yet, Lewis stresses that “Naturally

¹⁹⁹ John Mandeville, *The Book of Marvels and Travels*, Trans. Anthony Paul Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117.

²⁰⁰ Rieder, 7.

his conversations with the *hrossa* did not all turn on Malacandra. He had to repay them with information about Earth,²⁰¹ and in the chapter that follows, earthman and hrossa take turns asking questions and sharing information about their respective worlds and cultures. Ransom is not the mighty explorer condescending to contact with the inferior species, as he first suspects because of their low level of technological development. Instead, he quickly discovers that he is part of a meeting of equals, a contact of different cultures where each wonders at the other and where neither possesses the “colonial gaze” and its attendant power and agency. Instead, immediately for the hrossa, and quickly for Ransom, their differences become a source for joyful wonder, and the earthman discovers that, as his medieval predecessors knew, his own sense of wonder is situational and shared, from their perspective, by his Malacandran hosts. As James of Vitry posited after 1200, “perhaps the Cyclopes, who all have one eye, marvel as much at those who have two eyes as we marvel at them.”²⁰² In just such a fashion, Lewis shows the Malacandrans marveling at their human guest.

Lewis’s villains, for their part, are unable to reach this revelation and continue to regard the Malacandrans as savages. The lesser level of technological development is specifically one of the arguments Weston uses for why humanity has a right to supersede the Martian peoples, as he has subconsciously absorbed the ideology of 19th century anthropology and its use as colonial justification. Weston’s insistence in regarding the hrossa as superstitious savages employing magic tricks and subservient to witch doctors leads to his humiliation in the novel’s climax, as he tries to outwit a supposed witch doctor to whom he attributes the disembodied voice of the Oyarsa, only for it to be revealed as an old hross who had fallen asleep in the sun. His

²⁰¹ Lewis, 71.

²⁰² Quoted in Bynum, 14.

companion, Devine, has rather more straightforward motivations for his interplanetary imperialism, however.

During his sojourn among the Hross, Ransom gains a clue of what allure Mars has for the mercenary Devine when he is shown a golden bowl by his hosts. This confirms the suspicions already raised by his “ironical remarks about the white man’s burden and the blessings of civilization” during their journey to the planet. With Devine, Lewis provides a satire of the exploitative, imperialistic assumptions of Wells’ story and its analogs, as well as a worldly foil for Ransom’s spiritual journey. For the philologist himself, the attraction of the “Arbol hru,” the Malacandra metal, is not its material worth but its value as another window into the mysteries of Malacandra culture. Ransom is far more interested in the etchings he finds upon it than in the bowl’s substance, as the designs reveal to him the coexistence of the three Martian races. Thus, the bowl becomes another avenue of wonder, another way in which he experiences the ameliorating effects of encountering the marvels of Malacandra.

2.2.2 Martian Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw but Pure in Spirit

Yet, Lewis’s critique of the acquisitive wonder of science fiction through the exploitative nature of his villains’ journey is once again not a simple refutation. For all of its unfallen harmony, Malacandra is not merely a paradise that is simply spared the evolutionary necessities of the universe. Lewis’s Mars is no purely utopian vision, no version of the Earthly Paradise simply translated to another planet. Instead, it is a world of hardship and struggle, one blasted by cataclysm, when the fallen Eldil, the Christian Satan, of the titular Silent Planet, Earth, struck out during his rebellion. This is a world that knows death, pain, and scarcity, with most of its surface rendered uninhabitable by the Dark Eldil’s attack. Because of collateral damage, they do not

have Eden, do not reap what they do not sow, and are not walking through a garden of delight.

Yet, it is a world where such hardships are not inflicted or exacerbated by its inhabitants.

Because of the discipline and moral character inherent in their unfallen nature, the Malacandrans, who naturally limit their numbers through abstinence and who share their resource freely, have prevented the world from sinking into the earthly war of all against all. In Lewis's cosmos, it is this competitiveness, not the scarcity of resources or any difference in natural law, that distinguishes Earth's fallen state from Malacandra's unfallen nature. Lewis's Malacandra does not merely sidestep the forces that create the competition at the core of imperialistic ideologies.

Thus, Lewis's Mars is not simply an outright rejection of the Wellsian model of universal competition based on the Darwinian "struggle for existence," as Malacandra is a world where such a reality is entirely possible. What's more, even violence is not alien to this extraterrestrial realm. Lewis's Martians engage in violent, deadly hunts, pitting themselves against some of the powerful and dangerous inhabitants of their world. They may have the curse of labor without guilt, but even though they must hunt, they do not kill for sport, nor do they go to war for greed. The motivation for these hunts is the key, as is the motivation for a journey. They hunt only as necessary and with gratitude. This takes the form of a ritual, with divinely sanctioned violence wherein both "rational and irrational creatures participate in a mutually uplifting struggle that manifests the enduring kinship between them," creating a sense of unity, even in a moment of competition.²⁰³ Schwartz argues that in these elements, "Lewis is not simply repudiating but rather transfiguring or 'up-grading' (RP 116) the Wellsian vision of Nature 'red in tooth and claw' into an 'archetype,' or 'original,' that simultaneously preserves and 'takes up' (RP 116) some of the defining features of the evolutionary conflict itself."²⁰⁴ In this way, Lewis creates a

²⁰³ Schwartz, 13.

²⁰⁴ Schwartz, 13.

vision of a world not completely dissimilar from Earth and, in fact, without all of the human homeland's advantages in terms of resources and space, yet in which the struggle for existence creates unity instead of conflict. Thus, Lewis presents an example of evolution unlinked from colonialism, a world of violence without conflict, of change and growth without pain.

This vision of a world ruled by natural laws yet freed from the moral consequences associated with them provides Lewis with another avenue for his critique of colonialism. His *Malacandra* challenges science fiction's unproblematic acceptance of competition as the default mode of interaction between species. The arguments of his villains which share this assumption of inevitable conflict fall flat upon contact with the reality of *Malacandra*. Whatever the superficial justification of colonialism, it lacks the integrity of *Malacandra* and reflects the greed of a fallen nature. Devine's sneering references to the "White Man's Burden" reveal his own moral corruption, but in the context of *Malacandra's* "primitive" cultures that have their own worth apart from their ability to develop into those that mirror Western culture, they reveal the false assumptions beneath the concept itself. In the same way, Weston's speech about a "manifest destiny" for humanity reveals his own narrowness of perspective, but in the light of the harmonizing instinct of *Malacandran* culture, also reveals the absurdity of any claims for the special status of one group over others.

The *hnakra* hunt is the event that crystalizes these different strands of significance. Through it, Ransom enters into and participates in an experience that seems only possible in the unique setting of *Malacandra*, which is the specific mixture of excitement, wonder, and violence that is the hunt. The thrill of the experience is decoupled from an enjoyment of killing as conquest and competition and is contrasted to the selfish and unnecessary slaying of *Hyo* by Ransom's erstwhile human companions, which immediately follows it. Ransom cites fear as one

of their motivations when he is trying to explain how hnau could slay hnau, but the selfish, exploitative nature of their interaction with Malacandra is close to the surface as well. As he frantically explains to his other companion, ““They would think he was a beast. If they thought that, they would kill him for pleasure, or in fear, or’ (he hesitated) ‘because they were hungry. But I must tell you the truth, Whin. They would kill even a hnau, knowing it to be hnau, if they thought its death would serve them.’”²⁰⁵ The hunt illustrates the difference between Ransom’s pilgrimage and the exploitative aims of his fellow Earthmen. Whereas Weston and Devine are willing to kill a fellow rational creature if it serves their purposes, Ransom, learning from the hrossa, takes part in the hunt, not for any material gain from the death of the prey, but for the spiritual gain that the process itself grants. It is the hunt, not the kill, that is important, just as it is the journey, not the destination, that is important in *peregrinatio*. The ritual violence of the hunt, like the gold of the pfiltriggi bowl, is of value, not for itself or for what power it brings, but for what it teaches and models.

2.5 Non-Monstrous Monsters

In the interaction between earthman and Martian lies the third line of resemblance between the Space Trilogy and its medieval forbearers, as well as the third quality that sets it apart from its contemporaries. Lewis’s portrayal of his aliens and his protagonist’s reaction to them is a major departure from the fiction of the day. Instead of the common “Bug Eyed Monsters” of contemporary science fiction, Lewis provides his readers with aliens who are different from humans, but nonetheless not monstrous. This is a departure from more than just contemporary tradition. Jeffery Jerome Cohen’s landmark work on the role of the monster in

²⁰⁵ Lewis, 83.

fiction argues that, in western culture, the monster is overwhelmingly a symbol of fear and anxiety over the Other, in whatever form.²⁰⁶ This view maps well onto modern examples of the monstrous, and it certainly lines up with the alien Other as it was depicted in Pulp era science fiction. In that period, positive portrayals of aliens were almost always imagined as near-human, like Edgar Rice Burroughs' Red Martians, who are identical to their earthly visitor in every respect save that of skin color. Meanwhile, negative portrayals of aliens were almost always monstrous in form and character. As Lewis put it, they were all ogres.

Yet, that has not always been so. The term itself, "monster," descends from the Latin term, *monstrum*, which once had other connotations beyond grotesque and unnatural creatures. The Latin term could denote warning, but it could also herald a wonder or a portent, a sight worth seeing. Given the relation of the word to *monstro*, which means to point out or demonstrate, this is unsurprising. These etymological oddities are more than just curiosities illustrating the shift in languages, however, as they also point us to the fact that the very concept of the monster has changed over the years as well. In the most famous monster manual of the Middle Ages, the *Liber Monstrorum*, there are terrible and grotesque creatures aplenty, but there are also beings that are more marvelous than horrible, sources of wonder rather than sources of fear, all under the title of "monster." The book's sources, including the Wonders of the East tradition, Pliny's catalog of monsters, and the Alexander legends contain similarly ambivalent monsters, including both the frightful and the fascinating.²⁰⁷

The Middle Ages inherited a surprisingly benign view of the monstrous from Isidore of Seville and Augustine that colored the reception and production of such accounts. In his

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Theory," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3-25. 4.

²⁰⁷ For a full discussion of the development of the medieval sense of the monstrous, see John Block Friedman's *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*.

Etymologiae, Isidore of Seville, drawing on Varro, made the foundational argument that, rather than being violations of nature, creatures inherently evil and dangerous, monsters should instead be understood as portents, signals from God. As such, “they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of every-thing is the will of the Creator.”²⁰⁸ As a result, monsters could be seen in a positive as well as a negative light, and they were commonly turned towards didactic ends. As John Friedman observes in *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, “in the Christian period they were a sign of God’s power over nature and His use of it for didactic ends. In popular and pious literature monsters were, therefore, closely connected with Christian miracles and the marvelous.”²⁰⁹ In this sense, the medieval monstrous is of a piece with the nature of medieval wonder, and its monsters were often turned to the same edifying, spiritual purpose as the other marvels of medieval fiction.

Medieval monsters, like those that populate Mandeville’s *Travels*, while sometimes ferocious and always strange, are often seen, not as terrifying aberrations, but as diverse species of humanity, prodigies in appearance, but fellow children of God, and fellow followers of the Christian faith in potential, if not in practice. In fact, there were even some medieval thinkers that argued monstrosity fulfilled a necessary role in the universe. As Friedman puts it, “Monstrosity, in this view, provided a desirable contrast with the more harmonious form of Western men, contributing to the *concordia discors* of the universe.”²¹⁰ Thus multivalent medieval monster could be seen as a part of the divine order, and although their monstrousness was often associated with vice, it was also often associated with virtue.²¹¹ In the same way,

²⁰⁸ Stephen A Barney, et al. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 243.

²⁰⁹ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 109.

²¹⁰ Friedman, 178.

²¹¹ Friedman, 109.

Dante, one of Lewis's strongest influences, applies a similarly flexible approach to his monsters, which can serve as symbols of both sin and godliness. As Christopher Livanos points out, "monsters in the *Commedia* can be figures either of demonic evil or, in some cases, of transcendent good, as we see in the Griffin near the end of *Purgatorio*."²¹²

In Lewis's *Space Trilogy*, he evokes a similar sense of the traditionally monstrous alien Other, transforming them, within the texts themselves, from sources of apprehension and fear into sources of wonder and edification. Lewis's portrayal of his alien "monsters" both challenges and partakes in popular conceptions of the monstrous in fascinating ways. As with his treatment of wonder, Lewis's treatment of the "monstrous" alien is never far removed from its science fiction predecessors. In fact, as part of Ransom's imaginative reeducation, he must learn to see the aliens he encounters properly, as he usually imagines the Malacandrans in monstrous terms before discovering their wondrous reality. Lewis's aliens seem at first to capture all of the contemporary flavor of the monstrous alien and evoke the same fearful reactions, but when actually encountered, their difference is again a source of positive wonder.

To understand the uniqueness of Lewis's aliens, it is helpful to compare Ransom's contact with them to the Lunar misadventures of his science fiction models, Wells' Bedford and Cavor. Wells' aliens engender a much more traditional response, one which lines up with several of Cohen's monster theses, the guidelines he established to resemblances among monstrous representations in fiction. As Cohen posits, monsters in fiction are products of a particular cultural moment, and this is certainly true of Wells' Selenites, like his Martians. We have already seen how they partake of the era's anxiety over the Other and colonial ideologies, and they share the anthropological assumptions of the age. These monstrous aliens are clear

²¹² Christopher Livanos, "Dante's Monsters: Nature and Evil in the '*Commedia*,'" *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 127 (2009): 81-92. 82.

representations of the fear of the Other. They are obvious products of the culture that spawned them, and they are both repulsive and attractive in their difference, though it is by far repulsion that carries the day in Wells' novels.

Robert Boenig has conducted an analysis comparing *First Men* and *Silent Planet* in his *C. S. Lewis in the Middle Ages*, and he has noted the common element of fear in the reactions of Wells' protagonists. Like Schwartz, he traces the process of Ransom's imaginative retraining through encounters with the inhabitants of Malacandra, contrasting his growing acceptance of the aliens he encounters with the overriding fear of Wells' characters.²¹³ As he describes the contrast between the protagonists, "Like Cavor and Bedford, Ransom is in an approach/avoidance conflict, but it is one in which approach will emerge as the proper response. In fact, *Out of the Silent Planet* is largely the story of approach—Ransom's journey toward communication in which he gradually repudiates Bedford's persistent instinct to escape."²¹⁴ Boenig's analysis pinpoints the development of Ransom's Malacandran perspective and the central difference of reaction between him and his Wellsian forebearers. However, we might also say instead that the conflict is between two different attitudes of wonder, horrified or joyful wonder, fear and fascination. Ransom's conflict is resolved by discovering that attraction to the Other and celebration of the wonder of its difference is the proper response. A comparison of the different portrayals of the alien Other by Wells and Lewis reveals the monstrousness of Wells' descriptions of the Lunar creatures in contrast to the much more benign descriptions of Lewis's aliens. These descriptions invite fear on one hand and fascination on the other from both reader and character.

²¹³ Boenig, 82-88.

²¹⁴ Boenig, 86.

The first inhabitant of the Moon that Wells' space travelers discover is the hideous, though ultimately harmless, moon-calf. Bedford describes his initial impressions of the creatures in language that highlights its horror and repulsiveness:

I perceived that its gigantic, flabby body lay along the ground, and that its skin was of a corrugated white, dappling into blackness along the backbone. But of its feet we saw nothing. I think also that we saw then the profile at least of the almost brainless head, with its fat-encumbered neck, its slobbering omnivorous mouth, its little nostrils, and tight shut eyes. [...] We had a glimpse of a vast red pit as it opened its mouth to bleat and bellow again.²¹⁵

Its grotesque obesity, which will feature in several more passages of description, is emphasized, as is the beast's massive, dominant maw. Bedford's further examinations of the creature produce equally negative portraits. He sees them as "They lay against their food like stupendous slugs, huge, greasy hulls, eating greedily and noisily, with a sort of sobbing avidity. They seemed monsters of mere fatness, clumsy and overwhelmed to a degree that would make a Smithfield ox seem a model of agility."²¹⁶ Cavor's indignant outburst conveys the substance of their reaction quite well, as he curses both their appetite and their appearance by calling them "Hogs! [...] Disgusting hogs!"²¹⁷

In contrast, Lewis confronts his own spacefarer with an equally harmless, but much less repulsive creature, his Malacandran "giraffe." As he wanders lost, Ransom comes across a clearing, and:

Before he could fly he found himself in the midst of a herd of enormous pale furry creatures more like giraffes than anything else he could think of, except that they could and did raise themselves on their hind legs and even progress several paces in that position. They were slenderer, and very much higher, than giraffes, and were eating the leaves off the tops of the purple plants. They saw him and stared at him with their big liquid eyes, snorting in *basso profundissimo*, but had apparently no hostile intentions.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ H. G. Wells, *The First Men in the Moon* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001), 55.

²¹⁶ Wells, 56

²¹⁷ Wells, 56.

²¹⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 53.

