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Abstract

Argues that "*Out of the Silent Planet* is principally an argumentative effort in which Lewis is exploring and exploiting the persuasive, argumentative potential of narrative, and in particular of the science fiction genre."

Additional Keywords

Argument in *Out of the Silent Planet*; Lewis, C.S.—Use of science fiction genre; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*; Narrative in *Out of the Silent Planet*

C.S. Lewis and Narrative Argument in *Out of the Silent Planet*

Jim Herrick

C.S. Lewis' Perelandra Trilogy presents the reader with a literary enigma. *Out of the Silent Planet* (1937), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945), are thematically related and share some characters, but each novel stands strangely unrelated to the others in style, plot, and, apparently, purpose. Because they deal with religious, moral and social themes in an interplanetary setting, the books are difficult to classify. Sir Hugh Walpole calls *Out of the Silent Planet*, for instance, "a kind of poem," but Marjory Nicolson holds that "Mr. Lewis has created a *myth*" in this first work of science fiction, a view shared by J.R.R. Tolkien.¹ Chad Walsh writes as well that all three of the books "were issued as 'novels,' but in reality are three installments of one myth."² Kathryn Lindskoog notes that "not all science-fiction enthusiasts enjoy *Out of the Silent Planet*, partly because it includes nothing about technology or science," and finds the work to be "in reality a moral or religious fantasy."³ Hedging his bets, Joe Christopher sees *Out of the Silent Planet* as "science fiction romance."⁴

The purpose of these intriguing books is also in question. Wayne Shumaker finds a persuasive point to them, writing that they "were intended to render both intellectually and emotionally attractive a whole complex of ideas which pre-existed them."⁵ Similarly, George Sayer sees Lewis writing stories in which "Christianity is implicit," and these books to be no different from "all of his fiction."⁶ On the other hand, Richard Purtill explicitly rejects the notion that *Out of the Silent Planet*, at any rate, was written as an apology for the Christian faith.⁷ But perhaps Platonism and not Christianity is at issue in these works. Robert Houston Smith interprets the planetary romances as outworkings of Lewis' Platonism,⁸ a view shared by Christopher who sees *Out of the Silent Planet* as presenting the "Platonic-and-pre-Christian religious (or natural law) Utopia of Malacandra."⁹

Or, is Lewis not out to advocate either Christianity or Platonism, but rather to create an imaginary world or simply to tell a good story? Peter Schakel affirms that the creation of what Lewis calls "atmosphere" is "a central aim in Lewis' own science fiction books *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*,"¹⁰ while Thomas Howard finds that "Lewis has for his first concern the telling a good story" and that his "central concern in *Out of the Silent Planet*" is the development of vision and image that verge on the poetic.¹¹ Then again, Gilbert Meilander holds that these three books taken together "provide . . . a good starting point for discussion" of Lewis' theory of pleasure, though he allows that they accomplish several other, more obvious, purposes as well.¹²

The enigmatic character of these works, and especially of the first, has led at least one critic to allege literary offense on the author's part. Donald Glover finds in *Out of the Silent Planet* a competition between what he terms "information" and "the deeper imagination" and concludes that "there is no adequate fusion of the imaginative and didactic elements" in the novel.¹³ Finally, as if to collect all of the views expressed about Lewis' science fiction, A. N. Wilson has recently written of *Out of the Silent Planet*:

[It] is a book in which the author is firing on all cylinders. It brings together Lewis the scholar, Lewis the voracious reader of anything from medieval schoolmen to Italian epic to modern science fiction, Lewis the Christian apologist, Lewis the Irish satirist in the savage tradition of Swift, Lewis the failed Romantic poet.¹⁴

A survey of critical reaction to Lewis' space trilogy, and especially to its first installment, may leave a reader wondering what exactly Lewis was up to in these books. Was he writing as poet, myth-maker, philosopher, satirist, novelist, romantic, propagandist, visionary, or all of the above? Moreover, if the question invites so many possible answers, each with its several defenders, did Lewis commit some fundamental blunder in writing these books? This paper focuses attention on the first book of the trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet*. Purtill has written that "those who think Lewis intended his fictional works as arguments for Christianity obviously have little idea of what argument is." (Purtill, 137.) Nevertheless, this paper maintains that *Out of the Silent Planet* is principally an argumentative effort in which Lewis is exploring and exploiting the persuasive, argumentative potential of narrative, and in particular of the science fiction genre. *Out of the Silent Planet* is here viewed as a narrative argument which addresses issues that could not as successfully or as readily be addressed using expository prose, propositional logic, or the natural language dialectic of works like *Miracles* or *The Problem of Pain*. This view of the book, it is maintained, helps to explain several paradoxes attending it, including why critical responses to it have been so varied. Evidence to support this thesis is drawn from the novel itself, Lewis' own claims about *Out of the Silent Planet*, and critical appraisals of the work. Before turning to the evidence, however, it may be useful to summarize the characters and plot of *Out of the Silent Planet*.

