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Judith Brown

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Abstract

Traces the development and spiritual maturation of Ransom throughout the Space Trilogy

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom; Lewis, C.S. Space Trilogy (Out of the Silent Planet, Perelandra, That Hideous Strength)

THE PILGRIMAGE FROM DEEP SPACE

by Judith Brown

"'I have often,' wrote Chesterton, 'had a fancy for writing a romance about an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas... His mistake was really a most enviable mistake ... What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again.'"¹

"'Supposing that by casting all these things into an imaginary world, stripping them of their stained-glass and Sunday School associations, one could make them for the first time appear in their real potency?'"²

"No one else sees that the first book is Ransom's *enfance*: if they notice a change at all, they complain."³

OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET is a birth announcement. In the early chapters, Lewis takes some pains to set up a secondary description so that if we are alert, we can be present at the birth of Ransom.

Once he has been abducted and has found that space is really the Heavens, the figure is shifted only slightly to an "ocean of radiance," then to the "womb of the worlds."⁴ The passengers become heavy as they come within the gravity of Mars; they have the "experiences of a pregnant woman."⁵ Once landed, Weston and Devine precede Ransom out of the spherical spaceship. Ransom then exits, headfirst onto the spongy pink turf of Malacandra. A delightful account of "natural childbirth."

Like any newborn, Ransom sees only light: then he becomes aware of the "water colour world out of a child's paint-box."⁶ It is fascinating that Lewis combined the description of the god of war and environs—the physical well-being, the scouring, the vigilance, the perpendicularity—with an essentially pink and blue planetary nursery. Further, he made the combination believable.

But there ARE bogey-men in the nursery. The anticipated and grotesque Sorns come wavering across the lake and Ransom makes good his escape. The next sequence is the most specifically infantile. Ransom curls into a fetal ball beside a warm stream, talking to himself, practically using baby talk. He encounters the next day fluffy yellow giraffe creatures, followed by a Sorn shepherd.

Still Lewis maintains early childhood in the second-born Ransom as he meets the shiny, black Hyoui. Ransom and Hyoui shyly dance back and forth, curious children risking safety for a chance friendship, an encounter that cannot prudently be restrained. At the same time, Ransom reverts to the professional philologist, mentally publishing a concise grammar of Malacandrian. This won't do. Lewis cannot accomplish his real goal with Ransom, if Ransom assumes manhood too quickly. So Lewis puts him into a boat with Hyoui and thoroughly mortifies Ransom time and time again as they spin through a dizzying current of hot water. The creature that Hyoui brings home to his village is a woeful specimen of Oxford learning. Ransom, for his part, rouses only to the cubs.

In the village Ransom is nurtured, taught, and befriended. Having learned sufficient language, he narrates his arrival and the strange animal that interrupted his certain confrontation with the Sorns. The word of the Hnakra brings

the camp to a furious preparation for the hunt. It is now the time for Ransom to undergo the ritual of true "hnauhoo." Terrified, he is obliged to take the place of honor, riding with Hyoui and Whin in the lead boat, to seek out the terrible bringer of death.

Seconds before the hunt is consummated there is a supernatural intervention. An eldil speaks to Hyoui: "Man must go to Oyarsa." But Ransom, in a sudden burst of conscience and manhood, says, "No, don't interrupt the hunt!", and means, "I must do some worthy deed before I surrender myself to this Deity."

The Hnakra is killed. Ransom has become a man, but a fallen man. In the delay and accomplishment of the deed, Ransom is the agent of Hyoui's death. Postponed obedience is acceptable, but it bears terrible consequences.

This is the hinge incident. Ransom now bears the responsibility for his actions and for his very presence on Malacandra. Spiritual implications which have hovered at a distance are expressed. Ransom begins the trek to Meldilorn, home of the tutelary spirit of the planet. He is forced to accept life-saving hospitality from Augray, the Sorn. Finally meeting the terror of his dreams, he finds that Sorns are no more fearsome than the Hrossa.

And he learns conclusively, from the telescopic invention of Augray's, that he is indeed from that silent planet, Earth.