Lewis's elongated giraffes are described in neutral or even attractive terms that highlight their gracefulness and harmlessness. His description focuses on his creatures' agility, just as Wells' focuses on his own monstrous cattle's clumsiness and obesity. In addition, the detail of the creatures "big liquid eyes" helps to establish their similarity to earthly animals., while the eyes of the moon-calves are not only tiny, but also perpetually closed. Lewis's creatures' alien unfamiliarity is undercut by the sudden revelation that, however strange their form, they share the same dull, placid eyes and deep voice as earthly cattle. The encounter with these creatures provides another instance of positive wonder, as Ransom, recovering from his panicked flight from his captors, finds that "This episode had an infinitely comforting effect on" him.²¹⁹ Once again, an experience of wonder in the contact with something new and strange proves to have an ameliorating effect on the traveler as the benevolent nature of Malcandra continues to be revealed.

The two sets of space travelers' respective encounters with their world's intelligent inhabitants provide an even more effective contrast. Wells' Selenites might well have served as the model for Ransom's fearful apprehension of inhuman intelligence as "insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable" and likely were at least part of the image Lewis had in mind when he conjured Ransom's nightmare.²²⁰ Although when first glimpsed in shadow, the earthmen are quick to ascribe human-like features to their roughly humanoid shapes, this first, hopeful impression is quickly corrected. Bedford records that their captor "was a blank, black figure to us, but instinctively our imaginations supplied features to his very human outline."²²¹ Yet, once revealed, he discovers that "the human features I had attributed to him were not there

²¹⁹ Lewis, 53.

²²⁰ Lewis, 37.

²²¹ Wells, 64.

at all!”²²² The true face of the Selenite is a terrible shock to the spacefarers, and they can scarcely understand what they are seeing:

It seemed as though it wasn't a face, as though it must needs be a mask, a horror, a deformity, that would presently be disavowed or explained. There was no nose, and the thing had dull bulging eyes at the side—in the silhouette I had supposed they were ears. There were no ears.... I have tried to draw one of these heads, but I cannot. There was a mouth, downwardly curved, like a human mouth in a face that stares ferociously.²²³

The creature is so alien in feature that Bedford cannot even reproduce its likeness. Even the one human attribute he allows it, a mouth, is rendered frightening and menacing by the comparison. The creature horrifies and repulses the travelers, and its very alien nature confounds them. Bedford remarks that “They’re much more like ants on their hind legs than human beings, and who ever got any sort of understanding with ants?”²²⁴ Their inhuman, alien appearance immediately makes Bedford despair of any meaningful understanding between their species, though Cavor, as usual, is more sanguine about their chances. Nonetheless, common ground seems terribly remote in that moment of discovery.

In addition, their insectoid nature taps into a fairly universal fear of insects that is likely to be accessible to most readers. This is a fear that Lewis himself shared and which he passed on to his space-traveling hero.²²⁵ Early on in his adventure, as Ransom falls victim to phantom fears drawn from the works of Wells and others, “Loathing of insects, loathing of snakes, loathing of things that squashed and squelched, all played their horrible symphonies over his nerves.”²²⁶ Notably, it will be some time before Ransom himself, despite his greater capacity for positive

²²² Wells, 64.

²²³ Wells, 64.

²²⁴ Wells, 69.

²²⁵ Downing, 105-106.

²²⁶ Lewis, 37.

wonder, is prepared to accept insectoid aliens, and it is likely fortunate that the pfifltriggi are the last species he meets.

In contrast to Bedford, who at first attributes human features to the alien he encounters, Ransom's pattern of perception moves in the opposite direction in his initial meeting. Bedford initially grants the Selenite more humanity than it, in fact, possessed, and his discovery of his mistake further increased his horror and distress. Ransom, on the other hand, is comforted by his discovery of the Malacandran's sentience. At first, he has no idea that the hross is anything more than an animal, and perhaps a dangerous one at that. In fact, the initial description is of an object, not even necessarily a living being.:

Suddenly the water heaved and a round, shining, black thing like a cannon-ball came into sight. Then he saw eyes and mouth—a puffing mouth bearded with bubbles. More of the thing came up out of the water. It was gleaming black. Finally it splashed and wallowed to the shore and rose, streaming on its hind legs—six or seven feet high and too thin for its height, like everything in Malacandra. It had a coat of thick black hair, lucid as seal-skin, very short legs with webbed feet, a broad beaver-like or fish-like tail, strong forelimbs with webbed claws or fingers [...]²²⁷

The process of discovery is mapped out in detail, with Lewis tracing Ransom's realization, first of the creature's basic nature, and then, once it speaks, of its sentient nature. The imagery he uses is not as comforting as his giraffe-creatures, but nor is it as frightening as the Selenites. The hross is towering and ominously colored, with clawed hands, but it is also possessed of some familiar and almost humorous qualities, like its short legs, seal-like coat, and beaver tail. The picture is much more ambivalent upon a first reading than that of the giraffe, allowing the reader to share some of Ransom's anxiety, but it is also positioned to become a charming portrait of a fellow creature once that anxiety is removed.

²²⁷ Lewis, 55.

After hearing Hyoui's speech and discovering his rationality, Ransom is immediately convinced that, at least on some level, there is hope of finding common ground with the creature. In fact, his discovery of their shared gift of language pushes Ransom past his initial anxiety. In contrast to the fear and revulsion of Wells' protagonists, Ransom and Hyoui both, and the shared experience is also key, find themselves wary, yet drawn to the new creature each has discovered. Their encounter is marked by natural caution at first, but despite the uncertainty represented by the Other they have met, their very difference makes them irresistibly fascinating to one another. They soon find themselves in a sort of dance, with each desiring to approach the other, yet too cautious to allow themselves to be approached:

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.

Fear is part of their encounter, and even a degree of revulsion, but Lewis's emphasis lies far more heavily on the desire of these two creatures for a meeting of unlike and unlike. Lewis's description of their emotions, once again, focusing on both Ransom and the hross, is illuminating.

It was foolish, frightening, ecstatic and unbearable all in one moment. It was more than curiosity. It was like a courtship - like the meeting of the first man and the first woman in the world; it was like something beyond that; so natural is the contact of sexes, so limited. the strangeness, so shallow the reticence, so mild the repugnance to be overcome, compared with the first tingling intercourse of two different, but rational, species.²²⁸

²²⁸ Lewis, 56-7.

His metaphor, that of the meeting of the first man and the first woman, does not entirely capture the scene, but it is evocative. It illustrates the tension between fear and joy in wonder, fear of difference or celebration of its discovery. As Schwartz points out, this passage, with its hint of Milton's meeting of Adam and Eve from *Paradise Lost*, "evokes the complex of desire and mutual recognition that sometimes outweighs the suspicions that distance us from those we perceive as different from ourselves."²²⁹ Lewis continues to emphasize the mutual wonder of both observes, with his narrator assuring us that the human's emotions are shared by the hross. This same focus on perceptival wonder is found in Ransom's eventual encounter with the sorns, where his more academic hosts are as fascinated with their guest as he is with them.

Despite their more positive portrayal, Lewis's aliens do have significant similarities to their monstrous contemporaries and even Cohen's basic categorization. Cohen argues that one of the things that makes monsters out of fictional creatures is a sense of boundary crossing or category blurring. He writes that monsters "are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions."²³⁰ This horrifying hybridity is true of Wells' creatures, both his moon-calf, with its unsettling combination of pig and slug, and his anthropoidal antagonists, the Selenites, who blend the insectoid and the human in a way that is terrifying to their human visitors. Interestingly enough, it is also true of Lewis's aliens, who are all hybrids as well, creatures of crossed boundaries. In fact, their very hybridity initially serves as a source of anxiety for Ransom. Yet, once he learns to see them properly, that hybridity instead becomes another source of wonder. In this instance, Lewis is once more invoking a more medieval sense of the monster-as-wonder. In fact,

²²⁹ Schwartz, 35-6.

²³⁰ Cohen, 6.

hybridity, mixture, is one of the primary catalysts for medieval wonder that Caroline Bynum identifies. As she argues, “Wonder was moreover associated with paradox, coincidence of opposites; one finds *mira* (wondrous) again and again in the texts alongside *mixta* (mixed or composite things), a word that evokes the hybrids and monsters also found in the literature of entertainment.”²³¹ Lewis’s aliens are almost universally creatures that are *mixta*, composites and hybrids, and though they initially evoke the common response to monsters, their very composite nature quickly becomes part of their beauty, as they become *mira*.

Ransom finds himself shaken during his first meeting with Hroi the hross, and his discomfort stems almost entirely from just this sense of hybridity. His impression of the creature’s alienness becomes disturbing “when the rationality of the *hross* tempted you to think of it as a man. Then it became abominable—a man seven feet high, with a snaky body, covered, face and all, with thick black animal hair, and whiskered like a cat.”²³² This sense of unnatural mixture troubles Ransom until he hits upon the proper way of viewing the creature. He realized:

starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have—glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth—and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason. Nothing could be more disgusting than the one impression; nothing more delightful than the other. It all depended on the point of view.²³³

Viewing the creature from a different, decentered perspective, without humanity and himself as the point of reference, produces an understanding of the hross that is not only freed from the monstrous connotations of its hybridity but is instead a source of joyful wonder. The latter view emphasizes the inherent connection between creature and creation, an association that always produces such a delighted sense of wonder in Lewis’s novels. It is also worth noting that, for

²³¹ Bynum, 7.

²³² Lewis, 59.

²³³ Lewis, 59.

Lewis, the reference to “earliest dreams” is practically literal, as his earliest flights of fancy were almost wholly dedicated to what he called “dressed animals,” the anthropomorphic intelligent animals who populated the invented land of Boxen that he shared with his brother as a boy.²³⁴ Of course, Lewis would later return to this theme at length in Narnia, where he explores the concept in greater depth.

Lewis’s sorns partake in a similar pattern of hybrid horror followed by a transformation into wonder. Ransom’s first glimpse of them is full of fear, undoubtedly fueled by the mistaken apprehension of his captors that the sorns wanted him for a human sacrifice. Yet, their appearance, which seems like a distorted exaggeration of the human form, adds to his terror.

They were:

Spindly and flimsy things, twice or three times the height of a man. His first idea was that they were images of men, the work of savage artists; he had seen things like them in books of archaeology. But what could they be made of, and how could they stand?—so crazily thin and elongated in the leg, so top-heavily pouted in the chest, such stalky, flexible-looking distortions of earthly bipeds...like something seen in one of those comic mirrors.²³⁵

The image of a reflection distorted by a fun-house mirror is an evocative one and captures the fear inherent in their seemingly unnatural parody of the human form. Even their faces are distortions of human features and described in a language of composites. Ransom sees that their faces are “Thin and unnaturally long, with long, drooping noses and drooping mouths of half-spectral, half-idiotic solemnity.”²³⁶ Yet even from his earliest impressions, Ransom is struck with the fact that the monsters of his imagination do not, in fact, correspond to the creatures he conjured in his Wellsian nightmares.

²³⁴ Lewis, *Surprised*, 6.

²³⁵ Lewis, *Silent*, 46.

²³⁶ Lewis, 46.

He finds himself puzzled that “They appealed away from the Wellsian fantasies to an earlier, almost an infantile, complex of fears. Giants—ogres—ghosts—skeletons: those were its key words.”²³⁷ Nonetheless, Lewis eventually undermines even these more instinctual fears, and even the most basic bogies of the western imagination are displaced by Ransom’s actual meeting with a sorn, Augray. It is at this point that his imaginative reeducation is nearly complete, when he can finally see the sorn, as he had seen the hross, with the proper perspective.

Ogres’ he had called them when they first met his eyes as he struggled in the grip of Weston and Devine; ‘Titans’ or ‘Angels’ he now thought would have been a better world. Even the faces, it seemed to him, he had not seen aright. He had thought them spectral when they were only august, and his human reaction to their lengthened severity of line and profound stillness of expression now appeared to him not so much cowardly as vulgar. So might Parmenides or Confucius look to the eyes of a Cockney schoolboy!²³⁸

The same features that had driven his fears, the same combination of the human and the alien, are still present. Yet now, Ransom sees in their difference, not a distortion of humanity, but an elevation of human qualities. Humanity is no longer the measure of the Other. Comparing the creatures to titans and angels instead of giants and ogres emphasizes the awed wonder that the earthman experiences as he finally learns to see these Malacandrans properly. The sense of childhood wonder is also evoked once more in his comparison of his own ignorance to that of an ignorant schoolboy.

Ransom’s greatest test fortunately comes when he has been well prepared for it by his Malacandran adventure. The last of the Martian races he meets is that which was most calculated to send him screaming for the too-tall hills, the pfiltriggi. These creatures actually *are* the insectoid horrors that Ransom has feared and imagined throughout his trip, but when he finally sees them, he has been properly trained and fear is countered by humor, in very Lewisian

²³⁷ Lewis, 49.

²³⁸ Lewis, 101.

fashion.²³⁹ He gets his first look at one of the “busy people” when it pokes its head around a corner in Meldilorn, the city in which the races commune:

It was hairless like a man’s or a sorn’s. It was long and pointed like a shrew’s, yellow and shabby-looking, and so low in the forehead that but for the heavy development of the head at the back and behind the ears (like a bag-wig) it could not have been that of an intelligent creature. [...] It was much more insect-like or reptilian than anything he had yet seen.²⁴⁰

Ransom takes the creature in with a wry sort of detachment, though he was “glad that he had not met one of this third race on his first arrival in Malacandra” because of how much it resembles the Wellsian abominations of his fears. The resemblance grows stronger as Ransom continues to examine the creature, and it is revealed as a hybrid of hybrids, with a catalog of semblances that it calls to his mind:

The insect-like effect was due to the speed and jerkiness of its movements and to the fact that it could swivel its head almost all the way round like a mantis; and it was increased by a kind of dry, rasping, jingling quality in the noise of its movement. It was rather like a grasshopper, rather like one of Arthur Rackham’s dwarfs, rather like a frog, and rather like a little, old taxidermist whom Ransom knew in London.²⁴¹

This little being should, by all rights, terrify Ransom, but his reaction is once more one of wonder, albeit a laughing, humorous wonder. The catalog of resemblances becomes comic rather than frightening, especially with the inclusion of Rackham’s dwarfs and the little London taxidermist. Indeed, this creature, with its extreme hybridity and its insectoid nature, represents the final stage of the “transfiguration” of modern monsters that Lewis had undertaken. At this point in the tale, Ransom has finally learned to disregard his conceptions of anthropocentrism and come to recognize the glory of Malacandran difference. Even the *pfifltriggi*, which is an

²³⁹ Downing, 107.

²⁴⁰ Lewis, 112.

²⁴¹ Lewis, 112.

extreme example of that difference, can no longer scare him, and in that creature's figure, Lewis presents his readers with a monster made un-monstrous, a *monstroum* made *mira*.

The pattern is repeated in the other two novels, with Ransom encountering the strange and off-putting mixture of man and fish in the mermen of Perelandra. The creature's hybridity initially repels the earthman, but he eventually comes to recognize the creature's difference as wondrous in the same fashion as the Malacandrans. In a more terrestrial example, Jane has a similarly unsettled response to the hybridity of Ransom himself, whose visage is neither old nor young after his adventures on Perelandra, but a strange mixture of the two. Her inability to categorize and thus understand and, to an extent, control Ransom, makes Jane uncomfortable and worried. Yet, she quickly overcomes that in her attraction to the wonder of his appearance.

By the end of the Trilogy, Lewis's treatment of hybridity has come to resemble Dante's. This is not the mixture of beast and human, as in his use of the minotaur, despite the animal/human hybridity of the Malacandrans. Instead, by emphasizing the shared rationality, the shared *hnau*-ship of the Martian races, Lewis shifts the focus from their animal characteristics to their divine characteristics, the way in which the creature resembles the Creator. In this sense, they have come to resemble Dante's griffon, with its hybrid nature representing the mixture of God and man. Hybridity, in the end, comes to illustrate the wondrous creativity of God, and what was perceived as unnatural becomes, instead, the most natural of phenomena in the Isidorian sense, and resembles the central reality of the universe, the blending of God and man in the figure of Christ.

Chapter 3

Cosmic Immram: The Structural Similarities Between the Space Trilogy and Irish

Immrama

In his overview of C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy, David Downing subtitled one of his chapters "Cosmic Voyage as Spiritual Pilgrimage," and in that chapter, he used the concept of a pilgrimage as a metaphor to trace the spiritual growth of the series' protagonists. Yet, his choice of words is, perhaps, more fitting than he realized. Ransom's space voyages are, in a sense, cosmic pilgrimages, or more specifically, they are similar to the medieval genre that blended the pilgrimage journey with the romance quest, the Irish immram. For Lewis, the immram's mixture of the spiritual and the adventurous, as well as its Otherworld destination, provided a model of the drive and the ethos that lay at the heart of science fiction journeys.²⁴² In the marvelous islands of immrama one could encounter the not "merely physical strangeness" that was the greatest strength of science fiction settings.²⁴³ In fact, the overarching structure of each of his science fiction novels shares a great deal in common with the structure of most Irish immrama, especially that of the *Navigatio*.

