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Abstract

Notes the significance of Ransom's experience battling the Unman in *Perelandra* to his character development.

Additional Keywords

Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom—Spiritual development; Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*

Warfaring Christian

George Musacchio

Readers of the Ransom trilogy may recall that early in *Perelandra* C. S. Lewis himself appears as a character.¹ He learns that his friend Elwin Ransom is about to be sent on a special mission to the planet Venus, known among the angelic *eldila* as *Perelandra*. The character Lewis is incredulous. "I know!" said [Ransom] with one of his singularly disarming smiles. "You are feeling the absurdity of it. Dr. Elwin Ransom setting out single-handed to combat powers and principalities!" (23). The allusion is to Ephesians 6:12: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Authorized, or "King James," Version). Ransom explains:

"When the bible used that very expression about fighting with principalities and powers and depraved hypersomatic beings at great heights (our translation is very misleading at that point, by the way) it meant that quite ordinary people were to do the fighting."

"Oh, I dare say," said I [i.e., Lewis]. "But that's rather different. That refers to a moral conflict."

Ransom threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, Lewis, Lewis," he said, you are inimitable, simply inimitable!"

"Say what you like, Ransom, there is a difference."

"Yes. There is. But not a difference that makes it megalomania to think that any of us might have to fight it either way." (24)

In the world of the novel, Ransom is certainly right: the ordinary Christian may have to fight figuratively or even physically. As a true warfaring Christian on *Perelandra*, Ransom will do both.²

My intention here is to examine the major turning points in the adversary of God and man. For Ransom is a developing character. The structure of the changed Ransom, back from *Perelandra*, at the end of Chapter 2. Then Chapter 3 begins the retrospective story of his adventures on that planet. In Chapter 2 Ransom returns from *Perelandra* after about a year's absence. He is now "almost a new Ransom, glowing with health and rounded with muscle and seemingly ten years younger. In the old days he had been beginning to show a few grey hairs; but now the beard which swept his chest was pure gold" (30). The narrator now says of Ransom, "he came back from Venus even more changed than he had come back from Mars" (33) -- a reference to the story told in *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938).³ In contrast to Ransom's glowing health, however, he has a bleeding wound in his heel (30-31). Obviously, he has undergone some changes on *Perelandra*. What were the decisive events?

First, he is involved in the temptation of the innocent Green Lady, Tinidril, the Queen of *Perelandra*. Feeling inadequate to protect her physically from the demonic Weston, Ransom soon learns that the battle is first of all mental. He overhears Weston tempting her to live on the Fixed Land that Maleldil has forbidden, and remembering his own world's early



history, Ransom understands what's at stake. Thus at the next encounter between the demon-possessed scientist and the young queen he joins in. "Do not listen to him," broke in Ransom; "send him away. Do not hear what he says, do not think of it!" (113). The verbal battle is on. Ransom the Christian philologist is fighting with a "depraved hypersomatic being" at a great height, as he had told Lewis one might have to do (24). Ransom learns much and is morally toughened by his experiences in the long, complex temptation of the Green Lady. If the Unman had left them immediately after the episode with the feathered rode, Ransom would have been a different man from when he first arrived.

But a second and greater turning point comes for him after this long verbal battle. That climax is Ransom's internal struggle and decision, which constitute Chapter 11. In his psychomachy, demonic powers prompt his "voluble self" to argue against any further involvement, while Maleldil's Voice prompts his better self. At first he thinks he should leave it all to Maleldil. But that soon crumbles as the rationalization it is. Then Ransom sees that the outcome for the Lady -- and for the planet -- is up to him; he is Maleldil's representative and what he does at this climactic point in history matters. He resolves "to oppose the

Enemy in any mode which circumstances might show to be desirable" (143).