The polarity has been reversed. He is the alien, befriended upon a planet, peopled with good. Ransom is no longer the wronged victim, transplanted by an impossibility to a world that seeks his blood. His awakening to that actual position is slow. But the fact is actual and crushing, and it forces Ransom to say, "I dwell amidst bent creatures and I am like them, and I am bent."

Lewis underlines this even more sharply in the scene in which Ransom is speaking with Oyarsa, now in humility and with some restored confidence. But the remorselessness of truth forces him to one further sight. He sees, in this planet of gentle grace, creatures of incredible ugliness:

After these [hrossa] came a number of others armed with harpoons and apparently guarding two creatures which he did not recognize. The light was behind them as they entered between the two farthest monoliths. They were much shorter than any animal he had yet seen on Malacandra, and he gathered that they were bipeds, though the lower limbs were so thick and sausage-like that he hesitated to call them legs. The bodies were a little narrower at the top than at the bottom so as to be very slightly pear-shaped, and the heads were neither round like those of hrossa nor long like those of sorns, but almost square.

They stumped along on narrow, heavy-looking feet which they seemed to press into the ground with unnecessary violence. And now their faces were becoming visible as masses of lumped and puckered flesh of variegated colour fringed in some bristly, dark substance... Suddenly, with an indescribable change of feeling, he realized that he was looking at men. The two prisoners were Weston and Devine and he, for one privileged moment, had seen the human form with almost Malacandrian eyes.⁷

He sees man and knows that the love he has received on Malacandra has been bestowed, not on a worthy "hnau" quite different from his tormenters, but simply upon one of several creatures between whom the Malacandrian made no distinction. He is as ugly as Weston. He is as ugly as Devine. He is ugly.

In the line of the story, Ransom elects to return to Earth. He belongs, for good or ill, to Thulcandra. But he is given a choice, to go or stay. Weston and Devine cannot

⁷ *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 125.

¹ Walter Hooper and Roger L. Green, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 127.

² C. S. Lewis, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, N. Y.: Image Books, 1959), pp. 9-10.

³ Hooper & Green, *C. S. Lewis*, p. 179.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

remain, they are too corrupt. Though Ransom might be permitted upon Malacandra, he rightly acknowledges his kinship with Earth.

But he takes back the language of High Heaven, the language that is not merely another dialect, but True Speech in which the essence of the Word resides.

It is awkward to draw parallels without losing the mythopoeic joy that Lewis has smuggled into this story of conversion. But to become academic momentarily is to insure a far greater mythopoeic joy for a much longer time.

We are dealing, we said, with a spiritual pilgrimage. Lewis gives us two starting points to convince us that the very realization of the pilgrimage comes at a place far advanced of its actual beginning.

Ransom was predestined for salvation. He not only had a symbolic "birth" on Malacandra, but as he was moved, almost by annoyance, to take action on behalf of a poor widow and a half-wit boy, the end of that motion was to bring him before God. He threw his pack over the hedge, and the only way to get it back was to go through the hedge. Malacandra was the thickness of that hedge.

Neither Oyarsa nor God will force themselves on man on the basis of fear. Ransom was permitted to "grow up" before he spoke with the One who had sent for him. He was not brought to study language as a don. He learned it as a child. Weston, the proud, the great physicist, in a passage of glorious irony, speaks baby talk before and to Oyarsa himself. Those who will not learn humility will be humbled.

The magnificent adventure of *Out of the Silent Planet* now reveals its heart, and it is truth. It is an account of Lewis' journey as he sought the elusive wisps of joy in a chain of philosophies, until he was overcome by the single Joy. He documented it in *Pilgrim's Regress*, but was never satisfied with the result. I think that he succeeded uniquely in this trilogy.

PERELANDRA has at least two levels: an account of the nature of temptation and evil, and an account of man's struggle with the two. Lewis sets up clearly now the two sides which are ultimately at war in *That Hideous Strength*. The protagonists are Ransom and Weston.

