



Unearthing the Medieval Infrastructure of the Ransom Series (2) : Perelandra

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Unearthing the Medieval Infrastructure of the Ransom Series (2) —*Perelandra*

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I. Introduction

The Six Years' War, as J.R.R. Tolkien referred to *the Second German War*, raged on the Continent from 1939 to 1945. (1) Ideas became words; words became actions; actions led ultimately to the physical conflict of Good and Evil.

In such a conflict the power of words manifests itself as a determining factor in the outcome of events. The King's Speech (1939), delivered by King George VI, rallied the British people to the cause of the war. Churchill's "Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat" speech (1940) galvanized their resolve. Throughout the war the voice of C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), heard on the radio, lent a measure of comfort to soldiers on the field. In times of trouble it is, more often than not, the *human voice* that sees us through to the light at the end of the dark tunnel.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, however, seldom casts so clear a shadow upon humankind. Even before the War in Europe began, the forces of Evil were hard at work on the minds of men in more ways than one. In the eyes of C.S. Lewis, the writings of Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950), J.B.S. Haldane (1892–1964), and H.G. Wells (1866–1946) posed a serious threat of ingraining the concept of "Evolutionism" in the popular imagination, a critical first step towards its becoming accepted as "fact."

To counter such a threat, Lewis began a series of "scientifiction" novels, in which his hero journeys at first to Mars, where he encounters Good, then to Venus, where he combats Evil. In the final volume, Lewis's hero turns back the forces of Evil on earth, overturning the vision (set forth by Haldane) that humans may one day evolve into *Übermensch*, the latest variation of the serpent's temptation to Eve: "Ye shall be as gods."

For all his dabbling in science fiction, that is, space travel, anti-gravitational devices, weird creatures, and so on, Lewis remains at heart a medievalist. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the medieval underpinnings of *Perelandra* (1942), the second volume in the series of Ransom stories, sometimes called the *Space Trilogy*.

2. Foreground

Oxford biochemist J.B.S. Haldane championed the cause of science against the humanities and the churches. In *Possible Worlds* (1927), Haldane argued in favor of scientific research on animals. An essay in this book called “Man’s Destiny” rhapsodizes about the possibility of our species conquering the universe. “There is no theoretical limit to man’s material progress,” he writes, “but the subjection to complete conscious control of every atom and every quantum of radiation in the universe” (*Possible Worlds*, p.305).

Olaf Stapledon, in *Last and First Men* (1930), concocted a story of cloud-creatures from Mars who invaded earth and developed a new species of laboratory humans, all brains and hands. One of these creatures explains, two billion years later, that the transcendent purpose of going from planet to planet was for the Scattering of the Seed, which according to Stapledon was everyone’s supreme religious duty.

H.G. Wells, in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901), portrayed a single-minded physicist named Cavor who built a spaceship in his backyard, and who together with a younger man set out to find interplanetary gold. Their spaceship made use of “Cavorite,” an anti-gravitational material, to propel it through space. On the moon, they described life on earth to the Grand Lunar, who was stricken with amazement. Lewis acknowledges his debt to Wells: *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) uses exactly the same devices for its basic plot. Philosophically, however, the Ransom series rejects the beliefs of Wells as effectively as Cavorite repels gravity.

Lewis believed the danger of “Evolutionism” to be real. “What set me about writing the book [*Out of the Silent Planet*] was the discovery that a pupil of mine took all that dream of interplanetary colonisation [sic] 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...”(2) That is to say, they nurtured a “scientific” hope of defeating death.