This may seem like a bold claim for such a diverse set of novels, but both Sanford Schwartz and Katherine Hume have recognized a structural and thematic unity between the three novels, although they have interpreted the connections differently.²⁴⁴²⁴⁵ Hume focused on Lewis's novels as romances, while Schwartz saw them as "transfigurations" of three different but related views of evolution. They both, however, recognize the emergent plan in Lewis's

²⁴² Lewis, "On Science Fiction," 63

²⁴³ Lewis, "On Stories," 12.

²⁴⁴ Hume, 512.

²⁴⁵ Schwartz, 8-9.

composition of the Ransom books and the structural links that tie all three novels together.

While both readings are productive, recognizing the structural parallels to immrama casts the entire series in a light that emphasizes Lewis's blending of pilgrimage and romance motifs into a "spiritual quest," one which is played out in much the same form as its Irish predecessors.

Most Irish immrama share a similar narrative structure, and the *Navigatio* is no exception. In one of the foundational treatments of the genre, Séamus MacMathúna sketched the common structural elements shared among the corpus. He observed that immrama begin with a frame set in the mundane world, while the journey itself starts with an exile, either as a result of a crime or self-imposed, which leads in turn to a sea voyage that passes through a barrier marking the border between the normal world and the realm of the fantastic, and continues on to visit a number of otherworldly islands full of all manner of wonders. Throughout the course of their exile, the travelers move towards repentance and/or holiness, eventually reconciling with their victim or with God.²⁴⁶ The wonders they encounter among those strange isles perform a vital role in helping the travelers along their road to redemption. Finally, the narratives tend to end where they began, back once more in the normal world where the former exiles, changed by their experiences, use their new perspective for good. While Lewis explicitly referenced using the *Navigatio* as a model for his Narnian sea adventure, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, where the structural and plot similarities have often been noted by critics, this structure also maps well to *Out of the Silent Planet*, and to a slightly lesser extent, its sequels.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁶ Séamus MacMathúna, *Immram Bran: Bran's journey to the land of the women* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), 276-80.

²⁴⁷ Downing, *Wardrobe*, 43.

3.1 *Beginning in the Normal World*

In that first novel, Ransom's adventure begins in the everyday world of late 1930s Britain, as the protagonist, whom Lewis simply entitles "The Pedestrian" when readers first meet him, trudges along on his walking tour of the countryside. Both the "Pedestrian's" concerns and the substance of those first pages focus entirely on the mundane, rising no higher in the scale of drama than a comfortable place to rest his tired head and road-weary feet. Yet, both his travels and the story soon take a decidedly unusual turn that leaves this normal setting far behind. In the same fashion, the heroes of immrama begin their adventures in the normal world. The beginning of the *Navigatio* finds the wandering saint precisely where one would expect him to be, at his post in a monastery, firmly ensconced in Irish religious life. The tale of Mael Duin, for its part, begins in rather less holy but no less normal surroundings, with a raid along the coast of Ireland, and the ignominious birth of its hero. Both immrama spend some time in their less wondrous settings before the narrative truly begins, like *Out of the Silent Planet*.

In *Perelandra*, the story begins, not with Ransom, but with the ersatz Mr. "Lewis," who is nonetheless found in the everyday world of the English countryside, as with the first novel. The readers follow Lewis on his walk from the train station to Ransom's house, and though the fantastic breaks into the story more quickly than in *OSP*, as the unwitting academic is besieged by a spiritual attack during his trip, it is not until he reaches his goal that this is discovered. Instead, the normalcy of the scene is reinforced by its description. The narrator opines that "The flat heath which spread out before me [...] looked an ordinary heath. The gloomy five-o'clock sky was such as you might see on any autumn afternoon. The few houses and the clumps of red or yellowish trees were in no way remarkable."²⁴⁸ This conventional setting is immediately

²⁴⁸ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 9.

contrasted with the substances of “Lewis’s” thoughts, as he reflects on his friend Ransom’s own experiences with the fantastic, and it is not long before the narrator himself leaves that quotidian world behind.

There is a similar beginning to the final novel, which achieves the most mundane of the trilogy’s settings, as Jane putters about her apartment and goes about her daily routine and Mark attends an acrimonious faculty meeting. Could there be any setting less likely for the interference of the fantastic than the tedious, bureaucratic meanderings of a college meeting? In the introduction of Jane, Lewis’s focus on her boredom and the confines of her little apartment help to emphasize the unremarkable nature of the setting:

Through the open door she could see the tiny kitchen of the flat and hear the loud, ungentle tick tick of the clock. She had just left the kitchen and knew how tidy it was. The breakfast things were washed up, the tea towels were hanging above the stove, and the floor was mopped. The beds were made and the rooms ‘done.’ She had just returned from the only shopping she need do that day, and it was still a minute before eleven.²⁴⁹

The description not only immediately establishes how trapped Jane feels in her circumscribed little world, but also conveys a sense of oppressive conventionality. This is a world with absolutely no mysteries and nothing to discover. She is already intimately familiar with all of its nooks and crannies. Mark’s maneuvering within the college bureaucracy, although not without its hint of drama, is set against a similarly prosaic background, and both endure for much longer than in the earlier novels. In fact, it is quite some time before the truly fantastical elements of *THS* arrive, but when they do, the novel still features a similar departure from the normal to the Otherworld. Of course, Jane will eventually leave that world, and the wider, everyday world it represents, and enter a realm of mystery and wonder, while Mark enters one of horror and despair.

²⁴⁹ Lewis, *Hideous*, 11.

3.2 *Crime and Exile*

In most immrama, the quiet opening in the normal world is broken by a crime, which in turn leads to the exile of the protagonist.²⁵⁰ *Immram Curaig Mael Duinn (IMD)*, *Immram Curaig Ua Corra (IUC)*, and *Immram Snedgusa agus Maic Riagla (ISMR)* all begin in this fashion, with each of their voyages being prompted by a crime, sometimes of the protagonists, as is the case for *IMUC*, and sometimes in response to the crime of someone else, as in the other two examples. Either way, the immram itself tends to be motivated by a rupture of the order and peace of the mundane world of the frame tale.²⁵¹ This is key, as the recurring motif of the crime illustrates the genre's central themes of repentance, atonement, and spiritual growth, as MacMathúna observed.²⁵²

Ransom's voyage proper also begins with a crime in the first book, as does the standard immram, though his own is no more serious than trespassing. Nonetheless, the novel's villain is quick to point out that the first transgression was his, and when Ransom objects, "You have assaulted me, drugged me, and are apparently carrying me off as a prisoner in this infernal thing. What have I done to you?", he is quickly answered with an accusation in turn, as his captor declares, "I might reply by asking you why you crept into my backyard like a thief."²⁵³ Despite the villain's protestations, the real crime is, of course, his. The unscrupulous space travelers, Devine and Weston, are intent upon kidnapping a victim from Earth in order to sacrifice him to what they take to be the chief of the Martians they have encountered, and when Ransom costs

²⁵⁰ Barbara Hillers, "Voyages between Heaven and Hell: Navigating the Early Irish Immram Tales," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 13 (1993): 68-9.

²⁵¹ Hillers, 68.

²⁵² MacMathúna, 278.

²⁵³ Lewis, *Silent*, 29.

them their chosen victim through his interference, he makes an unwilling but adequate replacement.

In Ransom's case, Lewis provides a double crime to drive his exile, the protagonist's own minor trespass, and the villains' more serious transgression which follows in response to it. Interestingly, the crime that drives the action in most immrama is also half of a pair, a response to an earlier evil, just like *OSP*. As Barbara Hillers points out, "in each case the crime in question is a complex, double crime."²⁵⁴ In the case of Mael Duin, his father's death at the hands of a pirate band, which begins the hero's revenge quest, has to be seen in the context of his own violent past, namely, the rape of Mael Duin's mother, a nun. The Ui Chorra's malicious exploits are themselves inspired by their own dubious and infernal origins, as their parents made a pact with the Devil. Even the slaying of the king, which prompts the voyage in *ISMR*, is undertaken because of the oppression that the Men of Ross endured under his rule.²⁵⁵ In each case, the complex of crimes exemplifies the imperfect nature of the normal world and the character's need for redemption. Even the relatively innocent characters like Ransom and the monks of *ISMR* are still part of a fallen world and implicated by failures of their fellow human beings when brought into contact with the holy nature of the otherworld setting of their adventures. Barbara Hillers sees this connection as evoking the Christian doctrine of Original Sin.²⁵⁶

After the crime and the kidnapping that follows it, Lewis's hapless hero does indeed find himself exiled from Earth, as his fellow voyagers are exiled from Ireland, and though, unlike his saintly predecessor, Brendan, it is through no choice of his own, the results are strikingly similar. Through the rest of his voyage, Ransom is cut off from the Earth with no certain means of return.

²⁵⁴ Hillers, 68-9.

²⁵⁵ Hillers, 68-9.

²⁵⁶ Hillers, 69

Indeed, the odds against him ever finding his way back to Thulcandra, the Silent Planet of his origins, seem astronomical. He is adrift in an alien landscape and every bit as much at the mercy of fate as St. Brendan and his stout band. As Ransom realizes during the course of the flight to Mars, “his situation was, no doubt, very serious: indeed the possibility of returning alive to Earth must be almost discounted.”²⁵⁷ His predicament is similar to Mael Duin’s after the young hero’s ship is blown out to sea at the beginning of his voyage, lost and at the mercy of God and the elements. At this point, though Ransom will regain some agency when he reaches his destination, the ultimate fate of his journey is no longer in his hands.

Yet, just as in St. Brendan’s tale and other examples of immrama, as well as some pilgrimage fiction and many quest romances, Ransom’s unwitting journey is sanctioned by a magical or holy figure. In the *Navigatio*, Brendan’s first stop is the island of Saint Enda, where he receives the holy father’s blessing before setting out in earnest. In *IMD*, before Mael Duin sets out on his search for revenge, he seeks out the druidess Nuca for aid in his quest. Ransom’s cosmic Immram receives a similar blessing from such a figure, and it is actually initiated by the same character as well, all without the unwitting wayfarer’s knowledge. As he is later told by the Oyarsa, the angelic intelligence that governs Mars, or as the natives know it, Malacandra, Ransom’s journey and all of his adventures and mishaps have been ordered by this being in an effort, first to gain knowledge about his homeworld, the titular Silent Planet, and then to help Ransom himself overcome his flaws and find peace with creation and his Creator.

²⁵⁷ Lewis, 38.

3.3 Voyage Blessed by Holy or Magical Figure

In the same way, Ransom's second journey is also both blessed and facilitated by a holy figure, and it is once more the Oyarsa of Malacandra, and this time in a much more direct fashion. The Oyarsa carries Ransom's orders, which the traveler relates to the narrator, "Lewis." Readers discover that Malacandra has brought Ransom his instructions and his method of travel, a strange, ice-like translucent coffin in which he is to be transported to his second interplanetary adventure on Perelandra. It is also Malacandra himself that carries Ransom through "deep Heaven" and deposits him on the watery surface of that world, becoming both the instigating and facilitating figure of that voyage.

In the final novel, Ransom himself takes over this role for one of the series' new protagonists, Jane. Much like in the first book, his role is not immediately apparent, as Jane assumes she is in control of her course. Eventually, it is revealed that Ransom has given orders for Jane to be brought into the company at St. Anne's, and it is through her meeting with him, and through him, her exposure to the fantastic, that Jane's spiritual journey truly begins. Interestingly, the vaguely sinister Deputy Director of the N.I.C.E. fills the same role for Mark in an infernal inversion of his wife's spiritual journey.

3.4 Mist Barrier and Entry into the Otherworld

The beginnings of the journeys of all three novels are all marked by extraordinary experiences that serve to divide the normal world of the stories' openings from the fantastic worlds into which the protagonists are entering. Each of these scenes shares many of the qualities of an immram, as well as employing recognizable motifs of medieval Otherworld journeys. As Aisling Byrne points in her study on the subject, such a division is a clear marker

that a reader is dealing with an otherworld journey, as “some of the clearest signposts of the presence of an otherworld realm in literary texts are the distinctive boundaries between the actual world and the otherworld,” and among the most common of these is a water barrier of some sort, often represented by fog or mist.²⁵⁸

Like many Otherworld voyagers, in the first book, Ransom enters the wondrous region of his adventures through a mist-like barrier, which is also a common feature of immrama materials. In the *Navigatio*, the framing tale of Barrind’s description of his journey to the Blessed Isle with his son features such a crossing, as it begins with the pair encountering “a fog so thick” that they “could scarcely see the poop or the prow of the boat,” but which cleared when they reached their otherworldly destination where “a great light shone all around [them] and there appeared to [them] a land wide, and full of grass and fruit”²⁵⁹. Ransom’s experience is more cosmic in flavor but has a similar quality and marks a similar moment of transition in the narrative, a border between the normal world and the fantastic setting into which he is headed.

The space travelers’ sojourn in the void, or as Ransom himself insists on terming it, the heavens, is constantly accompanied by an incredible and all-consuming brilliance. When the traveler first enters the part of the ship facing out into space, he is stunned as “Instantly the room was flooded with a dazzling golden light which completely eclipsed the pale earthlight behind him” and which, even when heavy shutters are closed over the porthole is “still [...] too bright to look at.”²⁶⁰ Like the mist that surrounds Brendan’s crew and the ship of Mael Duin, this golden barrier at first blinds the party, masking their surroundings, and it is only through acclimatization and specialized glasses that they can see beyond its brilliance. They finally pass through this

²⁵⁸ Byrne, 76.

²⁵⁹ *Brendan* 4

²⁶⁰ Lewis, *Silent*, 30-31

barrier when they reach Malacandra, and it is a moment that quite literally marks their entrance into another world, which Ransom himself observes. The spacefarer is surprised and shaken by the sudden change as, “Suddenly the lights of the Universe seemed to be turned down. As if some demon had rubbed the heaven’s face with a dirty sponge, the splendor in which they had lived for so long blenched to a pallid cheerless and pitiable grey. [...] They were falling out of the heavens, into a world.”²⁶¹

In the second novel, we find not one, but two different barrier crossings. First, in the earthly frame tale, the narrator “Lewis,” finds himself facing a literal mist barrier as he approaches Ransom’s cottage, and with it, the beginning of the adventure and his first real exposure to the fantastic. As he takes the lonely walk from the train station to his friend’s home, “the evening mist was partly thick” and it becomes thicker and thicker as he goes.²⁶² By the time he is halfway there, he is “down in the fog,” and the landmarks of his journey take on monstrously distorted appearances.²⁶³ As Lewis moves through the barrier, he is met with the blindness of the fog, but also with supernatural resistance, as he is assailed by the dark eldila more and more violently with each step further into the mist. Of course, he does not recognize this attack for what it is until he is through it and out the other side.

It is once he is through the mist and into Ransom’s deserted cottage that he has his first conscious encounter with the fantastic, and at that moment he has truly entered another world, a world in which all of his doubts and musings about the stories of his friends are suddenly shot to pieces, as he faces an actual eldil for the first time. As Lewis stumbles about the darkened house, he “heard Ransom’s name pronounced; and almost, but not quite, simultaneously I saw

²⁶¹ Lewis, 41

²⁶² Lewis, *Perelandra* 12.

²⁶³ Lewis, 13.

the thing I had feared so long to see. [...] What I saw was simply a very faint rod or pillar of light.” He finds his experience almost impossible to put into words, and both the presence of the creature as well as its physical characteristics, like its color, prove beyond descriptions. This is a quality of the experience of the Otherworld or “fairyland” that Tolkien and his fellow Inklings found representative.²⁶⁴

Nonetheless, what he is certain of is the fact that the *eldil* is something beyond the normal nature of the world. After his piercing of the barrier, “Lewis” goes on to be a partner, albeit a limited and terrestrial one, in the fantastic events surrounding Ransom’s second interplanetary journey. The narrator becomes witness to both his friend’s departure and return, and he even holds conversation with the *Oyarsa* of Mars, speaking to the archangel as part of his own less spectacular but still quite marvelous journey.

