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Maleldil and Reader Response in C.S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*

Abstract

On Lewis's coinage of the name *Maleldil* and its linguistic implications.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Maleldil; Lewis, C.S.—Theory of language

ALELDIL AND READER RESPONSE IN C.S. LEWIS'S *OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET*

THOMAS RAND

IN *PLANETS IN PERIL*, DAVID DOWNING, summarizes three accounts of the meaning of *Maleldil* in C.S. Lewis's space trilogy:

William Norwood suggests that it might stand for 'male eldil,' since maleness in hierarchical societies is associated with higher authority. J.R. Christopher finds its roots in Anglo-Saxon *mal*, 'an agreement or judgment' and *ealdor*, 'lord,' interpreting the name to mean 'Lord of Judgment' or 'Lord of the Agreement/Covenant.' Perhaps the most convincing is Evan Gibson's speculation that 'Mal' is taken from the Hebrew word for 'king,' so that 'Maleldil' means 'king of all spirits,' or more familiarly, 'Lord of Hosts.' (41)

As Downing notes, however, these interpretations skirt the problem that for many readers, *mal* suggests *bad* or *evil*, making the apparent meaning of *Maleldil* *bad angel*, an odd name for a good deity (41). Victor Hamm was the first to note the suggestion of evil in the name. In "Notes on 'Old Solar'" appended to his essay, "Mr. Lewis in *Peralandra*," he writes, "'Maleldil' is the Old Solar word for God, the great eldil, or spirit; did Celtic *mar*, *mor* suggest the root 'great'? The association with Latin *mal*—(evil), noticed by some readers, is unfortunate; but attend to the sound of greatness and majesty in the prefix" (288). Writing on August 11, 1945 to Hamm, who sent the article to the author, Lewis explained, "MAL- is really equivalent to the definite article in some of the definite article's uses. ELDIL means a lord or ruler, Maleldil 'The Lord': i.e. it is, strictly speaking, the Old Solar not for DEUS but for DOMINUS" (*Collected Letters* [CL] 2.666-667). Lewis's letter was not published until 2004. Had his etymology of *Maleldil* appeared earlier, much speculation on the name's meaning would never have found its way into print. Lewis's explanation, however, does not fully address the problem that for many readers conditioned by the familiar and frequent appearance of the Latin *malus* in words like *malady*, *malefactor*, *malignant*, *malevolent*, *malicious*, and so forth, *Maleldil* is an ominous, vaguely threatening word.¹

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien also thought the name *Maledil* an unhappy choice, although for a different reason. Writing to his publisher, Stanley Unwin, on March 4, 1938, Tolkien observed,

Lewis's letter to an anonymous recipient of December 29, 1958, shows that he intended words in Old Solar to have powerful emotional connotations, but again offers no help with readers' potential discomfort with *Maleldil*. In fact, Lewis comments on the positive sound of *Maleldil* to his ear:

There is no conscious connection between any of the phonetic elements of my 'Old Solar' words and those of any actual language. I am always playing with syllables and fitting them together (purely by ear) to see if I can hatch up new words that please me. I want them to have an emotional, not intellectual, suggestiveness; the heaviness of *glund* for as huge a planet as Jupiter, the vibrating, tintillating quality of *virtribia* for the subtlety of Mercury, the liquididity. . . . of *Maleldil*. The only exception I am aware of is *hnau* which *may* (but I don't know) have been influenced by Greek *nous*. (*Letters* [ed. W.H. Lewis] 283-284)

That neither of Lewis's comments acknowledge that readers might be legitimately troubled by the phonetic similarity of *mal* and *malus* in the name *Maleldil* is perhaps not surprising. Lewis would hardly be the first writer whose analysis of his own work strikes readers as incomplete or even misleading. Lewis's disavowal of conscious connections between words in Old Solar and any actual language may sound to some readers like the disclaimers one finds in Author's Notes: "The characters and places mentioned in this book are purely imaginary and bear no relation to any actual persons or places." Furthermore, by denying any conscious phonetic connections between the words of Old Solar and words from actual languages, Lewis opens the door to the possibility of unconscious connections. The last line, "The only exception I am aware of is *hnau* which *may* (but I don't know) have been influenced by Greek *nous*" (*Letters* 284), might be read as an invitation to speculate. It is best, however, to take Lewis's comments at face value. That Lewis was open to others' insights about his work is clear from his letter to Charles A. Brady who sent him two articles he published in the journal *America*: "When you talk about meetings of human races in connexion with Ransom and the Hrossa you say something that was not in my mind at all. So much the better: a book's not worth writing unless it suggests more than the author intended" (CL 2.630). As the New Critics maintain, once a work is published, it acquires a status independent of its author, and what it means is necessarily more than what anyone, including the author, might say about it. Though Lewis's correspondence offers little help

Lewis "holds to items of linguistic invention that do not appeal to me (*Malacandra*, *Maleldil*—*eldila* in any case I suspect to be due to the influence of the *Eldar* in *The Silmarillion*—) but this is a matter of taste" (as quoted in Humphrey Carpenter's *The Inklings*, 66).

with readers' discomfort with the name *Maleldil*, the difficulty is real and explicable as part of the novel's design. The problem disappears, or rather, becomes a fitting part of the reader's response, once the name *Maleldil* is understood in the context of Lewis's understanding of medieval cosmology, his moral thought, and as part of the pattern of significant reversals in the novel.