While Lewis’s arguments focus on debunking the myths of Wells, Stapledon, and Haldane, his method emanates from David Lindsay’s (1876–1945) *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). This “theologized” science fiction-fantasy novel explores the nature of Good and Evil and their relationship with existence. The protagonist sets off in a crystal spaceship, falls asleep, and awakes to find himself alone on the planet. The lands that he visits represent the philosophical systems or states of mind that he must pass on his search for the meaning of life. Lewis wrote to his friend Ruth Pitter, “From Lindsay I first learned what other planets in fiction are really good for; for spiritual adventures... My debt to him is very great.”(3)

Thus armed with the device of the cosmic voyage as spiritual pilgrimage, Lewis wrote a series of adventures with Dr. Elwin Ransom as the protagonist. The first stop along the way is Malacandra (Mars). There, Ransom discovers three races of intelligent beings who live together in utopian

harmony. The ruling spirit of this planet, the *Oyarsa*, listens with interest as Ransom describes life on earth, which is ruled by a “bent” spirit. The antagonist Edward Weston then spells out the gospel of “Evolutionism” in the form of a speech, in broken Old Solar (interpreted by Ransom), foolishly delivered to the *Oyarsa*, who sends him packing. He gives Ransom a slap on the wrist for being a little fearful (who wouldn’t be, having been forcibly abducted, waking to find oneself aboard a spaceship to Mars?), and sends them back to earth.

In the second book, Ransom travels to Perelandra (Venus) on a mission to prevent the forces of Evil from “bending” that planet’s first king and queen.

3. Background

Lewis finished writing *A Preface to Paradise Lost* in 1942. By that time, the evil that was merely a threat while he was writing *Out of the Silent Planet* had come knocking at his doorstep (David Lindsay never recovered from the psychological shock of the bomb that damaged his house in Brighton). As Lewis delved into the complexities of Milton’s epic, a fire burned within him over the growing evils of “Westonism.” What better way to address these issues than to write another “supposal,” balancing Ransom’s previous adventure to Mars, where he encountered pure Good, with an adventure to the feminine planet Venus, where he would encounter pure Evil?

What is *Good*? What is *Evil*? In *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis outlines Milton’s adherence to the theology of Saint Augustine (354–430 AD). “Milton’s version of the Fall story is substantially that of St Augustine, which is that of the Church as a whole,” he writes. “By studying this version we shall learn what the story meant in general to Milton and to his contemporaries” (*Preface*, p.66). I will outline these points below, saving comments for later.

- 1) God created all things good. Bad denotes privation of Good.
- 2) “Bad” things are only good things that have been perverted.
- 3) Good can exist without evil, but evil cannot exist without good. Good and bad angels have the same nature—they are happy with God, but they are miserable without Him.
- 4) God foreknows that some men will voluntarily make themselves bad.
- 5) If there had been no Fall, the human race would have been promoted to angelic status.
- 6) Satan attacked Eve because she was more credulous.
- 7) Adam yielded because of his social bond to Eve.
- 8) The Fall *consisted* in disobedience.
The apple was only a prop, meant to instill obedience.
- 9) The Fall resulted *from* pride (“Pride goeth before a fall”).
- 10) The Fall resulted *in* man’s loss of authority over his inferiors, including his own body.

11) Disobedience of man's organism to man is evident in current sexuality, but would not have been so if not for the Fall.

(*Preface to Paradise Lost*, pp.66–70)

Lewis concludes his comparison of Milton's theology with that of Saint Augustine with a little sermon. "What is the Fall?" he asks. "The Fall is simply and solely Disobedience—doing what you have been told not to do: and it results from Pride—from being too big for your boots, forgetting your place, thinking that you are God.... this Milton states in the very first line of the first Book, this all his characters reiterate and vary from every possible point of view throughout the poem as if it were the subject of a fugue.... Readers... must just accept Milton's doctrine of obedience as they accept the inexplicable prohibitions in *Lohengrin*, *Cinderella*, or *Cupid and Psyche*. It is, after all, the commonest of themes; even Peter Rabbit came to grief because he *would* go into Mr. McGregor's garden" (*Preface*, pp.71–2).