Ransom himself faces a return of the light barrier from the first book in this second novel. The golden light of the heavens plays a role again, but only in passing, as Lewis, the author, does not share with his audience a real account of his hero’s journey to Venus. Ransom, the narrator laments, was never able to describe his second voyage, having been not quite conscious for it. Yet, he begins to awaken as he approaches his destination, and he finds himself facing another barrier of brilliance that functions much the same as that of the first novel. Ransom found himself aware of the heat of the sun on one side of his cosmic coffin and the cold of space on the other, but before long “both were soon swallowed up in the prodigious white light from below which began to penetrate through the semi-opaque walls of the casket. This steadily increased

²⁶⁴ See Tolkien’s “On Fairy-Stories” for an overview of the importance that he and Lewis attached to encounters with faery in stories: “Faerie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold... In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveler who would report them. And while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost.” 109

and became distressing in spite of the fact that his eyes were protected.”²⁶⁵ After the fact, the space traveler realized that this was “the *albedo*, the outer veil of very dense atmosphere with which Venus is surrounded and which reflects the sun’s rays with intense power.”²⁶⁶

Thus, this barrier once again marks a literal line between worlds in precisely the same way as the mist or water barrier of romance and immrama, as Ransom has arrived on Venus once he crosses it. As before, the passage is marked by the fading of the cosmic brilliance, “When the white light was just about to become unbearable, it disappeared altogether, and very soon after the cold on his left side and the heat on his right began to decrease and to be replaced by an equable warmth.”²⁶⁷ Shortly thereafter, the traveler finds himself floating on the sea of Perelandra, as his coffin-ship dissolves around him, having pierced the barrier. It is also worth noting that such clear divisions also fit neatly into Lewis’s carefully structure, hierarchically ordered universe. His updated medieval cosmology is a realm of sharp distinctions, and just like the “Medieval Model” that he adapted, the translunar universe is sinless and imperishable, though, in his efforts to reconcile such medieval concepts with modern science, he also introduces spheres, like Perelandra, that combine the modern views of evolutionary change and growth with sinless Otherworld of story and myth.²⁶⁸

In the final novel, Lewis creates another literal mist barrier, as Jane travels through the fog to reach the quietly fantastic setting of St. Anne’s, where her adventures with the marvelous really begin. It is by crossing this barrier that she truly leaves her mundane, normal life behind and steps across into the Otherworldly, where she will encounter ancient enchanters, psychic

²⁶⁵ Lewis, 30.

²⁶⁶ Lewis, 30.

²⁶⁷ Lewis, 30.

²⁶⁸ For a full discussion of Lewis’s “transfiguration” of evolutionary development with a sinless setting, see Schwartz 53-90.

visions, and finally the descent of the gods themselves, and it is a threshold crossing that is very carefully marked in the text. After an encounter with one of the N.I.C.E.'s representatives, Jane, almost unconsciously, finds herself taking the train to St. Anne's.

As her train climbs out of Edgestow, she emerges from a fog that has wrapped the entire valley and encounters a simple but striking sight. It comes slowly at first, as she notes "surely that bend in the road was more visible than it ought to be in such a fog? [...] Certainly what had been grey was becoming white, almost dazzlingly white."²⁶⁹ Once again, the approach of the barrier is, to a degree, blinding. Just a little further, and she finds that "the luminous blue was showing overhead and trees cast shadows (she had not seen a shadow for days), and then all of a sudden the enormous spaces of the sky had become visible and the pale golden sun."²⁷⁰ It is no castle of crystal and gold, as greets Sir Orfeo, but the sight is moving for Jane nonetheless, and to increase the parallels to immrama, her shining refuge above the fog is described as an island, and as one among a cloud-wrapped archipelago of false islands. Before she reaches the Manor, Jane:

saw that she was standing on the shore of a little green sunlit island looking down on a sea of white fog, furrowed and ridged yet level on the whole, which spread as far she could see. There were other islands too. The dark one to the west was the wooded hills above Sandown where she had picnicked with the Dennistons; and the far bigger and brighter one to the north was the many caverned hills-mountains one could nearly call them—in which the Wynd had its source.²⁷¹

Jane is struck by the sudden exposure to this vista, and she soon discovers that these "islands" above the clouds contain wonders that she never even dreamed of while living in the cloud-wrapped world below, the first of which is the power of Ransom's mere presence, transformed as he has been by his interplanetary adventures. From her first sight of "The Director," Jane's time

²⁶⁹ Lewis, *Hideous*, 134.

²⁷⁰ Lewis, 135.

²⁷¹ Lewis, *Hideous*, 135.

in the normal world is finished, in much the same fashion as Lewis the narrator's encounter with the eldil, which provided an undeniable sense of the otherworldly. It begins as "Jane looked; and instantly her world was unmade. On a sofa before her, with one foot bandaged as if he had a wound, lay what appeared to be a boy, twenty years old. [...] all the light in the room seemed to run towards the gold hair and the gold beard of the wounded man."²⁷² Yet, her initial impressions prove misleading, as the figure before her is not so easily defined:

Of course he was not a boy—how could she have thought so? The fresh skin on his forehead and cheeks and, above all, on his hands, had suggested the idea. But no boy could have so full a beard. And no boy could be so strong. She had expected to see an invalid. Now it was manifest that the grip of those hands would be inescapable, and imagination suggested that those arms and shoulders could support the whole house.²⁷³

The golden, almost glowing depiction of his hair and beard, and his indeterminate, neither old-nor-young nature mark Ransom with an otherworldly quality, reminiscent both of medieval faeries and with those who had, in turn, traveled to Faerie and returned, changed by their experience in the Otherworld.²⁷⁴ His youthful appearance is somewhat reminiscent of characters like the hero of *Immram Bran*, whose youth is maintained by his stay in the Otherworld. Unlike Bran and his unfortunate crew, who will instantly turn to dust as their age catches up with them upon contact with their homeland, Ransom is able to return to the real world without sacrificing that otherworldly youth and vitality. Of course, the experience of his Otherworldly adventure has not left him completely unmarked. Even Lewis's benign Otherworld is not without its dangers, and the wound inflicted by the Un-Man still plagues the returned Ransom in a less cataclysmic but nonetheless enduring reminder that no encounter with the Otherworld is entirely safe.

²⁷² Lewis, 139.

²⁷³ Lewis, 140.

²⁷⁴ Thompson's Motif Index number F233.5

During their meeting, Lewis once more returns to the image of the mist and its role as a divider of worlds. As Jane is lost in contemplation of Ransom's transfigured visage, the scene's sense of isolation from reality is heightened as: "Through the window she saw no trees nor hills nor shapes of other houses: only the level floor of mist, as if this man and she were perched in a blue tower overlooking the world." This experience of Jane's and those that follow are just as eye-opening as the sudden appearance of the sun at the top of the hill at the beginning of her journey. Together, they mark her departure from the mundane world of Edgestow and her entry into the fantastic world of the conflict between St. Anne's and Belbury.

3.5 Otherworld Islands

Once the travelers of an immram pass through the Otherworld barrier, they enter the otherworldly setting of their adventures, usually a series of islands filled with strange sights and unusual inhabitants. Saint Brendan visits a number of fantastical locales, like the Uninhabited House, the moveable island of the whale Jasconius, the Paradise of Birds, home to neutral spirits, and the Crystal Pillar. All of these varied places lie in the seas west of Ireland, in the blank spaces on the maps. Yet, in 1938, there was no longer as much room for fantastic settings among even remote islands as their once had been. The seas were perhaps too well known to harbor the same types of mysteries for Lewis and his audience as they had for readers of the *Navigatio* and other ancient and medieval voyages of wonder.

Noting the shift from terrestrial to cosmic settings for fantastical adventures, he observed that while "Homer, writing for a maritime people has to take Odysseus several days journey by sea before he meets Circe, Calypso, the Cyclops, or the Sirens," modern authors must look

further afield.²⁷⁵ Instead, as Lewis described in “On Science Fiction,” in order to “visit strange regions in search of such beauty, awe, or terror as the actual world does not supply,” he was “driven to other planets or other stars.”²⁷⁶ Lewis argued that this change is a function of “geographical knowledge,” pointing out that “the less known the real world is, the more plausibly your marvels can be located near at hand.”²⁷⁷ Thus, while the seas had lost some of their mystery, Mars was yet still unknown enough in the Pulp Era for the likes of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Lewis to set their fantastical tales on the Red Planet. It was in that final frontier that he created a new set of wondrous locations, “islands” of a sort placed, not in the medieval ocean, but in the modern ocean of space, the new home of marvels. This is true both on the level of the trilogy as a whole, with the fantastic settings of each book serving as its own self-contained wondrous island, and on the level of individual novels, which each feature a variety of marvelous settings.

In the first of the series, Ransom visits a number of such locations across Malacandra, and each of them have their own unique character, like the islands of Saint Brendan or Mael Duin. He first experiences the rugged, sharp-edged beauty of Malacandra after his frantic escape from his captors. Then he stays for a time at the peaceful and idyllic village of the hrossa, where he is exposed to the delights of Martian culture and the strange pleasure of friendship with these seal-like aliens. The hrossa themselves evince something of the peace and sanctity of a monastic community, like that found in Saint Brendan’s community of Ailbe. After his sojourn with the poet-people of Malacandra, Ransom goes unwillingly to visit the sorns in their cold and austere caverns, and finally comes, at long last, to the idyllic city of Meldilorn, where all the races of the

²⁷⁵ Lewis, “On Science Fiction” 63

²⁷⁶ Lewis, 63

²⁷⁷ Lewis, 63

world live in harmony. These settings each tend to carry their own spiritual dimensions and play a part in the traveler's spiritual journey, as well as his physical journey, just as with the tale of Saint Brendan. Among the hrossa, Ransom learns the folly of humanity by comparison to the uncomplicated and unfallen creatures, among the sorns,, he overcomes his fear and faces the giants and bogies of his imagination, and finally, comes to terms with the great moral fear of death in Meldilorn as he attends the funerals of the hrossa killed by his fellow humans.²⁷⁸

Of course, in *Perelandra*, the islands are quite literal, though they are floating rather than the more traditionally stationary variety. These roaming "lands" likely owe their origin to another quest romance, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and its Garden of Adonis.²⁷⁹ In *Perelandra*, Ransom's adventures take him from island to island, and then to the Fixed Land, the only stable place on Venus, and finally, below that land into the bowels of the planet where the climax of the novel occurs. In the various floating lands, he discovers a wide variety of plants and animals of various fantastic qualities, like the refreshing Bubble Trees, the friendly 'heraldic' dragon, the brightly colored frogs that rain from the skies and fill the trees, and the strangely shaped birds that populate the air. Different wonders occupy each new setting, and each, in turn, takes on new spiritual dimensions as the protagonist encounters them, playing their part in his spiritual journey. Among the islands, Ransom discovers both new pleasures, as well as learning a lesson about the dangers of misusing them, while the Fixed Lands, while at first comforting him by their similarity to earthly conditions, soon come to haunt him for the same reason and teach him to appreciate the idyllic islands. The depths of the planet, in their turn, offer their terrifying but ultimately benign monstrous insects, as well as their mysterious subterranean masters, carrying lessons about the limits of humanity's knowledge and understanding.

²⁷⁸ Downing, *Planet's in Peril*, 107-108.

²⁷⁹ Downing, 130.

3.6 *Counseled by Holy Hermit*

Each of the novels also features some version of the immram's traditional figure of the wise, holy hermit who educates and aids the voyager.²⁸⁰ In immrama, these ubiquitous figures are usually found on or near the final island of the traveler's voyage before their return home. With this holy figure, as Hillers observes, "the weary voyagers receive temporal as well as spiritual sustenance, and instructions regarding their journey home."²⁸¹ In the first book, after his disastrous hunting trip, Ransom goes unwillingly to visit the sorns in their cold and austere caverns, where he is initiated into knowledge of the universe. The sorn who greets the earthman, for his part, fulfills this common role. In the *Navigatio*, Saint Brendan encounters such a character in the person of Paul, the hermit who is sustained almost wholly by his faith and who teaches the wayfaring brothers about the power of spiritual discipline and about the future they face. Mael Duin meets the Hermit of Torach who also lends his wisdom to the hero. In *IMD*, the figure is represented by a monk from Tory Island, in *IUC* an apocryphal disciple of Jesus, and *ISMR* provides the most distinguished version of all, as its 'Good King' seems to be God himself.²⁸²

In Lewis's first story, *Augray*, the sorn, fulfills a similar function. Ransom discovers that these humanoid creatures are a somewhat solitary race, preferring isolation and privacy. His host at first seems to be living an almost hermitic existence, though he is eventually revealed to be the leader of an enclave of learning that resembles the well-ordered monasteries encountered by Saint Brendan and his band. Nonetheless, Ransom's host takes the human in and teaches him about the world of his exile, the nature of the Oyarsa, and more. Though the sorn's tower may

²⁸⁰ Hillers, 73.

²⁸¹ Hillers, 73.

²⁸² Hillers, 73.

not be the last “island” of Malacandra, it is close to the end, and it is his stay with the solitary sorn that prepares Ransom for his confrontation with the Oyarsa and his eventual voyage home. Like the isle of Paul the Hermit in the *Navigatio*, Augray’s tower is one of the traveler’s final stops, one of the last before he reaches the paradisiac final destination before returning to the mundane world.

In the Promised Land of the Saints, Brendan and his crew glimpse the Edenic land for which they have searched throughout their voyage, but they cannot enter and remain there because their role is to carry word of the wonders they have been shown back to the normal world. Their host bids them, “Return, then, to the land of your birth,” informing them that their journey was orchestrated “because God wanted to show [them] his varied secrets in the great ocean.”²⁸³ Ransom faces a similar fate, as his arrival in Meldilorn coincides with his conquering of his fears and his achieving the spiritual peace to truly appreciate the paradise that Malacandra could be. Unfortunately, it also coincides with his realization that he cannot stay. As he tells the Oyarsa before his departure, “Love of our own kind [...] is not the greatest of laws, but you, Oyarsa, have said it is a law. If I cannot live in Thulcandra, it is better for me not to live at all.”²⁸⁴ That realization is also tied to marvelous sights he has seen, just like his saintly predecessor. Yet, Ransom brings his own marvels with him, and after telling the Oyarsa of Mars about the death and resurrection of Christ, that angelic being declares, “You have shown me more wonders than are known in the whole of heaven.”²⁸⁵ Just like Brendan, part of Ransom’s purpose in returning to the mundane world is to bring with him reports of these wonders and the spiritual significance they bear.

²⁸³ *Brendan*, 69.

²⁸⁴ Lewis, *Silent*, 141.

²⁸⁵ Lewis, 141.

The pattern repeats in both *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*, which each feature their own version of such a character. The second novel lacks a direct parallel, seeing as Ransom, the King, and the Queen are the only intelligent mortal creatures on the planet after Weston's death. Yet, the Oyarsa Perelandra fulfill the role of the hermit for the traveler towards the end of the book. After Ransom emerges from his "second infancy," wherein he recovers from his climactic battle with the Un-Man, he meets the mighty eldil. Perelandra, who has lived apart from her human charges until then, educates the earthman about the destiny of the King and Queen, and interprets some of his own adventures for him, preparing him for his return home after the Great Dance.

In *That Hideous Strength*, we find perhaps the closest parallel to the old tradition, as Ransom himself, having been educated by angels among the stars, has now become a spiritual guide for fellow earthlings. He is not precisely a hermit, living with his companions in St. Anne's, but he is certainly withdrawn from the world, and the manor itself bears some of the characteristics of a monastery, an insular community joined together in pursuit of spiritual goals, working, praying, and acting in concert, all under the headship of their director-abbot. The former philologist even demonstrates the saintly demeanor of the holy hermits of romance and immram, and like Brendan's Hermit, Paul, Ransom's holiness is evident in his diet, his relationship with nature, and the power of his presence.

The Director is not yet, like the character from the *Navigatio*, existing only on the word of God, but his simple diet of a glass of red wine and a roll of bread is reminiscent of the fasting diets of holy men or the daily fish that had previously sustained Paul, who was feed by a divinely dispatched otter for 30 years.²⁸⁶ While animals do not bring him his repast as they did Paul,

²⁸⁶ *Brendan*, 64.

Ransom is nonetheless served by the lower creatures around him, as the crumbs from his meal are dutifully cleaned by a trio of mice who come at his call.²⁸⁷ Finally, he also has a beatific bearing, revealed in contrast to the pain of his perennial wound, the keepsake of his battle with the Un-Man upon Perelandra. Jane is captivated by that quality as she observes him dealing with his wound: “Pain came and went in his face: sudden jabs of sickening and burning pain. But as lightning goes through the darkness and the darkness closes up again and shows no trace, so the tranquility of his countenance swallowed up each shock of torture.”²⁸⁸ The total effect, and his role within the story as Jane’s spiritual guide certainly evokes the staple of the holy hermit found in romances, immrama, and saint’s lives. The unique form this trope takes in each of the novels, as Lewis freely mixes sources and tropes, is another example of his synthesizing imagination.

3.7 Reconciled to Agent of Exile

Through the course of their physical and spiritual voyage, the heroes of immrama eventually become reconciled with the agent of their exile and with God, and Lewis employs this structure in all three of his novels. After all of his adventures across Malacandra in *Out of the Silent Planet*, the errant earthman comes to the city, Meldilorn, where the three races of Malacandra commune, and faces the ghostly presence of the Oyarsa himself. At this point Ransom is finally reconciled to the ultimate cause of his exile, as he faces the guiding spirit of Mars. Like the hero of an immram, he comes to terms with his failings and his fears and is redeemed. After all of his running and rebellion, the traveler comes face to face with the angelic eldil and confesses that “Bent creatures” or sinful beings, “are full of fears. But I am here now and ready to know your will with me” (*OSP* 121). In this way, Ransom overcomes his chief

²⁸⁷ Lewis, *Hideous*, 146.

²⁸⁸ Lewis, 140.

moral failing and finds his courage restored, which seemed forever wounded by his experiences in the first World War.²⁸⁹ It is through this experience that the space traveler in turn makes his peace with Maledil, or God, and like his wayfaring predecessors, is ready to return from exile.

