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Freedom and Nature in *Perelandra*

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Freedom and Nature in *Perelandra*

Abstract

A religious and psychological analysis of *Perelandra*, noting the significance of change vs. stasis, free will, and the nature symbolism that reinforces them.

Additional Keywords

Free will in C.S. Lewis; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Tinidril; Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*—Free will in; Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*—Nature in; Nature in C.S. Lewis; Ken Raney

FREEDOM AND NATURE IN PERELANDRA

STEVEN PRICE

In Perelandra, the middle book of his space trilogy, which also includes Out of the Silent Planet and That Hideous Strength, C. S. Lewis takes the reader to a world of fantastic landscape. There, on a planet of floating, everchanging islands, exotic friendly beasts and luxurious fruits, the reader witnesses the temptation of a beautiful green woman by the supernaturally manipulated corpse of a physicist of earth. In spite of the novelties of setting and characterization, Perelandra is recognizable as a retelling of the Edenic story of Genesis and an investigation of the nature of human psychological freedom and the power of choice, as they relate to happiness and human self-actualization, or as Eric Fromm puts it, the process of human "individualization."

It is great artistic, spiritual, and psychological significance that Lewis weaves his imaginative web in such a way as to interlock his well known love of vividly portrayed nature with his insights concerning God, man, and freedom. In Perelandra, Lewis reveals his belief that true humanity is achieved only by spontaneous, free-will choices coupled with an acceptance of change as the essential nature of life and reality.

God is seen as the origin of change, and human acceptance of flux as an existential affirmation of faith in life and God. Undergirding these beliefs is the Perelandrian nature, which functions symbolically to teach the necessity for active, spontaneous, affirmation of change. In this context, the fact that Perelandra is a planet consisting almost entirely of free floating islands that move with the waves is of prime importance.

In Nature, Emerson wrote:

Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind...Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind... This relationship between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God...¹

While Lewis found much in Emerson that was objectionable, with these sentiments he could concur. He could also agree with Jonathan Edwards: "...why should it not be reasonable to suppose He (God) makes the whole (of nature) as a shadow of the spiritual world?"²

However, Lewis sees nature in Perelandra not as a mere source of Idealist metaphors or allegories, as was Emerson's tendency, nor as dogmatic spiritual typology, as Edwards was prone to do, but as mythical revelation. With Lewis, myth is of primary importance and includes natural and supernatural, psychological and spiritual, literal and imaginative truths. Commenting on Lewis' typical use of nature, Michael J. Christensen remarks, "One of the functions of the natural world, it seems, is to furnish symbols that point to spiritual reality. Nature supplies the substance of myth; God supplies the meaning."³ Myth, far from being mere whimsical artistic flourishes, contains deep, universal and reoccurring truths, as any student of Jung knows.

Lewis leaves no doubt as to his mythical intentions in Perelandra when he has the narrator remark that Ransom, the protagonist, because of certain unusual experiences on Perelandra,

had been perceiving that the triple distinction of truth from myth and of both from fact was purely terrestrial--was part and parcel of that unhappy division between soul and body which resulted from the Fall...Whatever happened here (on Perelandra) would be of such a nature that earth-men would call it mythological.⁴

At this point a brief plot summary is needed. In Out of the Silent Planet, Elwin Ransom, a middle-aged, Cambridge philologist had been taken by force to Malacandra, which we call Mars, by unscrupulous earth scientists, intent on colonizing that planet. Their plans had been thwarted by the power of good. However, Ransom there learned that a cosmic war was being waged and that earth was in a state of siege and quarantine and had been for thousands of years, since the time we refer to as the Fall. He also learns the language of Deep Heaven, Old Solar, and is returned to earth.

