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Abstract

Comparing the innocent characters, especially The Green Lady and Sandy, respectively, in *Perelandra* and *A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur's Court*

Additional Keywords

Twain, Mark

INNOCENCE IN LEWIS'S *PERELANDRA* AND TWAIN'S *KING ARTHUR'S COURT*

S. DORMAN

JOHANNES KEPLER, C.S. LEWIS, AND MARK TWAIN each wrote narratives representative of the best science fiction *cum* fantasy. In works of the first two authors, *Somnium* and *Perelandra*, the adventure begins with space travel, the former being our very first example of this in Western literature. As a specialist in Medieval and Renaissance literature, C.S. Lewis knew of *Somnium* (*The Dream*) and probably read it in the original Latin, for, in a recorded conversation with Kingsley Amis and Brian Aldiss, he asks if an English translation is proposed (Lewis, *On Stories* 143). Arthur Koestler recaps *Somnium* in *The Sleepwalkers*, and one notes the similarity in mode of travel: Kepler's "traveler is propelled by the spirits, but he is subject to the laws of physics [...]. The journey completed, Kepler proceeds to describe conditions on the moon" (Koestler 416-17). Lewis furthered the concept, for we see it in *Perelandra*, where his traveler, Ransom, is propelled to his destination, Venus, in a translucent coffin-shaped box by an *eldil*, a spirit. Lewis also launches immediately upon a description of *Perelandra* but with a pen more toward imaginative recreation of a wondrous and wholly otherworldly world. Kepler cares for the imaginative experience also, but he seems more concerned to convey his science-based speculations on lunar life. Both are true imaginative experiences for the reader, and we are immersed in their narratives by reason of their joy of exploration.

Kepler's narrative frame (later added) was a dream; his character's conveyer/helper was also an angel (*daemon*). In his *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Mark Twain brings us away from ourselves and the bureaucratic and industrial real world through the Yankee's travels to another time and place, in this instance conveyed by a dream of the personal unconscious resulting from a blow to the head. In a brief throwaway sentence—speculating on transmigration of bodies, souls, even epochs—we are given a hint of *deus ex machina*. We never learn exactly how the fantastic record and voyager to the Dark-Ages-That-Never-Were came to be unearthed from their tomb of "suspended animation" and brought forward to Twain's current day: the larger part of it appears to have been written 1300 years before and augmented with a contemporary document. He also, as the voyager's quasi amanuensis, delights in the descriptive constituents of the land visited, legendary medieval Britain. Twain's most poetic passages render the place and bespell the reader with their romantic mythical quality. I'm thinking of what the Yankee sees, in the court (with magnificently dressed, simple, genteel, and paradoxically brutal innocents), and on his travels with the innocent Demoiselle Alisande la Carteloise, whom he calls "Sandy." But *Connecticut Yankee* is also satire replete

with mockery of church, court, peasantry, *and* the bureaucratic and industrial age of its author and, by extension, our own. We also find self-mockery, as the tale's teller drones on about the droning tales of Merlin and the court . . . and, also by extension, tournaments, questing, and travels of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

Lewis's Ransom, too, enraptures us with his Perelandra, as Venus is known in the language of Old Solar. It is a voluptuous land of golden sky and reflecting sea, afloat with paradisiacal islands moving upon the surface of its waters like living carpets of old growth woodland; their contours ever renewed, rewritten by waves upon which they ride, with boughs full of ripe, luscious and various fruit. Its author sets up a telling dichotomy between these lissome lands ever moving and the "Fixed Island" forbidden (only at night) to the green lady who is the human embodiment of this mythical place. In Perelandra this fixed land is the one thing forbidden in the paradise of Maleldil, God of the universe, God of the green lady, God of us all in Lewis's tale. This naked lissome Lady is the only inhabitant, other than the King her mate, in this wide new world—second of all the worlds inhabited by those of Maleldil's likeness. Just so the Garden of Eden and its story is pictured forth in the young world of Venus.

She is the person Ransom meets, even as he is puzzling out his purpose for being in Perelandra. Why was he brought there by the eldil, or angelic conveying spirit? This is paradise and the Lady before him embodies calm joy; there is no distress of any kind here. Mark Twain's Connecticut Yankee, Hank The Boss, also meets an innocent woman; and he agrees to go questing with her. The comparison of the quality of the two innocents yields typical (and mythic) parallels illuminating these narratives.