Ransom's redemption has few parallels to the already saintly Brendan and his tale, with its hagiographical tone, though it does have some, as Brendan has his own moment of redemption when he considers the purpose of his voyage during his meeting with Paul. Instead, the philologist's plight has more in common with that of Mael Duin, who over the course of his adventures moves from a pagan-influenced philosophy of revenge to a Christian philosophy that emphasized forgiveness. Lewis's story also features such a focus on mercy, though it is the Oyarsa who forgives the murdering travelers, rather than Ransom.

The series of interplanetary immrama repeats the pattern in the second novel, where Ransom's spiritual journey again reaches its climax with his meeting with the author of his adventures, the Oyarsa of Malacandra. On Venus, Lewis's space traveler has continued the spiritual development begun in the first book, slowly coming to grips with his role in the grand cosmic drama in which he is taking part. As David Downing puts it, "If the great challenge of his first journey was to overcome his fears, the great challenge of his second journey will be to overcome his doubts."²⁹⁰ Those doubts revolve around just what is expected of him, especially in regards to his eventual physical battle with the Un-Man, as well as the extent of Ransom's relationship to God. The latter enacts the traditional Christian paradigm of a conflict between "one's sanctified self and one's natural self, between the spirit of Christ who has entered in, and the spirit of the 'Old Adam' who resists the intrusion."²⁹¹

²⁸⁹ Schwartz, 5

²⁹⁰ Downing, 111.

²⁹¹ Downing, 113.

This conflict is represented in the constant doubling of Ransom's portrayal, with his bifurcated, "piebald" appearance when he first lands upon Perelandra, where one half of his body burned red and the other "sickly white," and with the constant inner debates he enacts with the persistent inner voice that Ransom takes to calling his "voluble self."²⁹² Ransom's spiritual journey traces this struggle with will and self against submission to God, and it finds its ultimate revelation and resolution in his participation in the Great Dance, where he finally surrenders himself to Maledil and experiences the contradictory revelation of a reality wherein he, and everything else in creation, is both the center and the least important element of the pattern at different moments.

Each figure as he looked at it became the master-figure or focus of the whole spectacle, by means of which his eye disentangled all else and brought it into unity—only to be itself entangled when he looked to what he had taken for mere marginal decorations and found that there also the same hegemony was claimed, and the claim made good...²⁹³

The Dance embodies the traditional Christian paradox of finding freedom in submission to God. At the same time, it serves to address one of Ransom's recurring anxieties, notably his struggle with reconciling his own personal insignificance with the revelation of his mythic importance in grand cosmic drama of Perelandra. Despite the fact that he was enacting a myth, playing a major role in preventing a second fall, Ransom had to maintain his own humility and perspective. He had to realize that he was not chosen for his role because of any special worth or heroism, and the Dance's paradoxical mixture and conflation of high and low, significant and insignificant finally help the traveler to come to terms with the mystery of his own role in that second Eden. When he emerges from the visionary experience of the Dance, he is spiritually transformed,

²⁹² Downing, 113.

²⁹³ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 187.

having surrendered his will to God and shed the doubts that plagued him throughout his adventure, at which point, it is time to return to the normal world.

Jane's reconciliation in the final novel is rather less spectacular, though no-less life-changing. She too must make her peace, both with the God and the agent of her exile, in this case represented by both Ransom and her husband Mark. Her isolation from Mark and his descent into the Inferno-like world of Belbury are part of what drives Jane into her adventure in the first place, and it is her encounter with Ransom in the guise of the Director that sets her irrevocably on her path into the fantastic reaches of the tale. The story of her spiritual journey is also, like Ransom's in the previous novel, that of the struggle against surrender to God, a struggle for identity and control. Yet, unlike Ransom's extraterrestrial adventure, Jane's experience has the added domestic element of her own desire for separation and independence from her husband. Thus, her reconciliation has two parts. Her fateful encounter with the divine is the first, and the rapturous description of her surrender in that scene emphasizes the themes of identity and independence, showing the futility and ultimate foolishness of Jane's desire not to "get drawn in," itself a repetition of Ransom's fears in the first two novels:

In this height and depth and breadth the little idea of herself which she had hitherto called *me* dropped down and vanished, unfluttering, in to bottomless distance, like a bird in a space without air. The name *me* was the name of a being whose existence she had never suspected, a being that did not yet fully exist, but which was demanded.²⁹⁴

She, like Ransom before her on Perelandra, realizes that her efforts to claim her own space, to stake out parts of her life as her own private demesne, simply will not do when confronted by the presence of a God who insisted on wholehearted dedication and accepted no half-measures. She realizes that her conception of herself is not hers alone. Instead, "It was a person (not the person

²⁹⁴ Lewis, *Hideous*, 315-316

she had thought), yet also a thing, a made thing, made to please Another and in Him to please all others, a thing being made at this very moment, without its choice, in a shape it had never dreamed of.²⁹⁵

With that experience, Jane finds her defenses crumbling and eventually surrenders to God, thus making her peace with him, and upon her return to St. Anne's, with the Director. The final reconciliation is found in the very last pages of the novel, along with Jane's return from the fantastic realm of her adventures, as she resolves to enter the cottage that holds her estranged husband. Lewis leaves the exact nature of their reunion ambiguous, as the event that decides Jane's in her course is not any of the miraculous visions she's beheld or the philosophy of the Director, but the sight of the sleeve of a shirt—Mark's shirt" which "even hung over down the outside wall. And in all this damp too."²⁹⁶ The final line of the novel is Jane's resolution, "How exactly like Mark! Obviously it was high time she went in."²⁹⁷ Despite Lewis's application of humor to this scene, the connection remains, as Jane's pending reunion with Mark represents the final reconciliation of the story, as well as the ultimate end of her particular terrestrial voyage.

3.8 Return to the Normal World

In just such a fashion, immrama usually end with their protagonists leaving the wondrous realms of their adventures and returning to the normal world.²⁹⁸ Jane's turn from the cosmic events of *THS*'s finale, the descent of the gods and the fate of her soul, to the simple, domestic concerns of an untidy shirt, represent such a return, and each of the novels in the Trilogy provide a similar ending, though neither of the others is quite as charmingly prosaic as this one. After the

²⁹⁵ Lewis, 315-316

²⁹⁶ Lewis, 380.

²⁹⁷ Lewis, 380.

²⁹⁸ MacMathúna, 276.

comic punishment of the buffoonish villains in the first book, Lewis's protagonist and his companions are sent home, and in the fashion of an immram, the book ends there, in the mundane world where it began.

In such a way, Saint Brendan returns from his marvel-filled voyaging to take up once more the everyday tasks of governing his brothers in their abbey from which he had originally departed and educating them about all of the wonders that he saw. Ransom's experience in the first novel is similar, as he awakens on the grounded spaceship, and the descriptions of his terrestrial homecoming are pleasantly earthy and simple, emphasizing, in its familiarity, its contrast to the strange world from which he has returned. The traveler finds the ship's manhole and exited, immediately, "slipped in mud, blessed the smell of it, and [...] stood in pitch black night under torrential rain."²⁹⁹ He notices and revels in "the smell of the field about him—a patch of his native planet where grass grew, where cows moved, where presently he would come to hedges and a gate."³⁰⁰ Not only has he come back to Earth, but he has come back to what might well be the same stretch of English countryside from which he departed, and the cycle is complete.

The second novel breaks the pattern to a degree, ending before it has truly begun. Ransom's departure and return are both narrated in the frame tale before the actual account of his adventure on Venus, but despite Lewis placing the return at the beginning of the book, it does still feature the protagonist's reintroduction to the normal world. After his participation in the Great Dance for a year, Ransom is once more carried through Deep Heaven by the Oyarsa of Malacandra, and the scene that follows his arrival on Earth is, despite the fantastic method of his travel, perhaps even more conventional than that which he found after his first interplanetary

²⁹⁹ Lewis, *Silent*, 149.

³⁰⁰ Lewis, 149.

voyage. Though the traveler himself has been transformed by his time on the Edenic Perelandra, his concerns, upon reaching his homeworld, are quite ordinary. Rising naked from his coffin-conveyance, he is immediately cold, having left behind the balmy environment of Venus, and before long he is happily enjoying the comforts of home, including a hot shower and a good meal, as his friends pepper him with question. His first words on touching down are entirely prosaic, as he remarks “‘Ugh, it’s cold down here,’ [...] ‘I hope you’ve got the boiler going and some hot water—and some clothes.’”³⁰¹ His nonchalance about his remarkable adventure, as well as his depiction, talking calmly about astronomical theories as he revels in a hot shower, signal his return to the normal world. There is something baptismal in the image, as Ransom leaves the spiritual realm of Perelandra and enters once more into the physical reality of earth. The normalcy of mixing astronomy and bathing captures the human experience, combining the high and the low and symbolizing the reunion of body and mind that Ransom has learned to accept, with each having its important and necessary function.

In each story, the protagonist, whether Ransom or Jane, has returned for his or her otherworldly journey, changed by their experiences and prepared to share the spiritual benefits of their pilgrimages and their newfound knowledge with those still firmly grounded in the everyday world, much like St. Brendan upon his return to the monastery.

³⁰¹ Lewis, 27.

Chapter 4:

As Above, So Below: Medieval Echoes in the Underworlds of C.S. Lewis's Fiction

In the course of his cosmic immram, Lewis's interplanetary pilgrim treads not only the heights but also the depths of the space-age otherworld in which he travels. Like many visitors to medieval otherworlds, Ransom's journey in *Perelandra* includes a descent into the underworld, a katabasis, and through it, Lewis continues to develop themes with which he's worked throughout the Trilogy, like the orderliness of creation and the positive response to wonder. He would later reprise these themes and revisit the underworld in some of his later works, especially his Narnian adventure, *The Silver Chair*. Despite the differences in the settings of these two series, the chthonic realms they explore have surprising similarities, and a comparison of the two will help to illuminate both, as well as illustrate Lewis's continued attempts to revitalize medieval principles. There are obvious parallels in both of his subterranean realms to the best known medieval source for visions of the underworld, Dante's *Inferno*, yet Lewis, as he so often does, goes beyond his model. While his works often bear a self-conscious medievalism, his underworlds invite and at the same time subvert medieval comparisons. Both settings at first seem to conform to the standard archetypes of the underworld in general and the Dantean model specifically, but each story also includes a revelation that unveils the true nature of the locations, a nature that ultimately differs from that found in the primary classical and medieval models of such journeys.³⁰²

³⁰² It is worth mentioning that Lewis himself had mixed feelings about archetypal criticism. He, along with his fellow Inklings, found himself attracted to the theories of Jung by their temperament and their love of myth, but he also had a certain suspicion of Jung's conclusions. Essentially, the Lewis felt that Jung had "used a myth to explain a myth," essentially created a new myth to explain the power of the old ones. Yet, Lewis admitted to slipping into the archetypal mode in his own criticism occasionally, and in his own theology and philosophy there are definitely hints of Christian archetypalism, uncoupled from Jung's

Yet, the medieval and especially the Dantean influence is nevertheless very strong on these subterranean worlds, even while their creator is ultimately going against archetypal expectations. Through these contrasts, Lewis continues his rehabilitation of medieval ideas. He constructs his underworlds in such a way that they demonstrate a unified, hierarchical order in their universes for his wandering protagonists. There is a universe that is bountiful, bursting with life, as well as perfectly ordered and organized, with nothing out of place and no space wasted, not even in the very depths of a world.³⁰³ This is a view of creation that has strong medieval connotations. This concept, labelled the Principle of Plenitude by A. O. Lovejoy, came to the Middle Ages from Plato by way of Augustine and became a significant part of medieval thought. Lewis identified this idea as one of the primary concepts of his “Medieval Model.” As he summarized the principle in *The Discarded Image*, it is the belief, shared by ancient and medieval thinkers, that “the universe must be fully exploited. Nothing must go to waste.”³⁰⁴

In the medieval imagination, every level of the universe, every separate sphere of influence was populated with the matter and beings that belong there. Thus, though humankind only dwelt in the middle tier of the world, with an imperishable translunar reality above and a chaotic and infernal subterranean reality below, each realm was inhabited by beings suited for their surroundings, in fact, for beings created to inhabit those demesnes. In his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis characterized the peculiar blend of hierarchical order and plenitude that was such a central element of medieval thought by describing the perspective of thinker from that age, for whom “the universe was packed and tingling with anthropomorphic life; its true picture is to be found in the elaborate title pages of old folios where winds blow at the comers

theories of the unconscious. See his essay “Psycho-Analysis and Literature,” 296-299 in *Selected Literary Essays* for his reflections on the topic.

³⁰³ Downing, 67-8.

³⁰⁴ Lewis, *Discarded Image*, 44, 56.

and at the bottom dolphins spout, and the eye passes upward through cities and kings and angels to four Hebrew letters with rays darting from them at the top, which represent the ineffable Name.”³⁰⁵

Both the lowest land in Narnia and the strange, cavernous tunnels beneath Perelandra convey similar themes of order and plenty, serving as revelations to the heroes of each story of the larger truths of universal order and purpose of their universes.³⁰⁶ While what is arguably their primary model, Dante’s Hell, represents a rupture of the divine order, each of Lewis’s underworlds, though seemingly chaotic and empty at first, is actually full of life and part of the hierarchical order of the cosmos.

One of the objectives of Lewis’s Space Trilogy was, as David Downing has recognized, to rehabilitate this very view of reality, to reconcile it with contemporary science and philosophy, and scholars have examined many of the ways in which Lewis did so.³⁰⁷ Notably, Lewis not only filled his solar system with worlds inhabited by different rational beings but also peopled the heavens of his Trilogy with the *eldil*, the ethereal angels of his cosmology, who lived in the light-filled empyrean of space in an express rejection of the conception of the distance between worlds as empty and wasted. During his first journey, Ransom discovered that the modern understanding of space, which had haunted him as “the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds,” could not be further from the truth.³⁰⁸ Instead, what he finds in that vast ocean is an “empyrean ocean of radiance,” and he

³⁰⁵ Lewis, *Preface*, 75.

³⁰⁶ Both of these episodes have received fairly little critical exploration. Several critics have observed the incidents’ basic resemblances to the archetypal journey to the underworld, such as David Downing and Kathryn Hume. Jared Lobdell has argued for a few similarities between the Ransom episode and John Buchan’s 1910 novel, *Prester John*, but has not assayed a full analysis of the passage. While Sanford Schwartz explores the spiritual crisis Ransom’s journey to the underworld represents, he has not recognized Lewis’s “transfiguration” of underworld motifs in his treatment thereof.

³⁰⁷ Downing, 63.

³⁰⁸ Lewis, *Silent*, 34.

“could not call it ‘dead’; he felt life pouring into him from it every moment. [...] He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds.”³⁰⁹ In this manner, Lewis updated the medieval conception of the translunar world as full of divine energy, including angelic beings and governing spirits, a busy and intricately organized realm, while also acknowledging the modern understanding of the vast distances and harsh conditions of space. Ransom is well aware that outside of the fragile walls of their little craft, there is no way he could survive, light or no light. It is a place that is hostile to humans, yet Lewis emphasizes that this does not make it purposeless.³¹⁰

Lewis performed the same type of rehabilitation of the other extremes of his universes, investing the deep places of two of his worlds with a similar type of life and purpose. In the cases of *Perelandra* and the *Silver Chair*, he works not to reconcile the medieval vision with modern science but to contrast his reader’s expectations, based on archetypal concepts of the underworld and traditional models, with a discovered reality that emphasized and updated the medieval principles. In Lewis’s texts, he presents a more fully developed and realized sense of creation. In this way, he sought to transfigure the medieval conceptions of such underground realms, realms which had been populated by very different creatures in the medieval imagination than in Lewis’s own fiction, while at the same time, building on the theme of the acceptance of the Other already present in his treatment of his inhuman aliens.

As Sanford Schwartz notes, the scenes of Ransom’s katabasis come at a structurally significant moment in the novel. He argues that the four chapters that encompass the underworld journey, 12-15, serve as “the antithesis to the four-chapter celebration of life on the surface of the

³⁰⁹ Lewis, 34.

³¹⁰ Downing, 66.

planet” which occupy chapters 3-6, creating a parallel in the symmetrical structure of the plot.³¹¹ In opposition to the earlier celebration of life, the subterranean journey becomes an investigation of death and non-being, a lament in contrast to the novel’s earlier ode to existence. Yet, through his manipulation of underworld motifs, Lewis turns the lament into a song of praise at its end, as Ransom finally comes to recognize that the apparent irrelevance of humanity to so much of creation is, in fact, part of its glory. It is an almost infinite system where each element is both in the center and on the periphery. Ransom realizes the experience of one’s finitude and irrelevance to the universe, as Downing frames it, “situates us on a precipice that opens onto ‘the Abyss of the Father,’ giving one a sense of the vastness of the divine in contrast the insignificance of mortal life.”³¹² The chapters are a grand expression of the same perceptual retraining of the wonder response that has occupied much of the first two novels. Lewis introduces Ransom, and through him, his readers, to marvels that are even more frightening and alien than the very aliens of his first novel, and just as he did with those marvelous Martians, he illustrates the beauty and grandeur inherent in that which, at first, is repulsive in its difference.