Lewis devotes an entire chapter of his *Preface* to the concept of Hierarchy, which he traces back to Aristotle. He writes that "the Hierarchical idea is not merely stuck on to his [Milton's] poem at points where doctrine demands it: it is the indwelling life of the whole work, it foams or burgeons out of it at every moment... He pictures the life of beatitude as one of order—an intricate dance, so intricate that it seems irregular precisely when its regularity is most elaborate... He delights in the ceremonious interchange of unequal courtesies, with condescension (a beautiful word which we have spoiled) on the one side and reverence on the other" (*Preface*, p.79). In terms of the *Space Trilogy*, *hnau* must submit to *eldila*, *eldila* to *Oyarsa*, *Oyarsa* to Maleldil.

Lewis continues: "The significance of all this seems to me very plain. This is not the writing of a man who embraces the Hierarchical principle with reluctance, but rather of a man enchanted by it... Those to whom this conception is meaningless should not waste their time trying to enjoy Milton. For this is perhaps the central paradox of his vision. Discipline, while the world is yet unfallen, exists for the sake of what seems its very opposite—for freedom, almost for extravagance. The pattern hidden deep in the dance, hidden so deep that shallow spectators cannot see it, alone gives beauty to the wild, free gestures that fill it, just as the decasyllabic norm gives beauty to all the licenses and variations of the poet's verse... The heavenly frolic arises from an orchestra which is in tune; the rules of courtesy make perfect ease and freedom possible between those who obey them. Without sin, the universe is a Solemn Game: and there is no good game without rules... Unless we bear this in mind we shall not understand either *Comus* or *Paradise Lost*, either the *Faerie Queene* or the *Arcadia*, or the *Divine Comedy* itself. We shall be in constant danger of supposing that the poet was inculcating a rule when in fact he was enamoured of a perfection" (*Preface*, pp.80–81).

Upon this rock, Lewis built the foundation of *Perelandra*. The story stems from a supposal of what would have happened had the serpent's temptation of Eve been rebuffed. The serpent,

however, takes the form of Weston, Ransom's nemesis in *Out of the Silent Planet*. The arguments are no longer those of prehistoric Eden, but of modern (1940s) Europe. The theology is Augustinian. The genre is "scientifiction," an odd portmanteau word meaning "scientific fiction," an alloy, as J.R.R. Tolkien puts it, of allegory and satire. The setting shifts from rural England to pristine Venus. The imaginative landscape is pure C.S. Lewis.

4. Natvilcius

In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Elwin Ransom had a series of adventures set apart by philosophical conversation—medieval pageant played out across a heraldic landscape. This novel began with Ransom, the "Pedestrian," a Chestertonian character on a walking tour of England, looking for a place to spend a rainy night. His troubles began when a Wellsian scientist and his gold-digging associate decided to abduct him, instead of the village idiot, to sacrifice to the ruling spirit of Mars.

Perelandra begins with Lewis himself as a fictional character, an insertion similar to those of Chaucer and Langland, though the fictional Lewis serves only as a narrator, not part of the actual story. (The fictional Lewis, it will be recalled, was asked by Ransom to write the story of *Out of the Silent Planet*.) This "Lewis" has come to Worcester in response to Ransom's wire: "Come down Thursday if possible. Business." The "gloomy five o'clock sky" of the autumn afternoon aptly describes his mood. Apprehensive about this rendezvous, Lewis takes the three-mile walk to Ransom's cottage. What is he getting himself into?

Alone with his thoughts, which range from unease to fear to irritation at himself for leaving his rucksack on the train, Lewis ruminates on the nature of "deep heaven," and the nature of eldils, Ransom's word for angels. He philosophizes on the nature of Good and Evil. Arriving at Ransom's cottage he finds the door open, but no one is there. He nearly stumbles on a translucent white coffin in the middle of the room. Then he hears Ransom's name pronounced, not by a voice, but by something else.

But it was, if you understand me, inorganic. We feel the difference between animal voices (including those of the human animal) and all other noises pretty clearly, I fancy, though it is hard to define.... this was more as if rock or crystal or light had spoken of itself. And it went through me from chest to groin like the thrill that goes through you when you think you have lost your hold while climbing a cliff.