Weston says, in his great philosophical discourse at the end of *Silent Planet*, "Me no care Maleldil. Like Bent One better. Me on his side."⁸ By the time he reappears on Perelandra, the Bent One has improved Weston's knowledge of science and language—and completely removed his free will.

There is a great deal of superb writing that needs no comment, but one is continually tempted to comment, simply to share it. One such parenthesis I cannot resist is the arrival of Ransom on Perelandra. He is plunged into the dimly lit Perelandrian seas and subsequently discovers floating islands, fish, birds, the dragon, and finally the Green Lady. It is a precise parallel to the order of Creation in Genesis 1: light, water, birds and fish, plants, beasts and creeping things, and man.

The arrival of the Weston/Un-man and the opening solicitations to the Green Lady are straightforward. The nature of evil is delineated: intelligence is a tool, cruelty is a pastime. The horror of total personal annihilation looks out through the eyes of Weston. Ransom understands the full import of the "miserific vision."

In the temptation of the Lady there is an obvious reworking of the temptation of Eve in Genesis—"Hath God indeed said...?" But Lewis adds another element: the Great Risk, and the Noble Martyr. He builds the possibility of self-consciousness so subtly through Weston's continual stories and even through Ransom's clumsy interventions.

Finally the feathered robe is constructed and the mirror, the all-important mirror, is produced. Now the Green Lady can actually see the second image of herself, the image alongside, that is the parody of the role Maleldil has been playing. She has never known conversation with the "inner self" that at best we call "conscience" and usually use as a source of self-justification. The Lady now can visualize an interior being who might do this or that, because she has seen her *self*. That image irrevocably substitutes for the *parousia* of Maleldil. All that remains is the inciting to act upon that which she has seen.

In each successive assault, the Green Lady, with only minimal aid from the hero, Ransom, withstood and rejected

the temptation. Her theology was still in order: she did not disbelieve, or mistrust, or wish to disobey. At this point, removing the source of temptation physically seems the easy way out for Lewis. But it does so only academically.

The subtlety of the serpent who tore apart the colored frogs was leaving her no logical option. Anyone being tempted and resisting comes to a place where "this can't go on." Our action at this point is to alter the circumstance in which we are being tempted. Thus the temptation can no longer exist, or the possibility of yielding to it becomes impossible. Lewis does only that. The Green Lady has fulfilled her responsibility. The only other option is to remove Weston.

Here it seems to me that Lewis is talking about that second level, dealing with the spiritually maturing Ransom. Ransom, too, has enjoyed Paradise in a state of Innocence Returned. But this was not central to his being taken to the planet. He was brought, in the immense operation of the Beings that fill Deep Heaven, to do a task that he alone was qualified to do. Language knowledge, while helpful, was not the critical qualification. The critical qualification is hilarious. If it were not so absolutely consistent throughout the realm of Maleldil it would be ludicrous. Ransom was physically capable of beating Weston in a more or less fair fight. He was given the awesome responsibility of protecting the innocence of a new world, brought through Deep Space in an incredibly miraculous way—to beat up another don, preferably to kill him.

The clue to this shockingly unspiritual task is the fact that Weston was also a don. If, instead of thinking of *another* don (the Weston/Un-man), we dub in the *same* don? What if Lewis is saying: Enjoy the adventure, but remember that Perelandra is not just an innocent world that needs protection from corruption; it is also the inner world of a man that has been made innocent by redemption: a redeemed inner world that is threatened constantly with the urge to find its own way and "grow beyond" the immediate tutelage of its Redeemer.

What if the bringing to maturity of the inner spirit is accomplished, not just with excellence of knowledge, nor the possibility of a paradisaic "adjustment to life," but with a grubby, hand-to-hand combat of the redeemed nature beating down the unredeemed; the proud, the almost logical, the almost spiritual arguments, that are mouthed by the Un-man that lurks in more places than Perelandra?

If that assumption can be made without violence to the text, then Lewis says, "It isn't easy, this killing!" It is so hard that it has to be done again and again and again. Not until the body of Weston was hurled into the flames in the innermost part of Perelandra was Ransom certain that he was the victor.