It is well known that the imagined universe in Lewis's space trilogy draws on medieval cosmology. In his explanation of the essentials of the medieval world view, *The Discarded Image*, Lewis writes that moderns must accept a series of reversals of point of view and habitual patterns of thought if they are to see the universe as medievals saw it. Take, for example, the experience of looking at the stars:

Whatever else a modern feels when he looks at the night sky, he certainly feels that he is looking *out*—like one looking out from the saloon entrance on to the dark Atlantic or from the lighted porch upon dark and lonely moors. But if you accepted the Medieval Model you would feel like one looking *in*. The Earth is 'outside the city wall'. When the sun is up he dazzles us and we cannot see inside. (118-19)

Similarly, the heavens above the circle of the moon are not silent as they appear to a modern observer: "The 'silence' which frightened Pascal was, according to the Model, wholly illusory [...]. You must conceive yourself looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music" (112). Elwin Ransom, Lewis' philologist-hero, undergoes just such a reversal of point of view when he is transported through space as a prisoner of the scientist, Weston, and his opportunistic partner, Devine. As he approaches the surface of Malacandra Ransom "wondered how he could ever have thought of planets, even of the Earth, as islands of life and reality floating in a deadly void. Now, with a certainty which never after deserted him, he saw the planets—the 'earth's' as he called them in his thought—as mere holes or gaps in the living heaven" (37). Later, as Ransom talks with the *sorn*, Augray, he realizes that anthropologists' explanations of *albs* and *devas* might be inadequate, that they may in fact be *eldila*, and observes that such a discovery "would turn the universe rather oddly inside out" (102). Finally, and most significantly, in *The Discarded Image* Lewis explains how the planets, each guided by an unfallen Intelligence, could have come in the medieval mind to be thought to exert malign influence on earth:

'bad' or 'malefical' planets [...] are bad only in relation to us. [...] In a fallen Earth it is permitted by Divine justice that we and our Earth and air respond thus disastrously to influences which are good in themselves. 'Bad' influences are those of which our corrupt world can no longer make a good use; the bad patient makes the agent bad in effect. (116-117)

The idea is perhaps most famously employed in Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* in which Screwtape invariably refers to God as the Enemy.

That the bad patient makes the agent bad in effect is also central to the character Lewis's first encounter with the Oyarsa of Malacandra in *Perelandra*:

My fear was now of another kind. I felt sure that the creature was what we call 'good,' but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed. This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of is something evil, you may still hope that the good may come to your rescue. But suppose you struggle through to the good and find that it also is dreadful? [...] Here at last was a bit of that world from beyond the world, which I had always supposed that I loved and desired, breaking through and appearing to my senses: and I didn't like it, I wanted it to go away. (19-20)

The idea is also illustrated in Ransom's first exchange with Weston in *Perelandra*. Weston describes how his dream of shaping human destiny "was wrenched from me in Malacandra by a member of a hostile intelligent species whose existence, I admit, I had not anticipated." 'Not hostile exactly,' said Ransom, 'but go on'" (101). Readers troubled by the association of *mal* with evil might be said to experience a moral confusion analogous to Ransom's.

A reversal of moral polarity and point of view is clearly at work in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Preparation for that reversal may be found in the opening pages of the novel. On a walking tour Ransom finds himself caught out on the road with no place to stay the night, having been denied shelter in a nearby village. The narrator observes, "If he had chosen to look back, which he did not, he could have seen the spire of Much Nadderby, and, seeing it, might have uttered a *malediction* [my emphasis] on the inhospitable little hotel which, though obviously empty, had refused him a bed" (1). The word *malediction* seems oddly out of keeping with the narrator's usual word choice and with the dialog of the opening pages. Since Ransom is a philologist, the word choice could be explained as free indirect discourse, but *malediction* is close enough to *Maleldil* to invite notice. Of course on a first reading *malediction* could not be associated in the reader's mind with *Maleldil*, but in retrospect the reader might notice the phonetic connection.