I had no doubt at all that I was seeing an eldil, and little doubt that I was seeing the archon of Mars, the Oyarsa of Malacandra. And now that the thing had happened I was no longer in condition of abject panic. My sensations were, it is true, in some ways very unpleasant. The fact that it was quite obviously not organic—the knowledge that intelligence was somehow located

in this homogeneous cylinder of light but not related to it as our consciousness is related to our brains and nerves—was profoundly disturbing. The response which we ordinarily make to a living creature and that which we make to an inanimate object were here both equally inappropriate (*Perelandra*, pp.16–17).

To this second paragraph “Lewis” adds a footnote: “In the text I naturally keep to what I thought and felt at the time, since this alone is first-hand evidence: but there is obviously room for much further speculation about the form in which *eldila* appear to our senses. The only serious considerations of the problem so far are to be sought in the early seventeenth century. As a starting point for future investigation I recommend the following from Natvilcius (*De Aethero at aerio Corpore*, Basel.1627,II. Xii); [The Latin “original” is given, followed by his own translation:] (It appears that the homogeneous flame perceived by our senses is not the body, properly so called, of an angel or daemon, but rather either the sensorium of that body or the surface of a body which exists after a manner beyond our conception in the celestial frame of special references.) By the ‘celestial frame of references’ I take him to mean what we should now call ‘multi-dimensional space.’ Not, of course, that Natvilcius knew anything about multi-dimensional geometry, but that he had reached empirically what mathematics has since reached on theoretical grounds.”

Natvilcius knew nothing about multi-dimensional geometry because he did not exist. Sometimes when Lewis wrote anonymously, he used the letters “N.W.,” short for *Nat Whilk*, an Old English term for “I know not whom.” Natvilcius is the Latinized form of *Nat Whilk*. (Lewis’s friend and colleague J.R.R. Tolkien, in his oblique criticism of the Ransom Series entitled “The Notion Club Papers,” referred to himself as Nicholas Guildford, a name derived from *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a debate in verse written between 1189 and 1216.) (4) In *Perelandra*, Lewis is pulling the wool over our eyes.

We all enjoy a bit of impishness now and then; it’s what makes life fun. This bit of impishness on the part of C.S. Lewis has probably perplexed many a reader who did not know what sort of mischief he was up to. (5) How many scholars have dwelt on who Natvilcius was (or wasn’t), when in fact they should have been focusing on what he said, which is of prime importance to understanding the medieval infrastructure of *Perelandra*!

In the second chapter of *Perelandra*, Ransom arrives and tells “Lewis” that he has been chosen by the Oyarsa of Malacandra (Mars) to journey to Perelandra (Venus), on some as yet undisclosed mission. After some discussion, which amounts to a summary of *Out of the Silent Planet*, “Lewis” helps Ransom carry the crystal casket into the front yard. Ransom lies down in it and gets ready for his next adventure. “Lewis” narrates:

With feelings that have since often returned to me in nightmare I fastened the cold lid down on

top of the living man and stood back. Next moment I was alone. I didn't see how it went. I went back indoors and was sick. A few hours later I shut up the cottage and returned to Oxford.

Then the months went past and grew to a year and a little more than a year, and we had raids and bad news and hopes deferred and all the earth became full of darkness and cruel habitations, till the night when Oyarsa came to me again. After that there was a journey in haste for Humphrey [Tolkien's "Dolbear"] and me... and finally the moment when we stood in clear early sunlight in the little wilderness of deep weeds which Ransom's garden had now become and saw a black speck against the sunrise and then, almost silently, the casket had glided down between us. We flung ourselves upon it and had the lid off in about a minute and a half (*Perelandra*, pp.26–7).

These first two chapters serve as both prologue and epilogue to Ransom's story, which he proceeds to tell them, but not before Dr. Humphrey attends to an open wound on Ransom's heel and remarks on the beauty of a Perelandran flower (one of the flowers used to insulate the casket during the return trip): "It makes an English violet seem like a coarse weed" (p.27).