Archetypally, underworlds, caves, and subterranean realms tend to be associated with the infernal, employing what Frye terms “demonic imagery,” and the most common underworld motifs include those shared by depictions of the Christian Hell in tradition and especially in medieval vision literature like the *Inferno*, including darkness, chaos, and suffering.³¹³ Of course, medieval underworlds occasionally played host to both paradisiac and infernal realms, often serving as a physical location for Hell, Purgatory, the Earthly Paradise, or faerie realms that blurred the distinctions between all three.³¹⁴ The underworld of the *Aeneid*, one of the primary

³¹¹ Schwartz, 80.

³¹² Schwartz, 86.

³¹³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 147-150.

³¹⁴ Byrne, 58.

influences on medieval authors, and that encountered in the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii*, of twelfth century vintage, are two examples. Each includes a realm of reward as well as of punishment or purgation.³¹⁵ Yet, most medieval underworlds tend to adhere closely to archetypal images, featuring negative and infernal motifs. Even in the *Tractus*, it is likely that the Earthly Paradise its knightly protagonist reaches is encountered by a return to the surface, though this is never made explicit.³¹⁶ It seems that when the utopian and the diabolical share space in medieval underworlds, they often do so uncomfortably. For example, *Sir Orfeo*'s possibly subterranean fairyland's beauty is offset by the horrors the wayward hero finds within its central castle.³¹⁷ In the Space Trilogy and the Narnian Chronicles, however, Lewis attempts to create a happy marriage between these two sets of images. He combines both types of underworld, the paradisiacal and the infernal, employing common "demonic" underworld motifs, yet subverting their meaning through a revelatory scene where his protagonists gain understanding of their surroundings.

One of the primary reversals that Lewis undertakes is the archetypal image of the underworld as a realm of chaos and waste, a world in Frye's schema:

that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it and before any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden, has been solidly established.³¹⁸

Dante's Hell is, of course, just such a place as Frye describes, and his vision of the underworld, which comes at the end of a centuries long Christian tradition of visionary literature on the subject, became a genre-defining work, employing many of the motifs of earlier medieval and

³¹⁵ Byrne, 76.

³¹⁶ Byrne, 77.

³¹⁷ Byrne, 52

³¹⁸ Frye, 147.

classical texts.³¹⁹ In Dante's version, the cavern of Hell is part of hierarchical order of the universe, the lowest reaches of creation and as far from the domain of God in the heavens as possible. While he described this arrangement as part of the divine order, with the justice, power, wisdom, and love of God literally inscribed into the gates of Hell, it is still an infernal realm, hostile not only to mankind but to God himself, even if subject to the latter's rule. While the medieval Model paints a picture of the universe that is defined by nothing so well as order, Dante's Hell is the definition of chaotic, a breakdown of that order, even if it is contained and constrained by it. The sense of local disorder created by the *Inferno* is built into every facet of the poem. As Joan Ferrante notes, it is evident in "the astonishing variety of settings and of infernal guards in Hell, the rapid shifts from one of the many damned souls to another" and much more. The disorder even extends to the structure of the poem itself, as the cantos of *Inferno* are of constantly varying lengths, unlike the scrupulously balanced *Purgatorio* or more evenly distributed *Paradiso*.³²⁰ This is all part of Dante's careful, mathematically precise craftsmanship. The contrast between the structure of the different sections of the *Comedia* is part and parcel of the spiritual and physical characterization of those sections.

The carefully crafted chaos of Dante's Hell stands in contrast to the poet's vision of Heaven as the ultimate source of unity and order, and taken together, the *Commedia* creates the impression of a universe that is intricately organized at every level except the lowest through the poem's precise organization. While Dante's Hell is still under the rule of God, its petty king no more than the lowest prisoner in the pit, its existence as a physical space still throws the vision of the ordered cosmos out of balance, as there is a portion of creation that belies the beauty and

³¹⁹ Alison Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). 3-4.

³²⁰ J. Ferrante, "A Poetics of Chaos and Harmony," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. R. Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 181-200, 181.

function of the rest. It is precisely this implication of the lowest world that Lewis reworked in his own treatments of the underworld archetype, and this can be best understood through the way those settings both reflect and reimagine Dante's own.³²¹

Dante's *Commedia* serves as an excellent reference for Lewis's work for multiple reasons, not least of which is because the later author had a profound love and respect for his predecessor. In his *Allegory of Love*, Lewis wrote "Dante remains a strong candidate for the supreme poetical honours of the world," and he even went so far as to call the work of the craftsman of the *Commedia* "on the whole, the greatest of all the poetry I have read."³²²³²³

Throughout his life, Lewis read and studied Dante, writing several papers on the poet. What's more, as Marsha Daigle-Williamson noted in her study of the Dantean echoes in Lewis's fiction, the *Commedia*'s presence is felt throughout both the Space Trilogy and the Chronicles of Narnia. In fact, she observed several of connections between Lewis's underworlds and that of Dante.³²⁴

Daigle-Williamson maps a host of similarities between the journey of Lewis's protagonists in *The Silver Chair* and that of Dante's Pilgrim, even before the Narnians begin their own subterranean search. These similarities include a shared encounter with giants, in which both the Narnian giants and Dante's infernal titans are initially described as resembling "towers" from afar, and the portrayals of both groups emphasize their stupidity.³²⁵ In another example, she also notes parallels between the Narnians search for a bridge to continue their journey with

³²¹ There is an important distinction to be made here, as Dante is obviously writing about a sort of underworld that seems necessarily different than those of Lewis. He is, after all, describing the Christian Hell, while Lewis's settings are both local and physical, rather than spiritual. Yet, the later author intentionally evokes many of the same symbols as Dante, creating recognizable parallels and is investing his physical setting with spiritual significance.

³²² Lewis, *Allegory*, 145.

³²³ C. S. Lewis, "Dante's Similes," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 76.

³²⁴ Marsha Daigle-Williamson, *Reflecting the Eternal: Dante's Divine Comedy in the Novels of C.S. Lewis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015), 3.

³²⁵ Daigle-Williamson, 171-172.

Dante's depiction of his Pilgrim's encounter with Malacoda and his gang in *Inferno* 21. Not only does each feature a chasms and broken bridges, but each also features a lying guide who misleads the travelers about what lies ahead.³²⁶

4.1 *The Silver Chair's Underland*

Daigle-Williamson charts several other similarities between the two texts, but the connections to the *Inferno* are clearest in the *Silver Chair's* Underland, the subterranean realm ruled by the book's antagonist, which serves as the scene of its finale. Obviously the darkness of the cavernous underworld, emphasized during the Narnian's subterranean sea voyage where "Looking ahead, they could see nothing but smooth, dark water, fading into absolute blackness," is itself reminiscent of the *Inferno*, which the Pilgrim tells us "was so dark and deep and misty that, though I peered intently down into the depth, I could make out nothing there," but there is much more to the similarity than that.³²⁷³²⁸ As Daigle-Williamson observes, the protagonists of the *Silver Chair* "parallel the trajectory of the journey through the circles of Dante's Hell," as they descend through multiple caverns, heading constantly downward into the depths of the land.³²⁹ She also notes that they arrive at the dark city of Underland across the Sunless Sea, just as Dante's Pilgrim comes to the city of Dis by crossing the black waters of the river Styx in a similar boat without sails.³³⁰

Yet, the journeys of the Pilgrim and the Narnians have even more in common than Daigle-Williamson notes, and the Dantean echoes are present in every dim corner of Underland.

³²⁶ Daigle-Williamson, 172.

³²⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1981),153

³²⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy. Inferno* I, trans. Charles Southward Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989). 35.

³²⁹ Daigle-Williamson, 173.

³³⁰ Daigle-Williamson, 173.

After all, the finality of the voyage with Charon across the Styx is stressed in the *Commedia*, and Lewis establishes the same effect with the mantra of the children's guide in his story, repeated endlessly, especially in regards to their journey across the sea. The Warden proclaims "many have taken ship at the pale beaches [...] and few return to the sunlit lands" (SC 153). The scene is very evocative of the one-way traffic of souls across the Styx, and it suggests a similar sense of hopelessness as Charon's own declaration to the damned that crowd his dark craft, "Woe to you, wicked souls! Do not hope to see Heaven ever! I come to carry you to the other shore, into eternal darkness, into fire and cold!"³³¹ The same contrast between the upper and lower world is present in both speeches, as well as a focus on the absence of light in underworld. In fact, so hopeless seems the plight of the Narnians and so infernal the subterranean realm, the very inscription above the gates of Hell might well be carved into those of the dark city in Underland: "Through me you enter the woeful city, / Through me you enter eternal grief, / Through me you enter among the lost, / [...], Abandon every hope ye who enter here."³³² Indeed, a struggle with waning hope becomes one of the primary challenges faced by the Narnians in their own infernal city.

Once they pass the Sunless Sea, the traveling Narnians are also struck by the almost complete silence of the subterranean land. Even the massive, sprawling city moves and bustles without more than a whisper; it is "as quiet, and nearly as dark, as the inside of an anthill."³³³ The comparison to an insectoid colony heightens the inhuman, alien atmosphere of the place. The silence of the city is also reminiscent of archetypal lands of the dead, like the shadowy underworld of the Epic of Gilgamesh or classical sources like Odysseus's underworld journey,

³³¹ Dante, 31.

³³² Dante, 25.

³³³ Lewis, 155.

though admittedly not of Dante's cacophonous Hell. The silence of the caverns is suggestive of the Augustinian conception of evil as total absence, not merely an inversion of good. In this sense, Lewis continues the similar associations of Dante's Hell, like the darkness increasing coldness, reflecting a lack of light and heat, and further extrapolates them in this all-consuming silence. More familiar to the *Commedia*, however, are the denizens of this deep world.

The Earthmen who inhabit Underland are a grim and grotesque lot. The apparent chaos of Dante's underworld is reflected in their riotous variety of forms. Lewis describes them as "very different; some had tails and others not, some wore great beards and others had very round, smooth faces, big as pumpkins. There were long, pointed noses, and long, soft noses like small trunks, and great blobby noses. Several had single horns in the middle of their foreheads" (146). They only have one thing in common, and that is the mark of profound sadness upon their faces. These gnomes are monstrous in appearance and certainly reflect the horrible, demonic denizens of Dante's Hell, though in a more comic fashion.

Once again, their diverse, hybrid appearances are an invitation to fear and revulsion, but in typical fashion, Lewis does not let this association stand. The Narnians eventually discover that the seemingly cruel and monstrous gnomes are merely inhabitants of a different land, as out of place in the dark caverns of Underland as the surface folk themselves. Indeed, the gnomes are fellow rational creatures, no more evil or dreadful than the Narnians, and when seen in the light of their real realm, the repulsion of their strangeness turns, in the pattern of previous encounters with the Other, into a joyful wonder at their difference. So the demonic resemblances of the gnomes prove to be an illusion in the same fashion as the evil aspect of the underworld itself.

Like that medieval underworld, Lewis's Underland is even under the influence of an evil ruler, rebellious against the established order of the upper world. Underland's evil queen, the Green Witch, is found at the center of her kingdom's cavernous confines, like her demonic predecessor, and she shares his traditional association with serpents. As Daigle-Williamson has observed, the Witch shares Satan's penchant for transforming into a snake to do her evil deeds, transforming into a giant serpent in order to attack the protagonists once they break her spell.³³⁴ Yet, the parallels go even further on this front, as the satanic sorceress seduces an innocent in a garden-like setting and brings death into an idyllic and innocent childhood when she first encounters the young prince Rillian, cementing the Satanic overtones of the character. Of course, Lewis provides his male innocent with a female tempter, inverting the gender roles of his source, while also evoking the dangerous fairy lover of romance. All of these features, both of place and populace, combine to create a sense of dread and foreboding about the realm of Underland, drawing on archetypal conceptions of evil underworlds, like darkness, disorder, and silence, as well as specifically Dantean flourishes.³³⁵ The Narnians realize, as does the reader, that this is a place alien to humanity, a place that defies the ordered and beautiful reality of the surface world. In other words, it is a place very much akin to Dante's Hell. The contrast is drawn specifically in Puddleglum's speech as the Witch tries to ensorcell the Narnians. In the moment of crisis, he recognizes that the underworld is no place for humans (or marshwiggles, for that matter), and declares "Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play

³³⁴ Daigle-Williamson, 171.

³³⁵ Frye, 149-50.

world that licks your real world all hollow.”³³⁶ This is the turning point in the Narnian’s struggle against the Witch’s magic, and its lynchpin is the recognition that the underworld is not suited for, in fact, not designed for, human habitation. It is a realization of the Narnians’ outsider status in Underland.

4.2 Perelandra’s *Caverns*

While the *Silver Chair*’s Dantean connections are easy to see, the same types of symbols are present in Perelandra’s deep caverns, but more importantly, the setting evokes a similar type of response from character and reader. Like the Narnian underworld, Ransom’s descent creates a sense of dread and despair, as well as providing a growing sense of menace as the narrative approaches its end. The Dantean echoes serve similar purposes in both of Lewis’s texts as they do in their source. The entrance to this extraterrestrial underworld is through a cave and once again across dark waters, and there is no returning the way Ransom came once he has passed those black waves. In a strange way, Ransom shares the Pilgrim’s experience, having been brought across the stygian waters by an infernal ferryman, but his version is decidedly more hostile than even the menacing and unfriendly Charon, as the Un-Man drags him bodily into the depths. Perhaps the defining feature of this subterranean realm is its darkness, like the Inferno and other archetypal underworlds. In those Perelandrian caves, Ransom encounters an utterly abyssal environment, a darkness so complete that he is eventually described as starved for light, “thinking about light as a hungry man thinks about food.”³³⁷ His lightless wanderings also feature crossing multiple “rivers,” each of which brings him closer to the center of the cavernous pit. These include a boiling river, like Phlegethon in *Inferno* 12, though Lewis’s is a lava flow

³³⁶ Lewis, 191.

³³⁷ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 151.

rather than a river of blood. Nonetheless, they both share the blood-red coloring of Dante's river. Lewis's lava, which Ransom observes running in a stream below him where "it swelled and roared and writhed" evokes Dante's description of the Phlegethon as "del bollor vermiglio," the boiling vermillion.³³⁸³³⁹ Like the medieval pilgrim, Ransom looks down into this crimson river from above, and like its infernal counterpart, this fiery stream becomes the eternal resting place of the senselessly violent, as the exhausted space traveler throws the broken body of the Un-Man into its depths. It seems a fitting end in the style of Dantean *contrapasso* after the savage, mindless violence of the creature and its abuse of the Perelandran wildlife.

After all, the thing inhabiting Weston is literally of infernal origin, being some sort of dark eldil or demon, perhaps even the "dark archon," Satan himself, though Lewis remains ambiguous on this score. Marsha Daigle-Williamson links the Un-Man specifically with Dante's demons, finding connections between the increasingly inhuman descriptions of the creature, like his ripping claws and diabolical shredding of Ransom and the Perelandrian fauna, and the demons inhabiting the circle of Fraud in *Inferno* 22.³⁴⁰ These infernal parallels reach their height in the equally infernal setting of Ransom's underworld journey. There is even a moment in the fire cavern at the climax of his adventure, when the creature's power is in its ascendancy, where both the setting and the satanic Un-Man seem to be in infernal harmony, as suited to one-another as the most diabolical of Dante's settings and characters. At this moment, the Un-Man seems a demonic king in a demonic kingdom.

That moment comes as the Un-Man, now definitively dead and yet still animate, granting it a ghastly and inhuman presence, crawls out of the tunnel into the crimson cavern, followed by

³³⁸ Dante, 124.

³³⁹ Lewis, 154.

³⁴⁰ Daigle-Williamson, 92.

a colossal subterranean insect that inhabits the tunnels below. “Slowly, shakily, with unnatural and inhuman movements a human form, scarlet in the firelight, crawled out on to the floor of the cave [...]” and when it is joined by the horrible insectoid monstrosity that is its apparent servant in these subterranean scene, Ransom notices “the horrible shadows of both danced in enormous and united menace on the wall of rock behind them.”³⁴¹ The Un-Man’s demonic parallels are perhaps nowhere more apparent than in this scene, and once more Lewis employs hybrid imagery, the mixture of the shadows of man and beast in the grotesque and terrible combination of both, to evoke a dread that he will soon dispel.

This is the nadir of the fighting philologist’s spiritual and physical journey, the point where he almost loses hope, and it is also the point where Lewis’s manipulation of chthonic motifs reaches its crescendo. Both Ransom and his readers are treated to the dramatic appearance of the Un-Man amidst fire and darkness, and in that moment all of the archetypal fears of the underworld seem to come true. Ransom nearly gives in to the dark vision of the universe that Weston had outlined, seeing in the caverns’ inhospitable environs a reflection of the ultimately inhospitable nature of reality and a confirmation of the grim Modernist perception of the cosmos as empty and hostile that the interplanetary explorer had rejected during his first space voyage. Parphrasing Weston’s diatribe about “the rind” of reality and life, Ransom casts all of existence in the shadowy shape of this underworld, railing in his despair that:

what he had called the worlds were but the skins of the worlds: a quarter of a mile beneath the surface, and from thence through thousands of miles of dark and silence and infernal fire, to the very heart of each, Reality lived—the meaningless, the un-made, the omnipotent idiocy to which all spirits were irrelevant and before which all efforts were vain.³⁴²

³⁴¹ Lewis, 154.