In Perelandra, he is recruited to undertake a mission to Perelandra, which we call Venus. He discovers that his task there is to convey to the Lady of Perelandra, the only human female, who was created to be the mother of a new race, the history of earth's human family and its Fall into chaos and death after Adam and Eve. Ransom is to counter the arguments of the Dark Lord who tempts the Green lady to sin, as he had earlier tempted Eve in a similar situation. The Lady's reaction to the temptations and the warnings will result in her achievement of independent humanity, plus ennoblement or debasement, depending on her choice.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve was free to do whatever pleased her except eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. On Perelandra, the Lady is free to do all things except to dwell upon the Fixed Land after sundown. On her planet humans live continually upon floating reed islands of multiple colors and luxuriant, fruitful growth. These islands move continually with the winds and waves over the Perelandrian sea, which covers the vast majority of the planet. The only major exception to this is called Fixed Land, which is an island typical of earth islands in geography--that is, it is permanently attached and solid.

Satan, speaking through the body of Dr. Weston, a possessed earth physicist, tempts the lady to violate God's one command and to establish her permanent home upon the Fixed Land. He appeals to her on many levels, but mainly his arguments are that she must violate God's will (1) in order to mature and become independent as God wished her to become, (2) in order to prove her willingness to be spontaneous and bear risks, pain, and death--which is to be heroic and fully human, and (3) in order to be able to establish a stable life which she can plan and regulate rather than to live totally in the present moment randomly tossed about.

The tension between the Lady's choice to remain upon the undulating ocean, for which she was created, or to live upon the forbidden Fixed Land, is symbolic of the human choice between freedom and life with their fluid, chaotic, changeableness, and slavery and death with their unchanging security. Thus, Lewis' geographical details serve to illuminate insights on the nature of human freedom similar to those expressed by Alan Watts and Eric Fromm. Within the fictional world of the novel, these geographical details are to be seen as an expression of the will of God for the lady, which speak to her of proper choice at a time when He cannot communicate to her through direct language, reason, or intuition, reminding us of Emerson's claims for nature's function.

Eric Fromm's concepts of human freedom are highly relevant to the character of the Lady and her dramatic situation. To Fromm, humanity is a function of freedom: "...human existence and freedom are from the beginning inseparable....The lower an animal is on the scale of development, the more are its adaptations to nature and all its activities controlled by instinctive and reflex action mechanisms." Humanity begins when a person's behavior is no longer "fixed by hereditarily given mechanisms."⁵

Fromm claims two immediate reactions occur with the growth of freedom: "The process of individuation is one of growing strength and integration of its individual personality,

but it is at the same time a process in which the original identity with others is lost and in which the child becomes more separate from them.¹⁰ This separation from "the original oneness with man and nature" produces an anxiety in the new individual which leaves him "no choice but to unite himself with the world in the spontaneity of love and productive work or else to seek a kind of security by such ties with the world as destroy his freedom and the integrity of his individual self."⁷

And finally, Fromm's concept of spontaneous freedom is of absolute relevance:

...positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality⁸... [It] is the one way which man can overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self--for it joins him anew with the world, with man, nature, and himself. Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person...but love as spontaneous affirmation of the individual self.⁹ Spontaneous activity is free activity of the self and implies, psychologically, what the Latin root of the word, Sponte, means literally: 'of one's free will.'¹⁰

This exactly describes the Perelandrian woman's situation. From her creation until her meeting with Ransom and Weston, she was essentially a highly developed animal, a potential human, for she is totally integrated with nature, God and her husband, so as to act totally from instinct. She hears the voice of God within her directing her and unconsciously obeys the promptings of her body. She is a child. But her discussions with the earth men and their temptations and warnings against temptations introduce new concepts and begin her process of self directed thought and choice.