5. The Floating Islands of Perelandra

If a single flower delights one so, how much more was Ransom's delight at being plunged into the fresh-water seas of Perelandra? The descriptive talents of C.S. Lewis shine here as brightly as anywhere in literature. One might go so far as to dub him a virtual landscape painter, for his descriptions have a painterly quality that defies any other definition. He writes of "strange heraldically coloured tree[s] loaded with yellow fruits and silver leaves. Round the base of the indigo stem was coiled a small dragon covered with scales of red gold. He recognised the garden of the Hesperides at once" (*Perelandra*, p.40).

After swimming for hours and hours, Ransom struggles onto a floating island, meets a Green Lady, and speaks to her. He learns that she is the queen of the planet, the first woman, the "Eve" of Perelandra, as it were. She is not allowed to spend the night on the Fixed Land, the "forbidden fruit" of Perelandra. Soon Weston lands in a spaceship (similar to the one he used on his trip to Mars) and pitches his tent on the Fixed Land. Weakened by his own philosophy, Weston invites the forces of Evil to possess him and becomes, in Ransom's terms, the "Un-man." The latter then begins a series of temptations, trying to get the Green Lady to spend the night on the Fixed Land. The ensuing conversation follows Book IX of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

6. The Great Conversation

In Milton's story, Eve is working alone in the garden (IX,479–488). In *Perelandra*, the king and queen are on separate (floating) islands. When and where they might meet seems to be of no concern to the Green Lady. Milton's serpent flatters Eve, who is amazed at its ability to speak. It tells her that eating the forbidden fruit gave it this ability (532–595). In *Perelandra*, Ransom is amazed at Weston's ability to speak Old Solar fluently (recall his broken speech to Oyarsa in *Out of the Silent Planet*). The Biblical account finds nothing surprising in a talking snake: "Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field..." (Genesis 3.1). In *Paradise*, the serpent leads Eve to the tree and asks whether everything is forbidden, or just this fruit? (644–655; Gen.3.2–3). In *Perelandra*, the Un-man begins with his first fallacy: doing something is forbidden, but *thinking about* doing it is not forbidden. The Green Lady asks what good that would do? He answers that wisdom (becoming "older") involves thinking about what *might be*, not about what *is* (Milton's tree [680] was the mother of science).

The Un-man then begins to drive a wedge between the Green Lady and her husband. The argument hinges on her first conversation with Ransom, in which she described her search for fruit as continually delighting in unexpected finds, rather than disappointment at not finding expected delights. Ransom concludes that dwelling on expected delights is the root of sin, a minor theme of the book. The Un-man tells her that in meeting *him* she has found an unexpected delight, so why wait for her husband to return? Why not learn wisdom so she can be "older" than the King, and he will love her *more*? This echoes *Paradise Lost*, where the serpent tells Eve that life will be more perfect; she should know evil in order to shun it; God will congratulate her for acting independently (690–700). However, the Green Lady wonders how her husband could love her more (here Lewis implies that "love" is a word like "agree" or "perfect," qualities that cannot be pushed beyond the 100% mark). The Un-man concludes his argument with a bit of flattery. He tells the Green Lady that women of his world (earth) always seek new good and see that it is good before men can understand it. They are "little Maleldils" (gods). Why not become as they are? (Gen.3.5).

The next day, the Un-man renews the assault, focusing on reasons for "polite" disobedience: his second fallacy. The main thrust of his argument is the principle of the Little Red Button, the one that reads, "DO NOT PUSH." Why put a button there, he reasons, if you are not allowed to push it? Why put the apple in the Garden of Eden? Why put the Fixed Land on Perelandra? He comes directly to the point: "It is for this that I came here, that you may have Death in abundance" (*Perelandra*, p.98). How could the Green Lady know what he was talking about? She could not so much as carry on a conversation with more than one person at a time. Not long into this argument, the Green Lady begins to wonder if the Un-man is so wise. "But if this concerns me so deeply," she asks, "why does He [Maleldil] put none of this into my mind? It is all coming from you, Stranger. There is no whisper,

even, of the Voice saying Yes to your words” (p.101). Ransom suggests that obedience exists solely for its own sake. When the Green Lady praises him, saying he is not as “young” (=“green”) as he appears, the Un-man breaks in: “I am older than he, and he dare not deny it.” From this point on, Ransom’s arguments become futile. The Un-man points out that the breaking of the commandment brought Maleldil to our world (earth), and “he dare not deny it” (p.103). Now Ransom is frustrated beyond his capacity. “How could Maleldil expect him to fight against this, to fight with every weapon taken from him, forbidden to lie and yet brought to places where truth seemed fatal!” (pp.103–104).