The remainder of the story is indescribably beautiful. Lewis was greatly attached to the work of Dante. He also believed in Purgatory. Thus Ransom journeys from Hell, upward through the inner part of the mountain until he emerges high above the surface of the oceans, to be renewed by the sacramentally suggestive grape-like fruit, and to find that he had been permanently wounded...in the heel. "And He shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise His heel."⁹

Of the vision and beauty on top of the mountain, the coronation of Tor and Tinidril—either the entire chapter should be read beautifully, or copies distributed. What I will do, is to let it rest reverently without comment. It is a passage ecstatic and inspired and totally intimate in its nature. I defend it fiercely and emotionally against those unwary scoffers who offer that it might be dull.

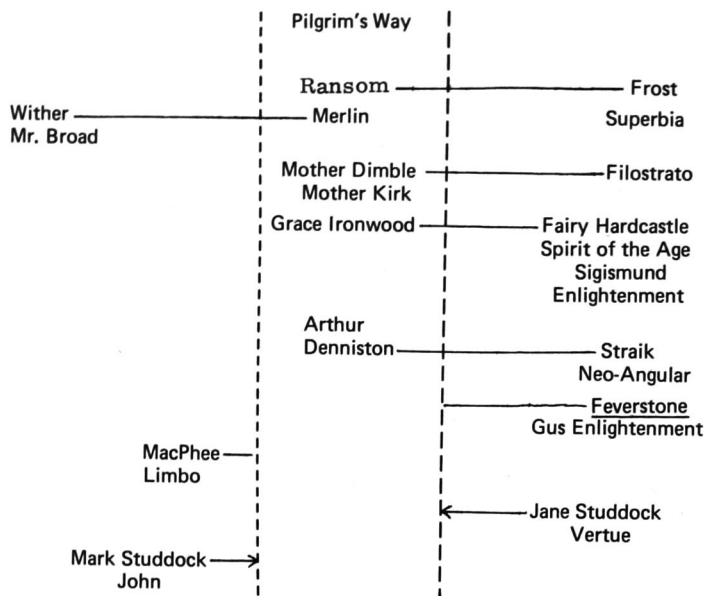
THE TRANSITION TO *THAT HIDEOUS STRENGTH* is somewhat jarring. It is a little disappointing for those of us who liked Ransom and wanted more. I am also tempted to suggest it to those who think Christian fiction writers are prudish bores.

Ransom's place is now beyond the ken of the rest of us mortals. He is The Director. But to carry the suggested spiritual nature of the first two books into this one, beyond the obvious plot exegesis, we have to look beyond Ransom.

I want to use *Pilgrim's Regress* now more extensively. If we overlay the map of the *Regress* with the characters of *Hideous Strength* I think we might see some helpful clarifications.

⁸ *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 140.

⁹ Genesis 3:15.



Belbury is on both sides of the road. For nearly every member of the N.I.C.E. there is a pilgrim from St. Anne's going toward the mountains. Some of the identifications are barely parallel, and thus quite weak, like that of Wither and Mr. Broad. Obviously Wither is far to the south of Mr. Broad, but that is as far south as *Regress* goes. I think Merlin is a fair co-respondent to Wither, and for that there is no character in *Regress*.

But for the characters of Frost and Filostrato, listen to these quotes from the poem on Superbia:

Filostrato— "I have scraped clean the plateau
from the filthy earth,
Earth the unchaste, the fruitful, the great
grand maternal,
Sprawling creature, lolling at random and supine
The broad-faced, sluttish halot, the slave wife
Grubby and warm, who opens unashamed
Her thousand wombs unguarded to the lickerous
sun.
Now I have scoured my rock clean from the filthy
earth,
On it no root can strike and no blade come to
birth,
And though I starve of hunger it is plainly seen
That I have eaten nothing common or unclean."