³⁴² Lewis, 154.

Frye's description of demonic imagery comes to mind once more in this scene, and his point about the absence of objects for human desire is particularly cogent in the context of Lewis's transfiguration of this type of imagery, as the lack of connection to human life and significance that his underworlds possess forms part of the spiritual struggles of his protagonists. The distraught pilgrim, faced with the alien and unwelcoming underworld and the infernal presence of the Un-Man, sees the caverns and the world they represent as a realm of darkness, chaos, and disorder, a home to monsters, and a place that is utterly divorced from both the light of the heavens and the spiritual light that it represents. This impression is heightened in the next moment as, following his inhuman antagonist, comes a seemingly monstrous creature from both the character and the author's nightmares.

Its description, an incongruous collection of parts, is akin to that of the composite monsters that guard various thresholds in Dante's Hell, just as this beast guards a metaphorical threshold, marking the point at which Ransom's view of the underworld is most Infernal before he begins to see it with new eyes, as well as a literal threshold, the point between the fire cavern and the upper world. This cavern with its fiery river could be seen as a border in Ransom's truncated journey through this extraterrestrial underworld. Lewis describes the appearance of the beetle-ish beast in a detail that captures Ransom's abhorrence and attempts to evoke a similar response in the reader. He writes:

First came what looked like branches of a tree, and then seven or eight spots of light, irregularly grouped like a constellation. Then a tubular mass, which reflected the red glow as if it were polished. His heart gave a great leap as the branches suddenly resolved themselves into long wiry feelers and the dotted lights became the many eyes of a shell-helmeted head and the mass that followed it was revealed as a large roughly cylindrical body.

Of course, the beast also echoes the monstrous hybridity that Lewis evoked and then subverted in his Malacandran inhabitants. The beast's appearance shares the mirage-like first perception of

some of Dante's monsters, first perceived as something more natural before their true and more disturbing nature is processed by the viewer. Just as the Pilgrim first perceived the giants of canto 31 as "many lofty towers," so Ransom at first thinks of the subterranean creature's legs and eyes for trees and stars before he can resolve the true nature of the sight.³⁴³ Even when he has sorted out that he is looking at a monstrous insect rather than a mobile tree, the shocks are not quite finished, as:

Horrible things followed—angular, many jointed legs, and presently, when he thought the whole body was in sight, a second body came following it and after that a third. The thing was in three parts, united only by a kind of wasp's waist structure—three parts that did not seem to be truly aligned and made it look as if it had been trodden on—a huge, many legged, quivering deformity...³⁴⁴

The creature seems unnatural and hideous, its nightmare shape embodying Lewis's own great fear of insects, as well as an archetypal fear of the anthropoid and alien and the Wellsian intellectual inheritance that has trained science fiction readers to expect insectoid monsters on extraterrestrial worlds.³⁴⁵³⁴⁶ It seems that at last Ransom has discovered the Wellsian terrors that he expected on Malacanrda, where "no insect-like, vermiculate or crustacean Abominable, no twitching feelings, rasping wings, slimy coils, curling tentacles [...] seemed to him anything but likely."³⁴⁷ This apparently diabolical being seems a fitting servant for the dark will of the demon that inhabits Weston's body, an infernal ruler for a seemingly infernal realm. It is at this moment that Ransom feels most lost, most alien in this place and a fearful wonder seems most appropriate.

³⁴³ Dante, 329.

³⁴⁴ Lewis, 154.

³⁴⁵ Lewis, *Surprised*, 8.

³⁴⁶ Schwartz, 31-2.

³⁴⁷ Lewis, *Silent*, 37.

4.3 *Underworld Transfigured*

Yet, it is followed by a moment of clarity that begins to show him the true nature of Perelandra's underworld and gives the lie to Weston's materialistic paranoia about the rind and the inner darkness. After he finally dispatches the Un-Man, Ransom looks again at the beetle-creature, and suddenly it has lost its menace and its terror. He sees it more honestly now, not as a monster, though its shape is strange, but simply as a creature, a being that is different, but not evil. Lewis wrote that "all loathing had vanished clean out of his mind, so that neither then nor any other time could he remember it, nor ever understand again why one should quarrel with an animal for having more legs or eyes than oneself."³⁴⁸ Ransom describes the effect in remarkably prosaic terms, recalling an experience on Earth when he had spotted a hideous bug on one of his papers, only to realize a moment later that it was just a leaf, "and instantly the very curves and re-entrants which had made its ugliness turned into its beauties."³⁴⁹ The fearful wonder of his initial perception is replaced by a positive wonder that recognizes beauty in difference and hybridity. Thus, Ransom realizes that this creature, just like this underground world, is not truly infernal, despite its archetypal associations. The Un-Man was as much a stranger there as he himself was.

Both texts have such a moment, and each has a similar effect. In *The Silver Chair*, this revelation comes as the kingdom of Underland is shaken by upheavals after the Witch's death and the very earth splits open, revealing that what seemed the very bottom of the world is yet one more cavern above a realm of incredible, almost divine and painful, beauty. This is the realm of Bism, the fiery, blindingly bright land, watered by rivers of lava and the true home of the Earthmen. Its description is striking. The travelers can hardly bear to behold the sight, but "they

³⁴⁸ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 155.

³⁴⁹ Lewis, 155.

thought they could make out a river of fire, and, on the banks of that river, what seemed to be fields and groves of an unbearable, hot brilliance—though they were dim compared with the river. There were blues, reds, greens, and whites all jumbled together.”³⁵⁰ Mesmerized by the strange beauty of the place, the Narnians find themselves quite tempted when their newfound gnome guide offers to show them the pleasures of his land, including marvelous fruits, like living precious metals and stones, “real silver, real gold, real diamond.”³⁵¹ He declares “Down in Bism we have them alive and growing. There I’ll pick you bunches of rubies that you can eat and squeeze you a cupful of diamond juice,” promising that “You won’t care much about fingering the cold, dead treasures of your shallow mines after you have tasted the live ones in Bism.”³⁵² The whole scene is rather utopian, and just as Ransom’s view of the beetle and the caverns is transformed by his moment of clarity, the appearance of Bism and the account of its wonders transforms the perceptions of the Narnians. They realize that the underworld has its beauties as well, beauties that surpass, in their way, any of the those of the surface world.

The jeweled realm of the salamanders and gnomes in *The Silver Chair* carries this connection even further. Although it shares its focus on light and precious stones with many otherworld narratives, Bism is especially reminiscent of the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, a poem Lewis admired and taught, featuring some similarities in imagery. Yet, Lewis employs these motifs in slightly different fashion. In *Sir Orfeo*, the titular protagonist “com into a fair cuntray / As bright so sonne on somers day,” where he sees an amazing castle whose “tmast wal / Was clere and schine as cristal,” and which seems to be composed entirely of jewels and precious metals. Orfeo sees “The butras com out of the diche / Of rede gold y-arched riche. / The vousour

³⁵⁰ Lewis, *Silver*, 215.

³⁵¹ Lewis, 218.

³⁵² Lewis, 218.

was avowed al / Of ich maner divers aumal. / Within ther wer wide wones, / Al of precious stones.” In fact, so rich and brilliant are the castles adornments that “Al that lond was ever light, / For when it schuld be therk and night, / The riche stones light gonne / As bright as doth at none the sonne.” The combination of brilliant light and unimaginable riches in jewels, gold, silver, and more is a common motif in otherworld narratives, as well as being linked to positive apocalyptic imagery by Frye.³⁵³³⁵⁴ These images also create utopian associations in Orfeo’s strange Otherworld.³⁵⁵ While in biblical otherworld accounts like that of *Revelations*, as well as medieval stories like *Sir Orfeo*, precious stones are used in fantastical descriptions to create a sense of incredible wealth and plenty, as well as to emphasize their worthlessness in a kingdom without want and need, Lewis refines the symbol yet further.³⁵⁶

By introducing the idea of ‘live’ jewels, living diamonds and fresh rubies, which can be squeezed for a delicious drink, the author reworks the meaning of the gems a second time. Not only are they abundant in the extreme and therefore lacking all of the acquisitive, greedy connotations of the upper world, they are given an actual, practical use. No one can eat gold or drink a gemstone, but in Bism, one can do just that. The symbols of wealth and power that have no other real function than to serve as stand-ins for other resources instead become part of the ambrosial plenty of the new land, emphasizing the complete reordering of values and principles that this setting requires. Consuming the jewels changes their meaning as symbols, deepening it and providing a further hint at the change in perspectives necessary to understand the proper place a location like Bism has in the scheme of things, its true station in the Great Chain of

³⁵³ Byrne, 26, 32.

³⁵⁴ Frye, 146.

³⁵⁵ Jeff Rider, “The Other Worlds of Romance,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 115–31, 122.

³⁵⁶ Byrne, 32.

Being. In this, Lewis further expands the Principle of Plenitude, creating a world where not only all places, but all things, have a use. Nothing at all is wasted in the Narnian's more perfect world, and no cold, dead things are admired solely for their beauty. Now, all that is beautiful is also useful and alive.

Through his transfiguration of the archetypal images of the underworld, Lewis addresses the tendency of humans to misread their surroundings, and in *Perelandra*, he also continues his efforts at combating what he called the "Great Myth," of the 20th century, "scientism." Through this episode, Lewis attempts to dispel the power of part of that myth by transfiguring it as well. Specifically, he is concerned with the naturalistic view of the universe as alien and indifferent to humanity, conjured for him by nothing so well as the modern understanding of the stark realities of space. He believed this concept led to a sense of alienation and hopelessness. It is precisely this philosophy that Lewis puts into the mouth of the Un-Man as Ransom chases him across the surface of Perelandra. In what is almost the last conversation before the cosmic pilgrim's plunge into the underworld, Weston/Un-Man offers a very pessimistic view of reality, a view that helps frame Ransom's response to the strange world that greets him below.

The Un-Man tells his foe to "'Picture the universe as an infinite globe with this very thin crust on the outside."³⁵⁷ He explains that 'crust' both in terms of time and in terms of human experience, arguing that "When we've got all the way through then we are what's called Dead: we've got into the dark part inside, the real globe."³⁵⁸ The creature goes further, telling Ransom that the darkness and emptiness of death is not only the vast majority of time, but it is also the vast majority of the universe itself, claiming that "All the things you like to dwell upon are outsides. A planet like our own, or like Perelandra, for instance. Or a beautiful human body. All

³⁵⁷ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 143.

³⁵⁸ Lewis, 143.

the colours and pleasant shapes are merely where it ends, where it ceases to be. Inside, what do you get? Darkness, worms, heat, pressure, salt, suffocation, stink.”³⁵⁹ That inner darkness and horror, that vast, disordered universe to which humanity is entirely irrelevant, is “the *real* universe for ever and ever.”³⁶⁰

The Un-Man links this view of reality specifically with traditional views and archetypal images of the underworld. He declares “Homer knew—that *all* the dead have sunk down into the inner darkness: under the rind. All witless, all twittering, gibbering, decaying. Bogeymen.”³⁶¹ In his diatribe he evokes the Homeric underworld, with its silence, darkness, and its insubstantial spirits. Of course, Lewis conjures these same uneasy spirits by utilizing these motifs in his depiction of both of his underworlds, guiding his readers to create the same associations as his hero. Indeed, the Un-Man’s ideas help to shape Ransom’s own response to what he encounters underground.

The impact of his enemy’s arguments is magnified by two experiences that Ransom has over the course of his sea-chase, each of which raise the specter of humanity’s irrelevance to the universe, a ghost which haunts him all the more powerfully once he leaves the surface world. The first experience is his hearing the calls of sea-birds, far from the floating islands and beyond any part of Perelandra he had previously known. Out of sight of any land and completely at the mercy of the sea, the traveler is strangely moved, as “The crying of these birds was [...] the wildest sound that Ransom had ever heard, the loneliest, and the one that had least to do with Man.”³⁶² The eerie birdsong, coupled with the myriad sounds of the ocean remind the traveler how very much out of his element he is, how disconnected he is from his surroundings, and it is

³⁵⁹ Lewis, 144.

³⁶⁰ Lewis, 143.

³⁶¹ Lewis, 143.

³⁶² Lewis, 135.

that sense of disconnection that proves the most troubling to him. He reflects that “It was not hostile: if it had been, its wildness and strangeness would have been the less, for hostility is a relation and an enemy is not a total stranger.”³⁶³

The complete irrelevance of his life and concerns to this oceanic setting causes Ransom to reflect on his understanding of Perelandra, with its “King” and “Queen.” He has been given to understand that they and their descendants will eventually be given the rule of the world, that, in a sense, it was created for them. Yet, in the vast emptiness of the ocean, he can’t help wondering: “But all its millions of years in the unpeopled past, all its uncounted miles of laughing water in the lonely present...did they exist solely for that?”³⁶⁴ Ransom realizes that he cannot hope to reduce the significance of the vast world to the simple service of humanity, and that realization troubles him as “The diffused meaning, the inscrutable character, which had been both Tellus and Perelandra since they split off from the Sun, and which would be, in one sense, displaced by the advent of imperial man, yet in some other sense, not displaced at all, enfolded him on every side and caught him into itself.”³⁶⁵ His own anthropomorphic ideas about humanity’s place in the divine order begin to crumble, and so does the religion that is intertwined with them.

The second experience, which builds on the doubts engendered in the traveler by the first, is his encounter with a strangely humanoid aquatic being. As he is riding along on his marine steed, Ransom is startled when he “found himself staring into something like a human face,” which is neither entirely alien nor entirely familiar.³⁶⁶ Once again, the traveler is troubled by something that does not fit into his frame of reference, and he realizes that ‘man and merman’ are

³⁶³ Lewis, 135.

³⁶⁴ Lewis, 136.

³⁶⁵ Lewis, 136.

³⁶⁶ Lewis, 137.

“wholly irrelevant to the other. They met as the branches of different trees meet when the wind brings them together.”³⁶⁷ It does not even occur to Ransom to try to make contact with the creature as he had with all manner of beasts on Perelandra because “They did not seem to be the natural subjects of man as the other creature were. He got the impression that they simply shared a planet with him as sheep and horses share a field, each species ignoring the other.”³⁶⁸ Over the course of his journey across the sea and through exposure to these beings that have nothing to do with humanity, Ransom slowly comes to doubt that “imperial man” warrants or could even sustain any type of centrality in the scheme of creation.

These encounters with the otherness of the universe leave Ransom troubled by his solitude, a solitude that he describes as “haunted: but not by an anthropomorphic Deity, rather by the wholly inscrutable to which man and his life remained eternally irrelevant.”³⁶⁹ In fact, the modern nightmare of space, banished with his first journey, the dream with its vast distances and its complete inhospitality to humanity, along with all its implications for the human imagination, comes rushing back upon the cosmic pilgrim at this point. What he calls “The Empirical Bogey,” crashes in on him, and he finds himself haunted, not by solitude alone, but by “the great myth of our century with its gases and galaxies, its light years and evolutions, its nightmare perspectives of simple arithmetic in which everything that can possibly hold significance for the mind becomes the mere by-product of essential disorder.”³⁷⁰ As Downing describes this sudden crisis of faith, “The erudite Ransom has been reasonably well fortified against scientific naturalism, but given that he has always assumed the centrality of man in the divine scheme of creation, the recognition that so much of the natural universe is irrelevant to humanity begins to

³⁶⁷ Lewis, 138.

³⁶⁸ Lewis, 138.

³⁶⁹ Lewis, 140.

³⁷⁰ Lewis, 140.

erode the pillars of his faith.”³⁷¹ Ransom’s perspective is so warped at this point that this encounter with the otherness of the universe, which had previously brought him into contact with the numinous and driven him to God, instead saps his hopes and corrupts his understanding of his experiences as thoroughly as his Wellsian education once had.

Thus, Ransom begins his dark adventure in the underworld with his perceptions colored by these doubts. Downing goes on to say that “already suspicious of the anthropomorphic character of his beliefs, and soon to be exposed to the vast indifferent core of the planet, Ransom comes to wonder whether his conception of God encompasses anything more than the superficialities of the human condition and the universe we inhabit.”³⁷² The seemingly infernal nature of the setting he encounters reinforces these doubts and drives home ever more how much of an alien he is in the vast majority of the universe, represented in microcosm in the inhospitable world of those seemingly interminable caverns. Yet, though Schwartz recognizes the spiritual and ideological significance of Ransom’s underworld journey, he does not notice the reversal that consumes the realm once the protagonist has broken free of his misperceptions. The naturalistic scales fall from Ransom’s eyes when he destroys the Un-Man and faces the formerly monstrous beetle-creature, and accepting it as a being that, though irrelevant to him, has its own purpose and value. In that scene, the underworld ceases to represent a frightful experience of otherness and begins to move towards a more joyful form of wonder that has its roots in Ransom’s discovery of a cosmic hierarchy in which humanity is not the center.