After several days of losing arguments, and several nights of losing sleep (the Un-man torments Ransom, calling his name all night), Ransom has had enough. An ordinary human cannot win a debate with a demon. Any exorcist can tell you that. But Ransom was no exorcist. And this was no ordinary demon; it was Lux-inferno, the light from hell. The only choice for Ransom was to destroy the body that the arch-demon possessed (it had already killed Weston, so he would not be committing murder). The fight is inconclusive, and the Un-man escapes on a sea-horse with Ransom in pursuit. The Un-man drags Ransom down into an undersea cave, bites his heel and lacerates his back. They climb back up through the mountain. Ransom finally casts the Un-man into a fiery pit.

7. The Great Chase

There is no such pursuit in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, nor in Genesis. Why should there be? In both versions the cause was already lost. “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat” (Gen.3.6). Herein lies the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 Jn.2.16). Milton continued his post-Edenic narrative, focusing on the lust of the flesh. Of necessity, Lewis breaks off the story of Genesis *cum Paradise Lost* when the temptation cannot be averted by debate. The quiet, cerebral setting of the Great Conversation turns into physical combat, adventure on the high seas and in subterranean caverns. Here Lewis turns to Dante Alighieri’s (1265–1321) *Divine Comedy* for his infrastructure.

In an essay entitled “Dante’s Similes,” Lewis writes: “Much of the strength of the [*Divine Comedy*] comes from the fact that it is performing a complex function which has since been split up and distributed among several different kinds of book. It is, first, a book of travel into regions which the audience could not reach but in whose existence they had a literal belief, and is thus strictly comparable to Jules Verne’s or H.G. Wells’s voyages to the Moon. It is, secondly, a poetic expression of the current philosophy of the age, and so comparable to *The Essay on Man* or *The Testament of Beauty*. It is, thirdly, a religious allegory like [that of] Bunyan, and fourthly a history of the poet like *The Prelude*”(6). *The Divine Comedy* is divided into three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and

Paradiso.

In *Purgatorio* the Fixed Land is the Mountain of Purgatory. Dante ascends the various terraces of the mountain, which represent the seven deadly sins. He passes through caves, climbs up the mountain, and comes outside at last to the Garden of Earthly Delights, with pleasant breezes and flowing streams. There Dante witnesses a masque, something like a Shakespearean play within a play (Canto XXIX). The procession consists of 24 elders, four six-winged animals (the four Gospels), a chariot bearing Beatrice, a Griffin, three circling women (Faith, Hope and Charity), two elders, four of humble aspect, and an old man who symbolizes the Book of Revelation.

In *Paradiso* we find the “hierarchy of gods, for aye rejoicing, dominations first, next then virtues, and powers the third. The next to whom are principedoms and archangels, with glad round to tread their festal ring; and the last the band angelical, disporting in their sphere. All, as they circle in their orders, look aloft, and downward with such sway prevail, that all with mutual impulse tend to God” (Canto XXVIII, Henry Francis Cary’s translation).

8. The Great Dance

Likewise in *Perelandra*, Ransom emerges from his ordeal in the cave and climbs through a garden paradise to the top of the mountain. At the summit, the Green Lady and her husband are crowned Queen and King of the planet. (Ransom explains that the Fixed Land was hitherto forbidden them because it was meant to be their throne.) Here the King, the Queen and Ransom (three of humble [i.e., mortal] aspect) are joined by the Oyarses of Perelandra and Malacandra (two elders), attended by four singing beasts. There ensues a “Great Dance” of twenty stanzas, followed by “a far vaster pattern in four dimensions” (p.188). The Great Dance lasts a year (Ransom must wait for the conjunction of Venus and Earth), after which our hero is packed aboard his crystal coffin (a type of “griffin-pulled chariot,” stretching the metaphor a little) and sent back to earth.