Despite Lewis's disavowal of conscious phonetic similarities between words in Old Solar and any actual languages, the novel supports the idea that remnants of Old Solar may appear in the languages of Earth. At the close of the novel the narrator describes his correspondence with Ransom about the word *Oyarses* in the writings of the medieval Platonist Bernardus Sylvestris: "Have you by any chance ever come across a word like *Oyarses*, or can you hazard any guess as to what language it may be?" (166). The clear suggestion is that *Oyarses*

is a survival from the common language of the planetary system, Old Solar. Readers therefore may infer that the word *malediction* might be related to the Old Solar word for God, *Maleldil*—that the prefix *mal* that has come to mean *evil* or *bad* in a fallen world is akin to *good* or *blessed* in the original language of the solar system.² That *mal* in Old Solar might mean something like *good* is further suggested in that Mars, the planet associated with war and bloodshed in the earth's mythology, is in Lewis's trilogy called *Malacandra*, an unfallen, utopian world.

It might be objected that the phonetic similarity of *malediction* and *Maleldil* is coincidental, but as critics have shown, many of the descriptions and word choices in the opening chapters of the novel are meaningfully connected with later events. They become ironic, in Cleanth Brooks's sense of the term, their meaning being modified by the pressure of context (730). Downing points out that Ransom's dream in which he sees himself, Weston, and Devine inside a walled garden attempting to escape and then being forced back over the garden wall by strange beings, is actually a shorthand version of Ransom's future experiences: "The garden represents planet earth. Weston and Devine will indeed try to escape the confines of this garden, taking Ransom with them. They will be forcibly returned to earth by creatures not of this planet" (103). Brian Murphy writes that "Ransom's walk is through an unusually silent countryside [...] a reference to the title and a foreshadowing" (29). Concerned about lodging for the night Ransom asks the worried mother of the missing Harry, comically, in retrospect, about owners of *The Rise*: "Would they put me up?" (3). In a more serious anticipation of the future, and one that foreshadows a significant reversal, as Ransom moves towards the house he notices that the way is "churned up into deep ruts—now full of water—as if it were used to carrying a traffic of heavy lorries" (5). This is both a realistic description of the earthly landscape and a foreshadowing of the geography of *Malacandra* and its formation in the deep past. As Ransom waits for his audience with Oyarsa in *Meldilorn* near the end of the novel, he pauses to examine images carved in stone:

On the next stone Oyarsa appeared followed by many creatures, and apparently making a furrow with some pointed instrument. Another picture showed the furrow being enlarged by *pfiffltriggi* with digging

² Victor Hamm writes that the conception of an "original universal tongue spoken throughout the universe by rational creatures [...] is part of his [Lewis's] theory of myth as universal truth. [...] What language did Adam and Eve themselves speak? [...] What are the etyma of our human names of the gods and the planets? There is certainly room for speculation here. Perhaps we *have* lost an original world-speech. [...] Perhaps the Tower of Babel symbolizes the confusion of tongues on *Thulcandra!*" (289).

tools. *Sorns* were piling up the earth in pinnacles on each side, and *hrossa* seemed to be making water channels. Ransom wondered whether this were a mythical account of the making of *handramits* or whether they were conceivably artificial in fact. (119-120)

The cooperation of the three *hnau* and their productive work under the direction of Oyarsa are the antithesis of Weston and Devine's exploitation of their fellow creatures and the damage done to the environment by their heavy equipment. Another later reversal is anticipated in the first paragraph of the novel when the solitary Ransom, denied hospitality at the inn, "wasted no time on the landscape. [...] If he had chosen to look back, which he did not, he could have seen the spire of Much Nadderby" (1). Later, when he arrives on the verges of Meldilorn, no longer on a solitary walking tour with no particular destination but in the company of Augray, he looks intently on the beautiful scene below, at trees "taller than a cathedral spire on earth" (113). Finally, Weston's drugging of Ransom's drink to facilitate his kidnapping, an image of perverted hospitality, heightens the significance of Ransom's first contact with the *hross*, Hyoui, who offers him a shell filled with water infused with a few drops from his pouch: "Hesitantly, almost shyly, he advanced and took the cup. [...] Whatever had been added to the water was plainly alcoholic; he had never enjoyed a drink so much" (57). The unity and careful patterning of the novel evidenced in these examples invites consideration of the word *malediction* as a similar ironic anticipation that prepares for the reversal of point of view Ransom undergoes and creates the potential for readers to experience a similar revelatory transformation.

The novel, as the narrator says, was written in the hope of "reaching a wider public," to create "a body of people familiarized with certain ideas" (167), among them being the idea that our most deeply held views of the world and our place in it may be in need of radical revision: alien life is not a horror to be feared, nor is God a malignant being intent on inflicting suffering on his creatures. On Malacandra, as in a Shakespearean Green World, Ransom's bent perspective is corrected and he returns to earth with cleansed vision. Intended or not, by choosing the name *Maleldil* Lewis creates the potential for readers to share Ransom's initial fear and repugnance as they follow in his steps, learning to see the world with new eyes.

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