In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Elwin Ransom, a professor of philology, is found in the midst of a walking holiday, a pedestrian tour of some part of England. At the end of a

long day of hiking, he is disappointed in his efforts to find lodging for the night. Walking on as the sun sets, he encounters a woman who pleads with him to find her mentally impaired son who has been working at a nearby estate for a mysterious scientist. Ransom agrees to inquire about the boy, and, after several unpleasant turns, finds himself drugged and bundled on board a space ship bound for Mars. The ship is manned by the greedy and soulless Devine — who turns out to be a former schoolmate of Ransom's — and Weston, an evil-genius physicist who has developed the space craft in which the three are travelling.

Devine seeks only riches by risking the journey to Mars — the planet has an endless supply of gold. Weston seeks the extension of science and the human species by colonizing Mars at the expense of the planet's natives. What is initially unknown to any of the three is that Mars — or Malacandra — is an untainted world inhabited by three intelligent species, and ruled by an angelic being who is God's own representative. Thus, by their appearance on Mars, Devine, Weston and Ransom introduce evil to the planet.

Ransom — a pious and sympathetic protagonist with a deep loathing for Devine and Weston — feels certain that he is to be handed over to the residents of Malacandra for sacrifice or research purposes. He thus plans and executes an escape once the three have landed. Wandering in the Martian wilderness, he eventually encounters friendly and intelligent beings — hrossa — who take him in. He learns their language and shares adventures with them, including slaying a deadly water-beast. But Weston and Devine kill one of the hrossa in their efforts to recapture Ransom, and he is sent by his hosts on a dangerous journey to visit the spirit-ruler of this unfallen world — the Oyarsa. In the course of this journey Ransom's life is saved by a sorn, a member of another intelligent species residing on the planet. The creature helps him to achieve his destination — an island on which resides the Oyarsa. On this island Ransom meets members of the third of the intelligent species of Malacandra, the pfifltriggi.

Weston and Devine are eventually captured and brought to the same island for trial before the Oyarsa. The three earthlings are ordered to leave the planet, and do, their ship disintegrating after they have disembarked on earth. Thus, in *Out of the Silent Planet*, humans in various states of degeneracy encounter an unfallen, sinless world. Two seek blindly to exploit this world for different base motives, while a third — Ransom — enjoys and seeks to protect its purity.

Textual Evidence

Out of the Silent Planet was written in 1937 when Lewis was thirty-nine years old. It was published in the fall of 1938, after at least one press rejected it. The book involves its author in creating and "peopling" a new world, and Lewis goes about this work with apparent relish. He delights in describing the geographical details of Mars, its

long valleys and vast plateaus, its unnaturally thin and steep mountains, its warm canals, its vegetable and animal life. Of particular interest to Lewis are the intelligent species on Malacandra—the hrossa, sorns, and pfifltriggi. The social life and vocational interests of these three groups, especially the hrossa, are explored, as are their interrelationships. The presence of three species, each with distinct interests and abilities, is, no doubt, one reason that Smith, Christopher and others have found a Platonic theme in the book.

As striking as is the imaginative work of *Out of the Silent Planet*, this vision of another world is apparently only background for another and more important task being performed by the novel. The imagined details of the Malacandrian landscape, like the remembered *topoi* of some ancient Athenian edifice, conceal arguments that Lewis the skillful rhetor brings forth one by one in making his case. Four kinds of textual evidence in the novel suggest its fundamental argumentative nature: (1) the work's character as something of a literary collage; (2) Lewis' detailed attention to the lives of the hrossa; (3) the characterization of science and the scientist in this science fiction novel; and (4) certain literary paradoxes attending the book's plot and characters.