There is humor in the portrayal of both these Ladies, but stemming from a difference in the quality of innocence between these times and places. It may be that the difference is also in qualities of the conversational exchange between the two travelers from different worlds, and their local interlocutors. The ladies are the adults of their world, yet in their literalness of thinking and speech, they might be the children of ours. If so, they perceive themselves to be on equal footing with those from out their world; and, indeed, in their perceptions of the outsider, they may think themselves—and be thought by the reader in many instances—the wiser. Twain's *Demoiselle Alisande la Carteloise*, whom the Yankee calls Sandy, is escaped from a dungeon and in search of a knight errant to return with her to set the other prisoners free—all of whom are virginal damsels in distress. (The typical pattern is shown in customs of courtly worship of one's feminine superiors: even in grailing legends gone madly awry.) In typical bureaucratic fashion Hank Morgan asks,

"Your name, please?"

"I hight the Demoiselle Alisande la Carteloise, an it please you."

"Do you know anybody here who can identify you?"

"That were not likely, fair lord, I being come hither now for the first time."

"Have you brought any letters—any documents—any proofs that you are trustworthy and truthful?"

"Of a surety, no; and wherefore should I? Have I not a tongue, and cannot I say all that myself?"

"But *your* saying it, you know, and somebody else's saying it, is different."

"Different? How might that be? I fear me I do not understand."

"Don't *understand*? Land of—why, [...] great Scott, can't you understand a little thing like that? Can't you understand the difference between your—*why* do you look so innocent and idiotic!"

"I? In truth I know not, but an it were the will of God." (Twain 60)

Then there is the exchange between Ransom and the Green Lady, as he finds her unperturbed about being separated from the King when the islands upon which each stood were suddenly thrust apart.

"But are you happy without the King? Do you not *want* the King?"

"Want him?" she said. "How could there be anything I did not want?"

There was something in her replies that began to repel Ransom. "You can't want him very much if you are happy without him," he said: and was immediately surprised at the sulkiness of his own voice. (Lewis, *Perelandra* 70)

Our protagonists are frustrated, rebuffed by the innocence of the rich new worlds they have encountered. (Lewis is careful to point out that the quality of the Green Lady's innocence is beyond that of virtue). But there is, as well, an innocence of a different quality about both Hank the time-traveler and Ransom, traveler through heaven. Twain has written as one in the thick of the industrial revolution, embroiled—for example, by his typesetting machine project—in that revolution. Lewis was writing during World War II as a man intimately concerned both in its outcome and in the encouragement of those who fought in it. In these narratives is imaginative exploration of concepts troubling to both in their times and to their protagonists. They have chosen mythopoeic settings and archetypal themes because it interested them to invoke such creatively and have these places and themes visited in their own imaginative experience, even while setting them on the page. Here the primary experience of the imagination resides. Yet life, whether it be in the midst of the Industrial Revolution or WWII, is its own primary experience: Creative imagination works in concert with the unconscious to re-experience and interpret. If the authors were not in some

sense innocent of their situations, they would not be so concerned to explore them.

And here is where the Green Lady is separated from Sandy: the innocence of the latter never undergoes a transformation, even as she experiences the onslaught of the Industrial Revolution out of time and place. But the purpose of the Green Lady is to undergo trial and sustain innocence that this very innocence might itself experience maturation and transformation. The taboo of the fixed land is the physical and spiritual locus of this trial. The fixed land is symbol of no petty taboo but, in signifying certainty, it is the grail of the faithless. Her would-be 20th century technologist *cum* tempter knows this.

In time of war the longing for certainty must be great; to apprehend the longing through a re-experience of paradise before the fall is a creative release, but more important is to comprehend at least some of the purpose of uncertainty in human life—vitaly important because it is reality. We live in a sea of uncertainty, with every aspect, whether in sustenance, shelter, comfort, relationship, work, or health, all up for grabs every instant. *Memento mori*. To the lady, in her innocent trust of Maleldil, uncertainty was no menace but a joy, a joyous adventure. The Yankee Boss had a host of evils he itched to reform, and, unlike many of Twain's contemporaries, his primary motive *was* reform, not merely industrial empire building. Nothing short of the industrialization of medieval England would serve for its correction. He longed to cure it of its backward entrenched credulity and classism. In this story, its unabated and unchastened cruelty was checked only by its naïf innocence, an innocence pervasive everywhere (even in the monarchy and nobility) except in the church and the occult sciences. And the transformation of the suffering society would come through a revolution of the way things were made. He was eyeing a new sort of habituation and circumstance, those with the appearance of progress. How would it fare?