One of her first new concepts was that of time remembered and time anticipated, viewed objectively from outside "like the waves," for she tells Ransom, "I have never done it before--stepping out of life into the Alongside and looking at oneself living as if one were not alive" (p. 60). She has been unselfconscious and instinctual. But she learns that she has within her the power of choice, to accept or reject:

"It is I, I myself, who turn from the good expected to the given good. Out of my own heart I do it...I thought...that I was carried in the will of Him I love (the creator), but now I see that I walk with it. I thought that the good things He sent me drew me into them as the waves lift the islands, but now I see that it is I who plunge into them with my own legs and arms, as when we go swimming."¹¹ (p. 69)

And just as Fromm says will happen, upon recognizing her self-independence, the lady experiences fear of separation. She says, "I have grown so old in these last few hours that all my life before seems only like the stem of a tree, and now I am like the branches shooting out in every direction. They are getting so wide apart that I can hardly bear it." (p. 75)¹¹

In response to the lady's anxiety, the spokesman for evil truthfully refers to Fromm's concept that freedom implies transcending animal instincts. Pointing to the fact that the lady no longer hears an inner voice of God directing her as to the truth of the earth-men's claims, Weston says, "'Do you not see that He is letting go of your hand a little? ...He is making you a full woman, for up to now you were only half made--like the beasts who do nothing of themselves'" (p. 105).

With this part of the tempter's message even the good Ransom agrees, in words that include a striking reference to what Fromm calls "the spontaneity of love" that joins an individual once more with this world:

What the Un-man [the devil-possessed corpse of Weston] said was always very nearly true. Certainly it must be part of the Divine plan that this happy creature [the lady] should mature, should become more a creature of free choice, should become, in a sense, more distinct from God and from her husband in order thereby to be at one with them in a richer fashion....This present temptation [to live on Fixed Land in spite of God's command], if conquered, would itself be the next, and

greatest step in the same direction: an obedience freer, more reasoned, more conscious than any she had known before, was being put in her power. (p. 133)

The lady's dilemma, as in all critical human decisions, produces not only the fear of separation and of individuation, but also the sharp fear of mistake or failure. (Perhaps this is a component of the fear of individuation or a cause of it.) She sees no absolutely clearcut, objective method of evaluating the claims made. This vacillation and ambiguity is symbolized by the movement of the waves, the flux of her island home.

When Ransom was delivered to Perelandra, he was unceremoniously dumped without warning into the ocean, where he literally was expected to sink or swim. After swimming to one of the floating islands, he required many hours of practice before he learned how to walk about on the rolling surface. These natural details also symbolize Ransom's lack of outside aid in making decisions. He was told very little about what he was to do in Perelandra. He was expected to decide what to do after viewing the situation. And when he finally clearly decided that it was up to him to put an end to the temptations coming through Weston to the woman, he had no assurances that he would be able to succeed in a physical fight; "...no faintest hint of a guarantee...came to him from the darkness" (p. 147).

In exactly the same way the lady's husband the king had been led to make an independent decision in which no outside aid or guarantee of correctness was made. While the lady was undergoing her temptation, the king was taken to another part of the planet and shown the tale of Adam and Eve. Then the ongoing temptation of his wife was shown him. The question was posed, will you follow your wife's choice if she chooses disobedience as Adam followed Eve? Either answer was an agony. Which was correct? The king later said: "He [God] gave no assurance. No fixed land. Always one must throw oneself into the wave" (p. 210).

That this insecurity is a natural and inevitable aspect of human freedom which must be absolutely accepted is central to Alan Watts' thesis in The Wisdom of Insecurity. To refuse the ambiguity of choice, to seek eternal absolute fixity is to choose death. As Watts says:

To be passing is to live; to remain and continue is to die...For the poets have seen the truth that life, change, movement and insecurity are so many names for the same thing...To resist change, to try to cling to life, is therefore like holding your breath: if you persist, you kill yourself...Struggle as we may, fixing will never make sense out of change. The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance."¹²

It is striking that Watts should use the phrases "plunge into it" and "join the dance" which are integral to the imagery of Perelandra. As we have seen, the waves symbolize movement, change and freedom, and after the major characters have all willingly and freely plunged into free decisions, they all witness the great cosmic dance in which all things join and move in infinite variety. (see pp. 214-220.)

Watts uses language even more symbolically relevant. After stating that most people do not have faith in life, God, or self which he defines as a total accepting surrender to whatever life brings, Watts claims that most of us adopt certain beliefs in order to make life what we would like it to be.