First, though Lewis is writing science fiction, he does not stick to that genre, or any genre, in *Out of the Silent Planet*. As Wilson has noted, the book is an odd mix of science fiction, satire, epic, poetry, and apologetics.¹⁵ Perhaps we could add to the list myth, fantasy, adventure, and several others—they are all there. But why? Why does this novel "find . . . its author firing on all cylinders"? Did Lewis lack an understanding of literary genres? This does not seem plausible when describing the author of *The Allegory of Love*, a man who in his mid-thirties had already established himself as one of the leading Renaissance literary scholars in Britain. Lewis had an intimate and thorough knowledge of literary types. Did he, then, lack focus or the literary discipline to write within generic constraints? Again, these are not likely explanations of the book's odd mix of forms.

Another explanation must be sought for Wilson's observation, one shared by other critics and biographers of Lewis.¹⁶ If Lewis intended *Out of the Silent Planet* to be serving argumentative purposes rather than literary ones, then his exploitation of various literary types might not be surprising. If the author were, for instance, making an argument and not a story, then to use whatever was available to make his point would only be prudent, and in keeping with advice to rhetoricians as old as rhetoric itself. Aristotle wrote that rhetoric teaches "the discovery of the available means of persuasion in any given situation."¹⁷ It is possible that in *Out of the Silent Planet* Lewis as rhetorician has discovered a variety of "means of persuasion" which he happily and consistently employs to his purposes. Perhaps Lewis was not thinking of science fiction so much as a genre, but rather as a literary frame in

which to construct an argument of materials drawn from several available literary forms. The "propositions" of his argument—its evidence, assumptions, warrants—are found in many literary locations, and, as any skillful pleader would do, Lewis discovers and arranges them to their greatest persuasive effect.

Second, Lewis is intensely interested in portraying the social life of the hrossa, the seal-like creatures that protect Ransom and from whom he learns their language, Old Solar. Lewis provides many details of their lives: they live in a close-knit community centered around the artistic activities of creating poetry and telling stories; they are in harmony with one another, and maintain genuine regard for the other two intelligent species on the planet. The hrossa possess a carefully worked out philosophy of life, portions of which they supply Ransom at various times in discussions of work, death, marriage, sex, danger, and the divine. But the hrossa are not dreamy-eyed mystics or ivory-tower philosophers. Their primitive agrarian life is at once sparse and rich, rigorous and pleasant, devoted to hard work and to the enjoyment of beauty, free of the fear of death yet lived in the presence of dangers.

Lewis' interest in the details of this unfallen society has led critics such as Christopher to term *Out of the Silent Planet* a "religious utopia" and others like Smith to see Lewis' "platonism" at work behind the scenes. And yet, while Lewis clearly intends the hrossa to be admired, he does not seem to be recommending their life for emulation, or, as Purtill puts it, "he is not recommending a return to the condition of the Old Worlds" (Purtill, 79.) Malacandra is neither utopia nor the Republic. These are not human beings, and they are not living in a setting that it would be possible for human beings to occupy. Their world is not fallen, it is inhabited by supernatural creatures with which the hrossa have regular contact—the eldila—and it is ruled by a nearly divine agent who has an absolute authority over life and death. Moreover, they share their planet with other intelligent creatures who are at least their equals. There is no clear social ordering here as of auxiliaries, mechanics and philosophers, though some parallels between Plato's groupings and the hrossa, pfiftriggi and sorns are certainly possible and may have been intended by Lewis.

Why, then, is Lewis so interested in the hrossa and their society? Perhaps because he is advancing an argument in which they stand as a bit of narrative "evidence." The hrossa represent intelligent life lived with neither the stain of sin nor the aid of science. And yet, their lives are interesting, vital, exhilarating and beautiful. Lewis is not arguing that human life without sin or science would look like the life of the hrossa. In fact, it is apparent that it could not look this way for reasons already mentioned. He is, however, affirming the possibility of a world in which holiness and the divine are ascendant, a world in which life loses nothing of what we value in it while being lived simply, reverently, and untechnologically, while gaining much

that we seldom know. Life on this strangely beautiful and dying world is fully as interesting and worth living, and even more so in some respects, as is life on our silent planet.

Lewis' affirmation of the possibilities of such a life is likely more persuasive when "told" than when outrightly argued. In fact, arguing such a thesis using propositional prose might be impossible, or at best would leave the author looking silly. So, Lewis creates a world, its inhabitants, and a society, all of which are believable and attractive, a world where lives and virtues are close enough to human that a reader can easily make the necessary connections, though the author does not "say" that they ought to be made.