Meanwhile, on Perelandra, in the twentieth century, nothing is being made but a gown of feathers. Ransom has discovered that the task the eldil has set him in sending him to Venus is nothing short of averting the second Fall of humankind. For again, in this ravishing place, Maleldil has created children for Himself after His image and likeness, and, now, envious of their innocence, the technologist/tempter comes. Lewis has adapted Bernard Shaw's Life Force, an intellectual and humanist construct of Lewis's time, for use *en mode* in his archetypal story; this in the character of his scientist turned occult magician, Weston. Here Lewis conceives it as the very devil, for when Weston ignorantly and willfully calls it into him, this "force" brings with it all the power and depravity of Satan. Oddly, in one of the most chilling passages of Lewis's story, there is even some suggestion of innocence about this corruption: in its pleasure over its intent and severely idiotic depravities (Lewis, *Perelandra* 111).

It showed plenty of subtlety and intelligence when talking to the Lady; but Ransom soon perceived that it regarded intelligence simply and solely as a [...] device necessary to certain ends, but thought in itself did not interest it. It assumed reason as externally and inorganically as it had assumed Weston's body. The moment the Lady was out of sight it seemed to relapse [into its imbecilic cruelties]. (128)

Here is the one who leads away from innocence through the temptations of certainty. But as yet the Green Lady's feather gown is no apron of fig leaves, and Ransom breathes a sigh of relief when he considers her but tempted to vanity (at the suggestion of the Un-man, the now fully-possessed Weston.) No, the grail of the Devil is the Fixed Island. He can have nothing less than that the Green Lady should spend the night on the fixed land, should build her life upon the fixed land and not on the command of Maleldil.

The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's court had not thought his sojourn in a strange land, and time, wasted. Throughout his many journeys and experiences of a quaint land with its quaint and pitiless people, the conviction confirms him in his purpose to build the republic and industrialize it. The innocence and heart of its people have frustrated him, but his affection for (and his reforming purpose toward) them remains undaunted. How does it all end? Turn to the great battle of the sand belt where The Boss and his fifty odd associates, with Clarence as man Friday, engage thirty thousand knights of the land (backed by the Church and its edict) with the might of the fledgling industrial age: dynamite and electrified barbwire.

Great Scott! Why, the whole front of that host shot into the sky with a thunder crash and became a whirling tempest of rags and fragments [...]. I touched a button, and shook the bones of England loose from her spine! In that explosion all our noble civilization-factories went up in the air and disappeared from the earth. (Twain 273)

A dream is a *deus ex machina*, an innocent framing for such tales. And it was used by Johannes Kepler, who speculates, relevant to temperature, to storms, to night and day, that life may be renewed on Earth by flies in combination with corpses. This is just prior to Kepler as narrator awakening from *Somnium*, the dream. A storm is rising, and he wakes in a condition similar to those about whom he had been dreaming. Awakes not with his books, or his daemon guide—but with his blankets twisted round.

Often wondering if he dreamed, the Yankee endured several episodes in ancient England before ceasing to care much about the question, when his position as *The Boss* seemed secure. Mark Twain's story ends as it began, in nostalgia, sick with a longing for some spiritual home. The Boss became

enchanted, bested after all of Merlin—with whom he wrestled throughout the tale—cast into a deep sleep of thirteen centuries, but not before Hank the Yankee had nearly decimated that quaint corner of dark ages England known as Arthur's Britain. He woke up to die in Warwickshire with the author (as framing narrator) near to catch the last words of his gasping and fanciful delirium. He had not saved the world its innocence but only mourned its passing, calling it *The Tale of the Lost Land* (Twain).

Lewis, too, placed himself in his fiction as the (framing) narrator to bring us Ransom's story. The author of *Perelandra* was wondering, with along his fellow Britons, if *his* England would also become a lost land. Would the Nazis, with their certainty of brutal purpose and industrial might, defeat the kingdom? Would *Perelandra*, with its damsel in distress, become another fallen world in need of redemption? He was working through the story, working out a different sort of syncretism, mythic Eden, of Venus/Aphrodite—perhaps even as he unfolded the narrative with his pen? The battle for the lost land of Earth (Thulcandra in *Old Solar*) would be fought again and again and again. But, in the mythopoeic realm, it might be that, given the faithfulness and endurance of Ransom, there would be just one fight between two single combatants on *Perelandra*: One the most majestic being ever created, self-debased to imbecilic proportion; the other a bookish scholar who consorted with angels.

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SUSAN DORMAN published a small collection, *Essays: Triologue: Kepler, Twain, Lewis*, which is the basis of her novel, *Fantastic Travelogue: Mark Twain and C.S. Lewis Talks Things Over in The Hereafter*. Forthcoming speculative SF, *DuOPolis*, is allusive biblical fan fiction, set in an alternate universe. Engaging with satire orbiting as dystopian chaos round a stable core of character goodness, the chaos is itself surrounded by a swirling "cloud of witness." S. Dorman has also published Mary Shelly fan fiction, *Gott'im's Monster 1808*, set in the western mountains of Maine.