The possibility of physical combat crosses his mind. How fortunate that isn't his lot! Surely that isn't his lot. It is his lot! (143-44). Earlier back on Earth, safely talking to Lewis, Ransom had insisted upon the possibility of an ordinary person literally wrestling with demonic powers (24). Now, alone in the Perelandran darkness, A major turning point in the history of Elwin Ransom comes when, knowing the physical battle with the Unman to be his task --Maleldil's purpose for him --he decides to do it. It is not an easy decision, even after he knows what he must do. "He was no longer making efforts to resist the conviction of what he must do" (146). But he hasn't determined to do it.

Then the Voice tells him two things that make a decision even more difficult: (1) his name is Ransom for a purpose -- he may have to suffer as Jesus did (147); but on the other hand (2) Maleldil the Young will suffer unimaginable things in order to ransom Venus if Elwin Ransom fails to prevent its fall.

[Ransom] had pictured himself, till now, standing before the Lord, like Peter. But it was worse. He sat before Him like Pilate. It lay with him to save or to spill. His hands had been reddened, as all men's hands had been, in the slaying before the foundation of the world; now, if he chose, he could dip them again in the same blood. "Mercy," he groaned; and then, "Lord, why me?" But there was no answer. (148-149)

Then knowing his task to be impossible, feeling himself "psychologically incapable of doing" what he should he realizes that "this time tomorrow" he "will have done the impossible" (149). It is a moving and momentous point in the book. And yet Ransom cannot isolate the exact moment of decision. It is like the moment of Lewis' decision about Jesus on that motorcycle ride to the Whipsnade Zoo (*Surprised by Joy*, 237). For Ransom. "The struggle was over, and yet there seemed to have been no moment of victory" (149). In the entire trilogy, this is perhaps the major turning point in Ransom's development.

As the decision of Chapter 11 was an internal climax for the protagonist, so the physical combat with its triumphant end is an external climax. Much of it, readers will recall, takes place underground, in dark, hellish settings. Ransom is doing what he was sent to Perelandra to do -- and doing it in a situation that tests him sorely.

Even at the very last, there is a final challenge by the enemy. In the cavern with the pit of fire, Ransom has a moment of bleak depression; he suddenly feels that Weston's view was right: that under the surface of life all is hellish chaos, an unacceptable "Reality"; that all righteous effort is in vain. Then the Unman, whose mutilated corpse Ransom had earlier left behind, crawls up out of the hole in the cavern floor. "I thought as much," says Ransom, nearing the point of despair (180). Then he realizes that those despairing thoughts are imposed from without by the enemy; he resists and attacks yet once more (181). When he rolls the body that used to be Weston over the cliff's edge into the pit of fire, it is all over. The warring Christian is triumphant physically and spiritually. "Glory be to God, I'm tired," he says. "A second later he was asleep" (182).

Though the major crisis is past, not all is easy for the protagonist after the obliteration of the Unman. Suffering from hunger, fatigue, and a bleeding heel he won't even notice until later, Ransom walks through miles of underground passages, finally stumbles into a river, and is dumped out into a pool in broad daylight (184). The hero has emerged, not on a white horse, armor glittering in the sunlight, but at least alive.

The emergence from underground symbolizes a "rebirth" in the sense of a triumph over death --physical and spiritual -- a triumph that changes the hero for the better. As the adventure underground was like an epic "descent to the dead," so Ransom's emergence is like an ascent to a new life. But we mustn't make too much of it; it is not the spiritual new birth into the kingdom of Maleldil, for he was already a warrior in that kingdom.⁴

Critics have likened this watery egress to baptism, which itself symbolizes a rebirth. Like a newborn baby, Ransom lies about the pool for two or three weeks, eating and sleeping, gaining his strength, and later having little memory of the details. "It was a time to be remembered only in dreams as we remember infancy. Indeed it was a second infancy, in which he was breast-fed by the planet Venus herself; unweaned till he moved from that place" (185). He has been reborn, has become as a little child. From now on he'll be a different character; he has rounded a corner, a corner he began to turn in Chapter 11 when he decided to fight the Unman. From this point throughout *That Hideous Strength*, Elwin Ransom is less like his early brothers and sisters.