Frost— "I have made my soul (once filthy) a hard,
pure, bright
Mirror of steel: no damp breath breathes upon it
Warming and dimming: it would freeze the finger
If any touched it. I have a mineral soul.
Minerals eat no food and void no excrement.
So I, borrowing nothing and repaying
Nothing, neither growing nor decaying,
Myself am to myself, a mortal God, a self-contained
Unwindowed monad, unindebted and unstained."¹⁰

As in *Hideous Strength* there are two chief personages both moving toward salvation, but from opposite polarities. Mark and Jane Studdock move into the pilgrim way from outside, and in *Regress* John and Vertue move toward the mountains of the Landlord. After they have accepted the Way, they have each to kill a dragon and obtain from the killing the chief lack to their own characters. John must go to the North and strengthen his weak soul. Having done so, these lines describe the transformation:

...the breath of the creature was freezing
cold. As soon as it touched John's face,
everything was changed. A corselet of ice
seemed to be closed about him, seemed to shut
in his heart, so that it could never again

¹⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 183. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

flutter with panic or with greed. His strength was multiplied. His arms seemed to him iron. He found he was laughing and making thrust after thrust into the brute's throat."¹¹

Is it not precisely what happened to Mark in the prisons of Belbury and the Objectivity Room? Or this hymn of joy as Vertue comes bounding back flickering with the passion of love:

'In her own spew the worm died.
I rolled her round and tore her wide
And plucked the heart from her boiling side.

'When my teeth were in the heart
I felt a pulse within me start
As though my breast would break apart.

'It shook the hills and made them reel
And spun the woods round like a wheel.
The grass singed where I set my heel.

'Behemoth is my serving man!
Before the conquered hosts of Pan
Riding tamed Leviathan,
Loud I sing for well I can
RESURGAM and IO PAEAN
IO, IO, IO, PAEAN!!

'Now I know the stake I played for,
Now I know what a worm's made for!'¹²

This is a highly tentative interpretation and open to contradiction. The characters could shift alignment easily, and I do not mean any more than a hint that *Pilgrim's Regress* might be a prototype of *Hideous Strength*.

Miscellaneous ideas surface: why was Curry saved and Bill the Blizzard murdered? Certainly Hingest was far more likeable, having a kind of integrity. Curry was a bustling pain in the neck.

Lewis talks of the minute incidents that determine the ultimate nature of a man's damnation or redemption. There are practically transcriptions of passages from Charles Williams, dealing with the minutiae of the imminently damned.¹³ There are also delightful quotations from Williams as a poet¹⁴ and as a "modern writer."¹⁵ Lewis daringly suggests that damnation can be wreaked in terms of a monumental joke, as the fixation of the curse of Babel, or the mistaking of the tramp for the newly carnate and terribly wicked Merlin, or Mark Studdock's reaction that a gust of coarse laughter would sweep away all of the petty obscenities of Frost and his "initiation." We take the dominion of evil both too seriously and not seriously enough.

A small point piqued my curiosity for several years regarding Ransom's successor as Pendragon of Logres. It finally dawned on me that there might be significance in the first names of the Dennistons: *Arthur*, of course, and his wife, *Camilla*...or *Camelot*. Perhaps.

That *Hideous Strength* is indeed the horror of N.I.C.E. and Belbury and Fairy Hardcastle. But there is another Strength in the riders above the storm, those that gather about the Pendragon of Logres to hold back Britain for another generation, and that is the Strength that we still have to deal with.

For those of us who look for Pendragons and find them more believable than Presidents, Logres IS real. There are, I suspect, not a few Pendragons here at Mythcon. In our own way, we are responsible for holding back whatever Belbury dwells in our houses, or our careers, or even our churches. We too have both the history and the glory of Maleldil the Younger, and the brilliance cast by Lewis and the others, to substitute for the lack of Ransom and Merlin these days. It is our role to be faithful against That Hideous Strength that grows now, too...which is really why we find ourselves in this place, at this time, together.

Originally presented at Mythcon VI, 1975.

¹¹ *Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 194.

¹² *Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 195ff.

¹³ Compare Charles Williams' *Descent Into Hell* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 214ff. with *That Hideous Strength* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 35ff.

¹⁴ *That Hideous Strength*, p. 194. ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

¹⁵ *That Hideous Strength*, p. 370.