The Great Dance springs directly from Dante’s *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. In a letter to Arthur Greeves (1930), Lewis wrote, [*The Divine Comedy has*] “a complexity in language and thought ... [and] at the very same time a feeling of spacious gliding movement, like a slow dance, or like flying... I should describe it as a feeling more important than any poetry I have ever read.”(7)

In *Perelandra*, Lewis uses the Great Dance to express the concept of medieval hierarchy: “In the plan of the Great Dance plans without number interlock... each is equally at the centre and none are there by being equals, but some by giving place and some by receiving it, the small things by their smallness and the great by their greatness, and all the patterns linked and looped together by the unions of kneeling with a sceptered love” (p.186).

The Great Dance also summarizes the philosophical problem of free will discussed by Boethius (ca.474–525 A.D.) (8), describing the unchanging eternal present: “We speak not of when it will begin.

It has begun, from before always” (p.183).

Besides hierarchy and free will, the Great Dance touches on divine justice, the nature of salvation, the importance of the individual, and the interdependence of all things; in other words, the Grand Scheme of Things. Thus Lewis’s picture of a hierarchical world ordered by love offers the same hope that Dante, Milton, and countless other scholars integrated into their literary vision, a vision that Lewis terms the Medieval Model.

9. Conclusion

Looking back, we see that Lewis focused on five main themes in *Perelandra*. Picking up where he left off in *Out of the Silent Planet*, he voiced his concern about “Westonism,” that is, the notion of scientists ruthlessly exterminating inhabitants of other planets in the name of furthering the human race. Secondly, he explored the significance of free will in making choices, a topic dealt with in detail by Boethius. Of course, the main theme of the book is the Great Choice: a re-telling of the story of the Temptation and Fall of Man. Success in averting the Fall made Ransom the “savior” of the planet, removing the need for Maleldil to visit later in human form. Hence a fifth, more abstract theme, the speculation that myths on earth may be corrupted forms of spiritual realities that exist in purer forms in un-fallen worlds, a phenomenon that Lewis’s friend Owen Barfield (1898–1997) referred to as “ancient unities” (“old single meanings” which have broken down, over time, into seemingly disjoint parts).

Inherent in the idea of “Westonism,” as I mentioned in my previous paper, is the notion of the “manifest destiny” of the human race. This, of course, turns the Medieval Model on its ear, an inversion that particularly rankled Lewis, who wrote that the heart of all medieval scholarship was a longing to contribute to the Model: “Medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organiser, a codifier, a builder of systems”(The Discarded Image, p.10). Lewis described how the hierarchical pattern, left over from the philosophical, theological and literary traditions of the Middle Ages, permeated Milton’s thought, producing a similar hierarchical structure in *Paradise Lost* as was found in *The Divine Comedy*: “Everything links up with everything else; at once, not in flat equality, but in a hierarchical ladder”(Ibid., p.12).

As Lewis had recently finished his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, it is no surprise that he should address various issues that he raised while analyzing Milton’s story. Lewis’s main theme in *Perelandra* was not the Temptation and Fall, as was Milton’s, but the Temptation and “Stand” of Man. *Perelandra* is not tragedy; it is comedy (i.e., it has a happy ending). As such, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* offered the perfect stage upon which Lewis’s hero could play out the second and third acts of his drama. *Paradise Lost* established the tone for the temptation sequence. *Purgatorio* provided the backdrop for a medieval “progress,” a spiritual journey of purgation and purification through the

underworld. *Paradiso* set the stage for Lewis's visionary Great Dance.

Unusual in a science fiction setting (or in any literary setting, for that matter), the Great Dance is a literary re-enactment of Boethius' argument of Free Will, among other things. (The *Consolation of Philosophy* features the female figure of wisdom that informs Dante, as well as Milton's ascent through the layered universe.) The Great Dance also demonstrates the theme of myths as corrupted forms of pure spiritual realities.