After this period of healing infancy, Ransom moves down the mountainside, through the memorable little "ripple-trees," up the mountains beyond the valley, to the cupped plateau, the flowered holy ground of the book's final scenes. We have passed a climax in his character development. He is ready to die happy there, or to do whatever Maleldil has for him to do. On my first reading, perhaps even on my second, I was ready at this point for Ransom to return to Earth and for the book to end.

But there is yet another climax for the book as a whole. Lewis himself indicates this in a letter to Charles A. Brady, October 29, 1944. Speaking of influences on his writing, he says, "The Wagner is important; you will see if you look, how *operatic* the whole building up of the climax is in *Perelandra*" (*Letters*, 205). Surely he is referring to this mountaintop experience of the last two chapters. Here, with the Oyarsas (chief angels/eldils) of Mars and Venus and with Tor and Tindril, the king and queen, Ransom learns more about Maleldil's magnificent System.⁵ A high point is his supersensuous experience of the Great Dance, that ancient symbol of the System's complex harmony. It climaxes thus:

He went up into a quietness, a privacy, and a freshness that at the very moment when he stood farthest from our ordinary mode of being he had the sense of stripping off encumbrances and awaking from trance, and coming to himself. With a gesture of relaxation he looked about him.... (219)

The Oyarsas are gone, and a year passed (220). Ransom and I were ready to go home two chapters ago, but, ah, what we would have missed!

The mountaintop experience has produced in Ransom the final change of the book. King Tor perceives that change. When Tindiril asks if Ransom will die of his bleeding wound, Tor answers, "I do not think so.... I think that any of his race who has breathed the air that he has breathed and drunk the waters that he has drunk since he came to the Holy Mountain will not find it easy to die" (221). When Ransom returns to Earth in the "coffin" that has not meant literal death for him, Lewis and the doctor are struck by his glowing health and golden beard.

This is the fully developed Elwin Ransom we see throughout *That Hideous Strength*.⁸ No longer the fairly ordinary, unexercised and unbreathed Christian of *Out of the Silent Planet*'s opening chapters, he is now the beloved Director of a dedicated remnant of Christians; he is an exalted "friend of oldils" while remaining a humble servant of Maleldil. He is determined to save England and civilization. He has far more purpose and direction than at the beginning of the trilogy. And at the end, his purposes fulfilled, Perelandra herself is coming to translate him to the Third Heaven, where his wound will be healed and he will dwell in the presence of Maleldil forever and forever. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished. And I do mean devoutly.

Notes

- 1 On Oct. 7, 1983, I read a somewhat different version of this paper at a regional meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.
- 2 This Miltonic image of Ransom -- taken from *Areopagitica* -- is my own application, not Lewis', but it is particularly appropriate for Lewis' Christian hero. In 1939-1941, Lewis was studying for the lectures he was to give on Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Green and Hooper 169) -- lectures that resulted in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). He had begun *Perelandra* by Nov. 9, 1940 (Green and Hooper 170), and it was virtually complete in May 1942 (*Letters* 200). And of course the temptation of the Green Lady echoes and elaborates on the temptation of Milton's Eve.
- 3 I've attempted to trace the development of Ransom's character through *Out of the Silent Planet* in "Elwin Ransom: The Pilgrimage Begins."
- 4 Examples of readers making too much of (sometimes supposed) birth imagery in Ransom's story are Chad Walsh (67), in a generally excellent article, and Myra Hinman. On the latter, see E.L. Core.
- 5 See my "Elwin Ransom: The Pilgrimage Begins" (8-9). [Typescript]
- 6 There is no appreciable development of Ransom's character within *That Hideous Strength*. We see new facets of his character there, but the changes precede the book. As we are told in *Perelandra*, "he came here from Venus even more changed than he had come back from Mars" (33). In *THS* we see the results. The aloof Pendaragon of Logres, the wounded Fisher-King, seems hardly of this world. Like Aeneas at the epic games, Ransom does not participate directly in the actions but stays in the background directing others with power, authority, and majesty (*Aeneid* V).

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