But the argument from the lives of the hrossa is not the major contention of *Out of the Silent Planet*, though it is a major premise in that more important argument. The central argument is the one directed against "scientism," or the view that science affords a path to human fulfillment and perfection, and holds the keys to human survival and advancement. In making this argument, as will be shown, Lewis pulls out all of the narrative stops, as nearly every element in the story except the scenery itself is a premise.

This brings us to our third piece of textual evidence from *Out of the Silent Planet*, Lewis' treatment of science and the scientist in the novel. The hrossa, as has been noted, are distinctly non-scientific creatures, living a natural existence at peace with themselves and the world—though they are zealous for battle with a particular species of sea monster—and wholly without scientific assistance or interest. The sorns, who do have some interests that might be called scientific—they study astrology and husbandry among other things—are apparently little interested in what we would call technology, though they have invented a few practical devices. Their scientific interest is mainly in the service of philosophy and theology, and they seek only understanding of the universe in which they live and which they know to be divinely created and governed. From what little we learn of the pfiftriggi, their central interests are making useful objects and sculpting. They have no scientific or technological concerns beyond the knowledge necessary for shaping metal or stone into useful and beautiful forms.

Lewis uses the narrative to persuade his readers that a harmonious order exists among these creatures, their world, and their creator which depends not at all on science. In this way he breaks stride with the genre of science fiction as it preceded and followed *Out of the Silent Planet*, a genre that often sees science as providing practical answers to the most pressing of human problems, as holding out hope of salvation or utopia, and as providing answers to the ultimate questions facing us. Thus, for instance, the problem of over-population does not receive a scientific solution on Mars, but a theological and philosophical one. The hrossa only mate during a short period of their lives, and so bear few young. When Ransom

asks one of the hrossa why this is, he receives a carefully articulated response which is perfectly in keeping with the hrossa's happiness: this is not an unwelcome restraint on their sexual activity, but one that makes sense of love, marriage and sex.

When science does enter the picture in the novel, it is uniformly evil. Weston—a scientist—is a personification and eventually a parody of the scientific mentality. He seeks to extend the life of the human species to other planets, and scientific knowledge will be pursued to the ends of the universe. But in a distinctly rhetorical encounter with the Oyarsa, Weston's reasoned defenses of these goals—his arguments—are refuted and ridiculed in the book's closing pages. Weston can see neither the folly of his own view, nor the beauty of the simple and unscientific lives lived on Mars. When confronted with the super-intelligence of the Oyarsa himself, Weston has no idea to whom he is speaking and believes he may have encountered some sort of black magic or witchcraft. Technology, too, is evidence of the vanity and irrationality of scientism in *Out of the Silent Planet*. The spacecraft which brings the three men to Mars is the ultimate product of scientific genius and technology, and yet the only use to which it is put is to advance the base and ludicrous dreams of two evil people, one mad with the prospect of wealth, the other with the prospect of science.

Fourth, *Out of the Silent Planet*, if viewed principally as a story, presents us with some paradoxes regarding plot and character development. These paradoxes are hinted at when Thomas Howard, one of Lewis' most enthusiastic fans, writes that

Out of the Silent Planet is the lightest of Lewis' narratives. The nature of his achievement here will not be found by looking for dense dramatic complexity, nor for subtleties in human situations....(Howard, 61)

This sympathetic critic also maintains that "the action unfolds in a plain linear way . . ." (Howard, 61.) Thus, though he finds the novel compelling, Howard suggests that *Out of the Silent Planet* is oddly simple in plot and character development.

Not inconsistent with this judgment, some critics have noted that the most attractive literary elements in *Out of the Silent Planet* are not the characters or the plot, but rather the scenery before which the dramatic action unfolds: Lewis' rich descriptions of space and the planet Malacandra. The best writing in the book is devoted to describing the stage onto which Lewis casts his protagonist Ransom. George Sayer, one of Lewis' most astute biographers, finds the scenic descriptions "the most remarkable parts of the novel . . ." (Sayer, 155.) This is an odd claim on the assumption that an adventure novelist's principal goal is not to create interesting surroundings in which flat characters pursue a linear course, but rather to create interesting characters caught in a web of fascinating circumstances and forced to make difficult decisions.