Belief has thus become an attempt to hang on to life, to grasp and keep it for one's own. But you can not understand life and its mysteries as long as you try to grasp it. Indeed, you can not grasp it, just as you can not walk off with a river in a bucket. If you try to capture running water in a bucket, it is clear that you do not understand it and that you will always be disappointed, for in the bucket water does not run. To 'have' running water, you must let go of it and let it run. The same is true of life and of God."¹³

This grasping, keeping, holding, clinging, planning, and refusal of change which Watts calls Death is precisely what Satan urges upon the woman. It is no coincidence that he tells her to grasp her own future into her hands and to permanently live on the Fixed Land. That land is not

coincidentally named "Fixed." Lucifer argues that in her natural condition the woman has no control over exactly where she will be when she awakens each day for her islands continually shift, that she is subject to unexpected separation from her husband, that she never knows what type of food she'll be eating next since the fruits of her islands differ. He suggests that by living on fixed land, she could avoid all of this. To most of us this sounds like practical, solid advice—hardly a diabolical temptation. Yet they do seem to be the opposite of the words of Christ:

Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body more than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.... Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.¹⁴

Ransom came to a serious question on Perelandra:

The itch to have things over again, as if life were a film that could be unrolled twice or even make to work backwards... Was it possibly the root of all evil? No: of course the love of money was called that. But money itself—perhaps one valued it chiefly as a defense against change, a security for being able to have things once again, a means of arresting the unrolling of the film. (p. 48)

With this Watts would certainly agree, for as he says, "Insecurity is the result of trying to be secure, and... salvation and sanity consist in the most radical recognition that we have no way of saving ourselves."¹⁵

Satan's appeal to the woman makes little sense to her at first, for she is fully instinctual and, as such, thoughtlessly follows Christ's principle of taking no care for tomorrow and accepting life totally. When Ransom tells her that earthlings resist and hate aging and death she responds, "'But how can one wish any of those waves, not to reach us which [God] is rolling towards us?'" (p. 68). In explaining how she accepts whatever happens to her even if she did not expect or plan it she says, "'Every joy is beyond all others. The fruit we are eating is always the best fruit of all'" (p. 83). And when she is unexpectedly separated from Ransom, whom she has come to consider a friend, she remarks, "We shall meet when [God] pleases... or if not, some greater good will happen to us instead" (p. 87).

It is precisely her willingness to accept whatever comes to her that the tempter attacks. He wishes her to refuse chance, as if she could, and to totally organize and plan her life, as though it were possible. In twisted fashion, he insinuates that only by clinging and keeping will she advance, though he knows that by that very attempt she will lose. In an attempt to arouse her vanity, he made her a feather dress. After admiring herself in it she throws it away. The tempter said:

'Will you not keep it?... You might wish to carry it on some days, even if you do not wish it for all days?'

'Keep it?' she asked, not clearly understanding.

'I had forgotten,' said the un-man, 'I had forgotten that you would not live on the Fixed land nor build a house nor in any way become mistress of your own days. Keeping means putting a thing where you know you can always find it again and where rain, and blasts, and other people can not reach it.... There can be no gifts, no keeping, no foresight, while you live as you do—for day to day like the beasts.' (p. 139).

It is interesting that human freedom means to transcend the life of a beast, while Christ and all great spiritual and moral leaders recognize the necessity of living free from the burden of guilt for the past and anxiety for the future, as do animals. The resolution of the paradox is that human freedom consists in doing of one's own free will, consciously, what animals do unconsciously—live in full acceptance of

life not without useless attempts to hold onto the moment. The lady's path to advancement leads to greater awareness of her selfhood simultaneously with her willing surrender to her created nature, as symbolized by her natural environment. Frithjof Bergmann states that:

In some cultures and religions, surrender and acceptance open up the door to Wisdom... The surrender of the insistence of the privilege of one's choice can be seen as a step bringing one closer to what is really home, and not only as a moment in which one's manhood is cut off.¹⁶