³⁷¹ Schwartz, 81.

³⁷² Schwartz, 82.

4.4 Proper Wonder and the Great Dance

This lesson in the cosmic hierarchy will be reinforced and dramatically expanded by Ransom's participation in the Great Dance, but his education beneath the surface is not yet complete. After decentering humanity from the cosmic order, the recognition of their irrelevance to parts of creation, instead of haunting Ransom, comes to be another mystery and a source of wonder in a journey already full of both. Despite being exhausted, injured, and shaken by his ordeal, the pilgrim finds himself enraptured by surroundings, that though alien, are still beautiful or sublime in grand measure. Like the jewel and fire-filled realm of Bism, Ransom stumbles through an area of blinding brilliance, filled with precious stones and other marvels as he makes his way through "great halls still dimly illuminated and full of unknown mineral wealth that sparkled and danced in the light and mocked his eyes as if he were exploring a hall of mirrors by the help of a pocket torch."³⁷³ The interminable darkness of the underworld is broken, this time not by a river of fire, with its infernal connotations, but by a garden of jewels. While the image is not as developed as it is in the later Narnian story, the motif is still recognizable, and the positively apocalyptic replaces the negatively apocalyptic. The jewels, representing an imperishable and shining realm, are, just like Bism, nonetheless, representative of both the beauty and the inaccessibility of the underground realm.

Notably, one of the mysterious wonders Ransom witnesses is a pair of massive thrones, built not for humanity, but for some other beings, creatures to which human existence is as irrelevant as it is to the mermen and sea birds of the surface. He discovers these marvels in "a vast cathedral space which was more like the work of art than that of Nature, with two great thrones at one end and chairs on either hand too large for human occupants."³⁷⁴ The traveler is

³⁷³ Lewis, 157.

³⁷⁴ Lewis, 157.

not sure that this sight is not the result of his delirium, but whether real or imagined, its impact on his understanding of the universe is profound. His growing comprehension of this Lewisian spin on the Principle of Plenitude is solidified by another marvel that seems to be related to those mysterious thrones. Staring down into a vast chasm, Ransom observes as “four of the great earth-beetles, dwarfed by distance to the size of gnats, and crawling two by two, came slowly into sight. And they were drawing behind them a flat car, and on the car, upright, unshaken, stood a mantled form, huge and still and slender.”³⁷⁵

The earthman is quite impressed with this strange creature which, wholly unaware of him and “driving its strange team [...] passed on with insufferable majesty and went out of sight,” continuing the pattern of benign neglect established by the merman and cave-beetle.³⁷⁶ Ransom finds himself thinking of the pagan tradition of local gods, realizing intuitively that this creature was as at home underground as he himself was out of place. As he ruminates on the chthonic being, he finally arrives at the truth to which each of these experiences has been leading him. He declares, “Assuredly the inside of this world was not for man. But it was for something.”³⁷⁷ As his underground education in the ordering of the universe continues, Ransom recognizes his own, and humanity’s, inferiority to these beings in their own sphere. He reasons that even though the “swathed form in its chariot, was no doubt his fellow creature. It did not follow that they were equals or had an equal right in the under-land.”³⁷⁸ Through this experience, the pilgrim begins to comprehend the lessons finalized in the Great Dance. He has discovered that humanity’s centrality to creation is purely relative, depending on his perspective, and he has learned that the irrelevance of parts of creation to humans means only that they were not created

³⁷⁵ Lewis, 158.

³⁷⁶ Lewis, 158.

³⁷⁷ Lewis, 157-8.

³⁷⁸ Lewis, 158.

for them, not that they were not created for some other purpose. This realization calls the imperial program of human colonization into question, both on and off of the Earth, emphasizing as it does the relative worth of different parts of creation within their different spheres. Yet, Ransom is still unable to reconcile these revelations to his anthropomorphic preconceptions of the divine order.

As he confesses when he has finally meets the King, “I am full of doubts and ignorance,” because he is still troubled by the revelation that humanity is not central to the cosmic order, that as he puts it, the Incarnation on Earth for the sake of humankind is not “the central happening of all that happens.”³⁷⁹ This seems to fly in the face of his faith. Following the King’s proclamations about the grand future of his world and his race, the earthman summarizes the sources of his crisis of anthropomorphic faith by saying “I do not even see how your world can rightly be called yours. You were made yesterday and it is from of old. The most of it is water where you cannot live. And what of the things beneath its crust? And of the great spaces with no world at all?”³⁸⁰ He fears that the only other option is that of the “enemy’s talk,” “which thrusts my world and my race into a remote corner and gives me a universe, with no centre at all, but millions of worlds that lead nowhere or (what is worse) to more and more worlds for ever.”³⁸¹ This is the “Empirical Bogey,” which had crept into his thoughts and which he, and Lewis, see as overshadowing the modern world, the mere specter of scope, the vastness of the universe, feared and inspiring awe for the simple sake of that very vastness.

Despite his earlier rejection, even contempt, of that naturalistic view, Ransom finds himself wondering if indeed “the enemy’s” message of materialistic nihilism is to be dismissed

³⁷⁹ Lewis, 183.

³⁸⁰ Lewis, 183.

³⁸¹ Lewis, 183.

so casually “when He says that all is without plan or meaning.”³⁸² The earthman realizes that all of his attempts to find a pattern in the diversity of creation have met with abject failure, and he confesses that “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.”³⁸³ Lewis captures the modernistic anxiety about grand narratives and the impact of knowledge about the scope and complexity of the universe, but he also attempts to assuage his hero, as well as his audience, in those doubts. Although the King proves unequal to the task of making sense of this confusing search for a center, he calls on the eldila, Perelandra and Malacandra, who attempt to explain the mystery for their human charges.

With the unseating of the great shadow of humanity from the throne of the universe and the acceptance of man’s paradoxical position as both central and peripheral, like all of creation, Ransom begins to put the final nail in the coffin of his belief in the Great Myth, the “scientism,” which, realized in contemporary science fiction, saw man striding from star to star in cosmic imperialism. With humanity’s irrelevance to the cosmic order finally established, all of the arguments for, as Weston put it in the first novel, marching on, “step by step, superseding, where necessary, the lower forms of life that we find, claiming planet after planet, system after system,” are finally silenced for Ransom, and with them, the arguments for the more terrestrial forms of imperialism which were some of Lewis’s primary targets in the Space Trilogy.³⁸⁴³⁸⁵

In this experience Ransom transcends the lessons he had previously learned about perspective and wonder. He had come to understand that the difference of his fellow rational

³⁸² Lewis, 183.

³⁸³ Lewis, 183.

³⁸⁴ Lewis, *Silent*, 136

³⁸⁵ Schwartz, 6.

creatures as a result of his own perspective, and he had recognized the glory of that difference as part of the *diversitas* of the divine order, a cause for joy and not for fear. Now he must learn that lesson on a grand scale and recognize that even in his judgement of the universe itself, he must be aware of his own perspective and fight against the tendency to make “man the measure of all things.” He must replace his confused and frightened wonder response to the bewildering diversity of creation with the joyful, admiring wonder embodied in the childlike marveling of the King and Queen.

What follows is a Hymn of Praise to the creator and a cosmic vision that together serve to finally resolve Ransom’s doubts and provide the proper context for the anti-anthropomorphic experiences he has had. These final pages are thoroughly medieval in character, as Lewis employs the common medieval image of the “Great Dance” to conceptualize the complex hierarchical relationships of creation in poetic form. Medieval thinkers often visualized the orderly relationships of the heavenly spheres as an intricate dance, and a common representation of the *primum mobile* was of a young dancer playing a tambourine.³⁸⁶ Lewis always conceived of the medieval concept in contrast to modern visions of the cosmos, and he described it in contrast to the mechanistic view supplied by modern science, saying that for the medieval mind, the movements of the heavens “are to be conceived not as those of a machine or even an army, but rather a dance, a festival, a symphony, a ritual, a carnival, or all of these in one.”³⁸⁷ Lewis saw the “Great Dance” as a key component of his “Medieval Model.”

For him, the symbols and the language of medieval cosmology “continually suggests a sort of continuity between merely physical events and our most spiritual aspirations,” and in his

³⁸⁶ Downing, 73.

³⁸⁷ C. S. Lewis, "Imagination and Thought in the Middle Ages," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41-63,60.

use of the “Great Dance” in his Space Trilogy, Lewis attempts to reinvest “space” with the spiritual significance that he believed it had lost in its modern mythic shape.³⁸⁸ It was this spiritual dimension that serves as an answer to the “Empirical Bogey,” that fear of emptiness and meaninglessness that Ransom faces during his adventures on Perelandra. As David Downing points out, this vision with its revelation about interconnectedness and divine complexity “serves as a kind of liturgical answer to the angst produced by positivism, the sense that humans inhabit a vast, dead universe that mocks all philosophy, all desire for justice, all yearning for some larger meaning.”³⁸⁹ Through his “transfiguration” of underworld motifs Lewis does the same with the opposite extremes of creation, investing every level of the universe with a spiritual value that was intended of its utility for humanity.

In Lewis’s use of the image of the Great Dance, he is once again reworking ancient and medieval sources to reach his modern audience, as Daigle-Williamson recognizes his adaptation of Plato, Plotinus, and Dante, combining the latter’s use of the dance as a form of praising God with his predecessors’ use of the motif in relation to the movement of the spheres and the whole of creation.³⁹⁰ Daigle-Williamson also observes that Ransom’s vision employs many of the details of Dante’s pilgrim’s own journey among the heavens. Yet, for Lewis the motifs serve a slightly different purpose than his predecessors. In *Perelandra*, these sections reinforce the ideas of a creation bursting with plenty and populated at every level, while also continuing the decentering of Earth and humanity. Lewis’s description of the Dance establishes the unity of creation with the divine, even in all of its mind-boggling diversity, but he places much more emphasis than Dante on the equal weight and significance of all elements of creation, from the

³⁸⁸ Lewis, *Discarded*, 94.

³⁸⁹ Downing, 73.

³⁹⁰ Daigle-Williamson, 94.

highest to the lowest. Daigle-Williamson argues that, while “Both heavenly visions express a unity-in-diversity of all creation,” Dante’s version focuses on unity, while Ransom’s focus is on diversity, and that Lewis actually “structure’s Ransom’s vision in a contrapuntal fashion to the one in the *Paradiso*.”³⁹¹ This serves as an effective coda to Ransom’s adventures, which have themselves emphasized the diversity of creation by manipulating the reader’s expectations about the deep spaces he explored. Ransom’s encounters with the ultimate alien realms continued the process of reeducating wonder responses begun on *Malacandra* and result in a hero who can finally respond appropriately to the universe.

The Hymn that sets the stage for the vision of the Dance takes the form of a shared discourse of adulation and explanation, itself blending the voices of all creatures present in an illustration of its message of unity and shared significance. One voice, possibly that of an eldil, *Perelandran*, or even that of Ransom himself, declares that he has been asking the wrong question, as it is not a matter of one thing created for the sake of another:

Though men or angels rule them, the worlds are for themselves. The waters you have not floated on, the fruits you have not plucked, the caves into which you have not descended and the fire through which your bodies cannot pass, do not await your coming to put on perfection, though they will obey you when you come. [...] 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.³⁹²

The voices share that there are wonders in every part of creation, many of which will never be seen by human eyes, but they exist nonetheless, and do so for their own purposes. Even the very dust of the universe, on the worlds and floating between the stars, shares the spotlight with humanity. The voices declare that “Each grain is at the centre. The Dust is at the centre. The Worlds are at the centre. The beasts are at the centre. The ancient peoples are there. The race

³⁹¹ Daigle-Williamson, 95.

³⁹² Lewis, *Perelandra*, 185.

that sinned is there. Tor and Tindril are there. The gods are there also.”³⁹³ It is a paradoxical vision where everything and nothing in creation is at the center of the pattern and at the top of its hierarchical structure, the element for which all else was made. This scene captures Lewis’s view that the hierarchical order of creation is more complex and fluid than a modern understanding would allow. In his later theological work, *Miracles*, he once again employed his favorite symbol for such relationships, the dance, writing that the order of the cosmos is not a simple pyramid, but rather more like a dance where the figures change places and significance through its course. As he describes it, “The partner who bows to Man in one movement of the dance receives Man’s reverences in another.”³⁹⁴ In the unity of expression and vision in this hymn, Ransom finally escapes the bonds of his own perceptual sense of wonder and can marvel with joy at, not only the *diversitas* of the universe, but also the strange reality of his and humanity’s paradoxical place within it.

This paradox is possible because the center is dependent, not on the importance of individual elements of creation, but on the constant and persistent presence of God in each of those elements. As the voices declare in the Hymn, “Where Maleldil is, there is the centre. He is in every place. Not some of Him in one place and some in another, but in each place the whole Maleldil, even in the smallness beyond thought.”³⁹⁵ Ransom finally finds this explanation borne out by his vision of the Great Dance, wherein he sees this constant sharing of significance by all elements of creation brought to life in a striking passage:

It seemed to be woven out of the intertwining undulation of many cords or bands of light, leaping over and under one another and mutually embraced in arabesques and flower-like subtleties. Each figure as he looked at it became the mater-figure or focus of the whole spectacle, by means of which his eye disentangled all else and brought it into unity—only to be itself entangled when he looked to what he

³⁹³ Lewis, 185.

³⁹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 128.

³⁹⁵ Lewis, *Perelandra*, 185.

had taken for mere marginal decorations and found that there also the same hegemony was claimed, and the claim made good...³⁹⁶

In this vision, Lewis is once again adapting and updating medieval philosophy. Not only is he employing the medieval symbol of the Great Dance as the controlling image, but he is also using medieval theology to address the modern fears about a cold and mechanistic universe. Schwartz recognizes that Lewis is drawing on Christian Neoplatonism in these passages, specifically on the works of the 15th century bishop, Nicolas of Cusa, about whom Lewis had almost written a doctoral thesis. Schwartz argues that Nicholas's works addressed a similar problem to that which torments Ransom, and Lewis adapts his conception of "the transcendent God who is immanent in each element of the universe" as a solution and a direct response to the mechanistic view of the universe that results from positivism.³⁹⁷ Thus, Lewis combines a medieval, spiritualized view of the cosmos with the modern view of a universe that is largely alien and irrelevant to humanity, making its very strangeness part of its spiritual power.³⁹⁸

Although this process of reeducation is more carefully explored and explicated in *Perelandra*, both it and the later Narnian novel present a similar effect as their protagonists come to understand their seemingly infernal surroundings with greater clarity. It is revealed to them that even the elements of creation that seem farthest from the divine are still part of the cosmic order. From the top to the bottom, every aspect of the universe has its role, its station in the Great Dance, and every piece of creation contributes to the divine beauty of the whole. In an inversion of Dante's Hell, Lewis rejects the idea that lower positions on the hierarchy are ugly or necessarily morally inferior. Instead, they are beautiful for their purpose, even if they are alien to humanity. Thus, the glittering, jewel-covered plains of the deepest world in Narnia are an

³⁹⁶ Lewis, 187.

³⁹⁷ Schwartz, 85.

³⁹⁸ Schwartz, 85.

inhospitable realm for the Narnians themselves, though it is the proper place of the deep gnomes and salamanders who thrive there. In the same way, the cold, lightless caverns of Perelandra, the bones of the planet, are hostile territory for Ransom, but they are home to creatures that seem to serve some vast and necessary purpose that is beyond his ken. Even in the seeming chaos and horror at a world's core, Lewis's imagined underworlds reveal a beauty and a plan, perfectly in step with the divine order and the Great Dance. Just as the seemingly wasted and dead realm between the stars is full of life and beauty, so are the deep places of the worlds. It is the ultimate lesson in positive wonder.

Conclusion

Just as Ransom learns to love the bewildering yet transcendent diversity of the universe, so the reader who approaches the Space Trilogy looking for the impact of Lewis's "medieval imagination" will find it easier to appreciate these strange, yet fascinating books. The medieval sense of wonder that pervades them was a unique response to the fiction and philosophy that preceded them, and that response, embodied in the spiritual quests traced through the Trilogy, remains a valuable one today. In his inaugural address at Cambridge, Lewis referred to himself as a dinosaur because of his ability to read "Old Western" literature as a native, but he also warned his students to take advantage of the unique situation of having a genuine thunder lizard as a guide to the past while they could because "there are not going to be many more dinosaurs." Yet, through his Space Trilogy Lewis has given the lie to his own prediction. Every year his work provides a window into the past, a bridge across that gulf, that allows travel and commerce and brings closer together what is in danger of drifting irreconcilably further apart. His efforts have created generations of readers that are familiar with the green hills of that distant temporal country, who if not fluent, can at least recognize the tongue of those bygone days. The Space Trilogy has helped to spark "medieval imaginations" in generations of readers, introducing them to the beauty of his beloved Medieval Model of the cosmos, the concept of the spiritual quest, the ambiguous quality of the medieval monster, and open, joyful experience of wonder that demands nothing of its object. With any luck, there may yet be many more dinosaurs in the years to come.

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