Regarding the novel's characters, Sayer notes that "critics sometimes complain that Weston and Devine are cardboard characters" and states that he himself is of the opinion that "this otherwise magnificent piece of science fiction does suffer by weak characterization of Ransom, from whose perspective the story is told." (Sayer, 155) The depth of this flaw is considerable, Sayer thinks, since "Ransom is the one character who ought to be real, yet he never quite comes alive. He has no faults or idiosyncrasies, and we are told little of his spiritual life and intimate thoughts." (Sayer, 155.) Similarly, though in a harsher tone, Lois and Stephen Rose write that Lewis portrays Ransom "unconsciously perhaps) as a lovable but rather dumb child."¹⁸

Surely these observations about plot and character in *Out of the Silent Planet* present us with paradoxes. How could an author of Lewis' skill commit so fundamental a blunder in an otherwise praiseworthy piece of fiction as to create one-dimensional characters, and a particularly flat hero, involved in a thin plot which, nevertheless, is set in a spectacularly well described scene? Perhaps, as Sayer suggests, Lewis did not want to "slow the story down," talk too much about a character—Ransom—who was a lot like himself, or create an obviously Christian hero. (Sayer, 155.) But there is another possibility: that plot and particularly character development in *Out of the Silent Planet* are being pressed into the service of argument, and this in two ways.

First, Weston and Devine are not characters, but caricatures. They are in the novel to represent points of view, even arguments, which the novel seeks to discredit or refute. To make them real people would be to detract from the novel's main argument: that materialism and scientism are hopeless and, in the case of the second, insane philosophies. As philosophies, they create men who are as flat and soulless as are Devine and Weston. Thus, these "cardboard" men are exactly the evidence the argument calls for—examples of the human consequences of adopting debased views of human life. Richly developed antagonists might have made *Out of the Silent Planet* a better novel, but would not have made it a better argument.

Second, what of Ransom? Surely a fully developed hero would not have detracted from the novel's work. Not necessarily, from Lewis' point of view. He had remarked in "Of Science Fiction"—and it is odd that this comment escapes Sayer's attention—that Wells' characters "Cavor and Bedford have rather too much than too little character."¹⁹ Lewis explains:

Every good writer knows that the more unusual the scenes and events of his story are, the slighter, the more ordinary, the more typical his persons should be. Hence Gulliver is a commonplace little man and Alice a commonplace little girl. If they had been more remarkable they would have wrecked their books. (Lewis, "Of Science Fiction" 64-65.)

In other words, Lewis was aware of the problem created

by rich character development in a book with purposes other than the exploration of character. Did he think that a fully developed Ransom might have detracted from the imaginative work of creating Malacandra? Perhaps, if we discount the possibility that Lewis had other goals in *Out of the Silent Planet*. But, if the novel *did*, as we have been arguing, have other goals, a richly detailed Ransom might have “wrecked” his book, too. Too much attention to the hero, his motives and emotions, his idiosyncrasies, his complexity, would have drawn attention away from the argument Lewis was making. Even Ransom is being used, and as a tool, he should not be too interesting in himself. The same can perhaps be said for the “linear” plot. By distracting from the book’s main purpose, a strong, complex storyline might have made *Out of the Silent Planet* interesting as a novel *qua* novel, but less effective as a narrative argument.

Thus, *Out of the Silent Planet*’s potential in plot and character development are exploited for their argumentative value. On a broader view, science fiction’s capacities for setting people in marvelous machines and on other planets in contact with strange creatures are all exploited for the sake, not of imaginative exhilaration or psychological exploration, but of arguing a point.

In this section I have argued that the range of literary forms, Lewis’ interest in the hrossa, his treatment of science and the scientist, and several paradoxes attending *Out of the Silent Planet*, all suggest that this novel is intended primarily as an argument, and not primarily as a work of imaginative fiction. Moreover, Lewis himself tended to confirm this view of his first space novel.