This denouement of myth is achieved by transposing the Beatific Vision, described by Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274) as being man's "final end," a vision that surpasses both faith and reason, onto an interplanetary setting. (Plato, Saint Augustine, and the Neo-platonists, who came to prominence during the Middle Ages, held similar views of a vision of the Good.) On the surface, the Great Dance resembles the Book of Revelation (which itself resembles Ezekiel), with its seraphim, its eyes and its wheels, with C.S. Lewis the author playing the role of the Old Man from Dante's *Purgatorio*. In other words, the Great Dance comprises a brilliant literary enactment of the Medieval Model, summarizing Boethius, adulating Dante, expounding upon Milton: the "Revelation of Saint Clive," as it were.

There is a degree of mystery around the wound in Ransom's heel that makes it seem miraculous (Ransom says the Un-man probably bit him). Continually bleeding, it becomes a sort of stigmata, alluding to the mythical account of the Messiah in Genesis 3.15: "And I will put enmity between thee [the serpent] and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." To complete the metaphor, Ransom "bruised" the Un-man's head before he cast him into the fiery pit. Prior to that, the Un-man's temptation consisted in no small part of trying to convince the Green Lady that in his world (earth), the disobedience of her counterpart eventually led to Maleldil's incarnation, purporting the fallacy that Evil eventually results in Good.

Ransom, the Un-man, the Green Lady, the King, Ares and Aphrodite, the Singing Beast, and the Giant Insect come together to form the cast of characters of a Medieval pageant. It is a pageant with a kind of music (*Perelandra* the opera was first performed in Oxford in 1964), and with a kind of allegory, consistent with the Victorian view of religious pageant.⁽⁹⁾ The stylized event of the Greek theater, the play with its chorus, with its costumes, has allegorical affinities, or perhaps, as Jared Lobdel suggests, pageant (remember, Tolkien called it Satire) and allegory are two parts of an ancient unity.⁽¹⁰⁾

Lewis's motives for writing the Ransom stories were thoroughly modern: he was roiled by the growing acceptance of postmodernism during the 1930 s. His surface structure resembles that of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, or even (at times) G.K. Chesterton. His infrastructure is solidly medieval. It becomes clear after reading *Perelandra* that Lewis, like the scholars that came before him, has fulfilled his longing to contribute to the Medieval Model of the Universe. Is that just an anachronism,

or part of another ancient unity?

Notes

- (1) "The Notion Club Papers," in *The History of Middle Earth, Vol. IX: Sauron Defeated*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), p.283, note 12.
- (2) C.S. Lewis, *The Letters of C.S. Lewis*, Ed. Walter Hooper (Mariner Books, 2003), p.262.
- (3) George Sayer, *A Life of C.S. Lewis* (Crossway Books, 1994), p.153.
- (4) Tolkien first named Lewis "Michael George Ramer," but changed his name to "Philip Frankley." Havard (Dr. Colin "Humphrey" Havard in *Perelandra*) is named "Rupert Dolbear."
- (5) Lewis had recently (1942) published *The Screwtape Letters*, an intriguing series of letters purportedly from the demon Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, instructing him on how to secure the damnation of a British "patient."
- (6) C.S. Lewis(1940). "Dante's Similes," in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge, 1966), pp.67-8.
- (7) *The Letters of CS Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, Ed. Walter Hooper (Collins Books, 1986), pp.325-6.
- (8) "To acquire a taste for it is almost to become naturalized in the Middle Ages." C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge, 1964), p.75.
- (9) Major Warren Lewis's diaries depict the Lewis / Moore household at The Kilns as very Austenian, including friends Vida Mary Wiblin, musical director at Magdalen College School. Warren Lewis himself was studying music and composing in the 1930 s. See Jared Lobdel, *The Scientifiction Novels of C.S. Lewis* (McFarland & Company, 2004), p.106.
- (10) Lobdel, p.102.

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