Since the tempter was asking her to choose that which is impossible in life—fixing, freezing, stopping chance and movement—the lady's surrender amounts to surrendering an impossible option. Had she chosen it, the disintegration of her mental harmony would have followed a course with which all earth men are quite familiar through personal experience. As it happens in the novel, she asserts her freedom and chooses not to accept the tempter's suggestion. At this point she became an individual—and a completely integrated one.¹⁷

Then she finally understands the process of maturation through which she has successfully come to become a balanced individual and why the forbidding of the Fixed Land was so significant. She tells Ransom:

The reason for not yet living on the Fixed Land is now so plain. How could I have wished to live there except because it was Fixed? and why should I desire the Fixed except to make sure—to be able on one day to command where I should be the next and what should happen to me? It was to reject the wave—to draw my hands out of [God's], to say to Him, 'Not thus, but thus'—to put in our own power what times should roll towards us... That would have been cold love and feeble trust. And out of it how could we ever have climbed back into love and trust again? (p. 208).

Significantly, once the Lady has made her choice, both alternatives and their implications are clear. Furthermore, the Fixed land is no longer prohibited, for she has shown that she is in no danger of trying to fix or control her life no matter where she may dwell. Thus, the land and islands can be seen to have only symbolic psychological meanings, not intrinsic ones.

Lewis' myth of Perelandra consists of deep truths. While the Lady of Perelandra and her world are not only alien, but fictional as well, they seem to be of the same essence as we ourselves. The path of freedom on earth is essentially the same as that on Perelandra, acceptance of our nature and openness to the unknown and to change, or as the Lady of Perelandra would say, we need to learn to swim.

ENDNOTES

¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emerson's Nature: Origin, Growth, and Dreaming, eds. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. and Alfred R. Ferguson (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1969), pp. 15-18.

²Jonathan Edwards, Images or Shadows of Divine Things, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), from meditation number 9, p. 44. For a useful background on Puritan and Anglican literary traditions in nature symbology in Edwards' time and before, see Miller's foreword.

³Michael J. Christensen, C. S. Lewis on Scripture (Waco, Texas: Word, Inc., 1979), p. 75.

⁴C. S. Lewis, Perelandra: A Novel (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1944), pp. 143-144. All subsequent references to Perelandra are to this edition and will appear in parenthesis in text.

⁵Eric Fromm, Escape from Freedom (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1941), p. 32.

⁶Fromm, p. 31.

⁷Fromm, pp. 22-23.

(continued on page 42)

Banquet at Belbury, continued from page 14

81 Ibid.: 434. 82 Ibid. 83 Ibid.: 67.
84 Ibid.: 67-69. 85 Ibid.: 99. 86 Ibid.: 101.
87 Ibid.: 113. 88 Ibid.: 118. 89 Ibid.: 127.
90 Ibid.: 144. 91 Ibid.: 205. 92 Ibid.: 440.
93 Ibid.: 441. 94 Ibid.: 69. 95 Ibid.: 68.
96 Ibid.: 69. 97 Ibid. 98 Ibid.: 157.
99 Ibid.: 209. 100 Ibid.: 210.
101 Ibid.: 213-214. 102 Ibid.: 222.
103 Ibid.: 440-441. 104 Ibid.: 441.
105 Ibid.: 91-92. 106 Ibid.: 94.
107 Ibid.: 441. 108 Ibid. 109 Ibid.: 48.
110 Ibid.: 47. 111 Ibid.: 47. 112 Ibid.: 59.
113 Ibid.: 61-62. 114 Ibid.: 260.
115 Ibid.: 261. 116 Ibid.: 259-260.
117 Ibid.: 441. 118 Ibid.: 442. 119 Ibid.: 445.
120 Ibid. 121 Ibid.: 11. 122 Ibid.: 154.
123 Ibid.: 34. 124 Ibid.: 305. 125 Ibid.: 315.
126 Ibid.: 317. 127 Ibid.: 444. 128 Ibid.: 445.
129 Paul A. Karkainen, Narnia Explored (Old
Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1979) 53.
130 Ibid. 131 Lewis 1945: 456. 132 Ibid.: 15.
133 Ibid.: 16. 134 Ibid.: 24. 135 Ibid.: 28-29.
136 Ibid.: 59. 137 Ibid.: 46.