Lewis on *Out of the Silent Planet*

Lewis was familiar with, and had explored, almost the entire range of literary genres. He wrote scholarly prose, popular non-fiction, fiction ranging from the Narnia tales to *Till We Have Faces*, poetry, short essays, short stories, and newspaper columns. And, he had his preferences. As Paul Holmer notes:

Lewis always liked the kind of literature, long narratives and idealized epics, where the simple certainties between right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, purposeful and aimless are clearly celebrated and where the beauty makes one ache and the tragedy has real consequences.²⁰

Moreover, Lewis was keenly interested in the potential of various types of literature to serve different literary and rhetorical purposes. In particular, he writes that science fiction and other literary genres dealing in “the impossible—or things so immensely improbable that they have, imaginatively, the same status as the impossible—can be used in literature for many different purposes.” (Lewis, “Of Science Fiction” 69.) He may have first been impressed with the possibilities of science fiction on reading David Lindsay’s *A Voyage to Arcturus*. Of Lindsay and his strange work, published in 1920, Lewis wrote to a friend:

I first learned what other planets in fiction are really good for; for spiritual adventures. Only they can satisfy the

craving which sends our imaginations off the earth. Or putting it another way, in him I first saw the terrific results produced by the union of two kinds of fiction hitherto kept apart; the Novalis, G. MacDonald, James Stephens sort and the H. G. Wells, Jules Verne sort. My debt to him is very great. (Quoted in Sayer, 152.)

But adventure and imagination were not simply ends in themselves. Lewis was also struck by the persuasive capacity of good science fiction for making a moral point without any direct instruction of the reader by the author. Thus, he notes, fantasy romances have the potential, “if the story is good” to “point a moral: of itself, without any didactic manipulation by the author on the conscious level. Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* would be an example.” (Lewis, “Of Science Fiction” 69.) This possibility attracted Lewis, perhaps especially when combined with science fiction’s capacity for “enlarg[ing] our conception of the range of possible experience.”

Lewis, I maintain, sought to exploit the persuasive capacity of science fiction in *Out of the Silent Planet* by testing the genre’s ability to covertly advance an argument at once both social and theological. That Lewis had such a rhetorical intent in mind in the book seems clear from his own testimony in the “Reply to Professor Haldane,” where he writes of *Out of the Silent Planet*:

If any of my romances could be plausibly accused of being a libel on scientists it would be *Out of the Silent Planet*. It certainly is an attack, if not on scientists, yet on something which might be called “scientism”—a certain outlook on the world which is causally connected with the popularization of the sciences, though it is much less common among real scientists than among their readers.²¹

This admission follows hard on the heels of the claim that this and the other two of the space trilogy were merely “light, holiday kind of fiction.” If so, at least one rhetorical dagger is concealed in the holiday baggage. This admission is particularly interesting given the fact that Lewis explicitly denied that the more clearly didactic *Perelandra* was written to advance a point of view. Of critics who maintained this, Lewis said, “They are quite wrong.”²² Wrong about *Perelandra*, though apparently not about *Out of the Silent Planet*.²³

The first novel of the space trilogy, then, was written to attack one view of life, and perhaps to advance another. Lewis specifies that the idea being attacked in *Out of the Silent Planet* is

the belief that the supreme moral end is the perpetuation of our own species, and that it is to be pursued even if, in the process of being fitted for survival, our species has to be stripped of all those things for which we value it—of pity, of happiness, and of freedom. (“Reply,” 76-77.)

“It was against this outlook on life,” writes Lewis, “that I wrote my satiric fantasy . . .” (“Reply,” 79.) Interestingly, the hrossa’s lives exhibit each of the three qualities Lewis mentions here.

Other testimony from Lewis supports the view that *Out*

of the *Silent Planet* is principally rhetorical and argumentative in nature. In a letter to "a lady," written in 1939 just one year after the novel first appeared, Lewis writes:

What set me about writing the book was the discovery that a pupil of mine took all that dream of interplanetary colonization quite seriously, and the realization that thousands of people in one way and another depend on some hope of perpetuating and improving the human race for the whole meaning of the universe—that a 'scientific' hope of defeating death is a real rival to Christianity.²⁴

And in a particularly telling comment in the same letter, Lewis intimates that

out of the 60 reviews only 2 showed any knowledge that my idea of the fall of the Bent One was anything but an invention of my own. But if there was someone with a richer talent and more leisure I think that this great ignorance might be a help to the evangelisation of England; any amount of theology can now be smuggled into people's minds under cover of romance without their knowing it. (Letters, 167.)