Freedom and Nature in Perelandra, continued from page 40

⁸Fromm, p. 257.

⁹Fromm, pp. 260-261.

¹⁰Fromm, p. 258.

¹¹Note how the lady's language agrees with Emerson's claim that primitive language is largely poetry in which natural objects are metaphors for mental realities.

¹²Alan Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message For an Age of Anxiety (New York: Random House, Inc., 1951), pp. 41-43.

¹³Watts, p. 24.

¹⁴Matthew 6:25-26, 34, KJV.

¹⁵Watts, p. 4.

¹⁶Frithjof Bergmann, On Being Free (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 60.

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It was not necessary for her to disobey God's command in order to be individuated. Fromm claims that Eve's choice to eat the forbidden fruit was the beginning of humanity on earth, as the first assertion of human will (p. 33). In this he is correct. He implies that only disobedience to God would free man from instinctual coercion and make man individual. In this he errs (on the side of the devil by the way). All that is required, by Fromm's own explanation of the process of freedom, is a willful, conscious, assertion of an individual's choice. Eve could have individualized herself by saying "no" to the serpent, as did the Perelandrian Lady, as well as by saying "no" to her Creator. The difference in the consequences, however, is astounding. Saying "no" to the tempter individuates the woman, reintegrates her with nature, God and man. The opposite choice produces what theologians call "damnation" and psychologists "mental illness" and the rest of humanity "misery."

Review: Tolkien in Silver, continued from page 33

The Hobbit) on the front cover, with runes under it, the translation of which is not given. The three spines together contain a design of clouds and stars at the top and mountains and pines below.

(I have subsequently discovered from Ruth Noel that the Runes say "Twenty-five years" in Anglo-Saxon. It was she who supplied them to Houghton Mifflin for this edition. Small wonder my previous attempt to decipher them from the Angerthas had proved fruitless.)

Textually this is the revised edition that first appeared in 1965, except that "Silver Anniversary Edition" is added to the title page of each volume. This edition is obviously meant for completist collectors, being priced at \$50.00. It is visually handsome and a fitting way to mark twenty five years of pleasure.

We may look forward later in the decade to 1987 and 1988, which will be the golden anniversary of The Hobbit in Britain and the United States respectively.

Glen GoodKnight

NOTE: A similar item on a more modest scale, is the "25th Anniversary Collection to mark the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's great work of imaginative fiction," The Lord of the Rings published by Unwin Paperbacks, the Third Edition, 1979. Bound in paperback in a silver box, the three volumes are accompanied by "a 16 page anniversary booklet illustrated with photographs, cuttings, and letters," the text of which was prepared by Humphrey Carpenter. Parts of three contemporary reviews appear, along with a letter from Tolkien to Rayner Unwin and a manuscript page from LOTR.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

PREVIEW OF THE NEXT ISSUE

The Motif of the Garden in the Novels of Tolkien, Williams, and Lewis by M. E. Pitts

The Irish Mythological Cycle and Tolkien's Eldar by Gerald V. Gillespie

The Cosmic Gospel: Lewis and L'engle by M. L. Carter

A Jungian Reading of The Kalevala (Part II) by Bettina Knapp

Early Glimpses of Middle-earth in Tolkien in the 20s by Manfred Zimmerman

"Felicitous Space" in the Fantasies of George MacDonald and Mervyn Peake by Anita Moss

and more, as space permits, plus all the regular features.

At the present moment, we need more articles on the genres of myth and fantasy generally, other authors, and Charles Williams, in order to attempt to maintain a "balance" of material in each issue. Send submissions directly to the Editor: Glen GoodKnight, 740 South Hobart Blvd., California 90005.