This passage is revealing, for it points up both that Lewis had distinctly argumentative and persuasive motives in writing *Out of the Silent Planet*, and that he viewed the romance as a rhetorical vehicle whose potential for religious persuasion had not yet been fully realized. Lewis' interest in the capacity for the story to "smuggle" theology is consistent with his observation that good stories can make moral points without direct instruction of the reader, another kind of smuggling perhaps.

In sum, Lewis found in the rhetoric of science fiction a capacity for catching the reader in a narrative that "expanded the realm of the possible," while at the same time making moral and theological points without arousing the kind of psychological defense mechanisms which he knew all too well attended more direct argumentative approaches. His first exploration of the genre—in fact, his first novel—afforded him the opportunity to explore this rhetorical medium to argue against what he took to be a dangerous and even heinous view of human life.

Lewis probably had in mind readers who were not already persuaded of a Christian view of life in making his argument in *Out of the Silent Planet*. He writes that "*Perelandra* is mainly for my co-religionists," and in this way seems to acknowledge a different rhetorical goal, or perhaps a non-rhetorical goal, for that work. ("Reply," 79.) But *Out of the Silent Planet* is singled out as a piece of fiction with a decidedly rhetorical turn. It was written to refute a point of view, and to discredit advocates of that view. It was written for people like the student he mentions who actually believed the promises held out by scientism and its proponents. Thus, an audience of thoughtful and modern-minded readers who might be attracted to space novels is perhaps the readership Lewis had in mind. His goal is to persuade this audience away from one view, and toward another. This rhetorical view of his audience provides additional support for seeing the author's inten-

tion as principally argumentative. Adapting discourse to the goal of persuading a particular audience is one traditional definition of rhetoric.

The argumentative use of a carefully crafted novel may strike some readers as too mercenary for a writer of Lewis' refinement and manners. However, he unabashedly admitted his sympathy for such activity in a letter to the well-known science fiction author, Arthur C. Clark. Lewis asked rhetorically, "What's the excuse for locating one's story on Mars unless 'Martianity' is through and through used . . . emotionally and atmospherically as well as logically."²⁵ Thus, the action of *Out of the Silent Planet*, the one work of the trilogy which is, in fact, set on Mars, was located in this place specifically with the design of exploiting "Martianity" to Lewis' own argumentative purposes. The very "feel" of the place is used to rhetorical ends: breathing the atmosphere of Mars is intended to put the reader into the right frame of mind for receiving the book's message, its argument about scientism and Christianity. Kath Filmer calls this use of atmosphere "sublimity," and she notes:

This quality of sublimity which may be experienced in Lewis' fiction does not destroy the powerful polemic which characterizes it. It too has a rhetorical purpose and operates persuasively by an appeal to the emotions and to the imagination. (Filmer, 63.)

In this section I have argued that C. S. Lewis' own statements about fantasy literature, science fiction, and his first space novel, confirm the view that *Out of the Silent Planet* ought to be understood as principally an argument in narrative form. The genre of science fiction and imagination itself were studiously and self-consciously employed to make the strongest case possible against scientism, perhaps Christianity's chief rival in the mid-twentieth century. Lewis as Christian apologist unabashedly used the rhetorical means available to him as a fiction writer to make his case against what he took to be a loathsome view of human existence, while at the same time suggesting for his readers' acceptance the very highest view of human life.

Conclusion

Critics have found a tension between the literary and argumentative ends of *Out of the Silent Planet* which apparently did not bother Lewis. We have already noted that Glover finds a deep flaw in the unresolved tension between "information" and the "deeper imagination" of the book. Wilson writes of *Out of the Silent Planet* that "the theology does not wage war on the story," as if it ought to. (Wilson, 155.) But for Lewis, "theology" and "information" are the argumentative weapons themselves, while "story" and "imagination" are vehicles for delivering these weapons to the site of battle—human reason and imagination.

Filmer notes that Lewis' fiction is rich in "metaphor and symbol in which he has encoded arguments . . ." His didacticism and even his use of imagination are "part of the overall polemic image associated with both the author

and the man.” Thus, she concludes that “Lewis instructs in order to argue . . .” (Filmer, 149.) “Lewis,” she holds, “knew that bald argument can be an unlovely thing. Like the ancients he honed into tools the figures of speech, the tropes—metaphor and symbol—so that what was insistently polemical might also be imaginative and pleasing.” (Filmer, 149.)

But, it may be saying too little to affirm that Lewis employed narrative simply for its ability to please the reader and render “bald argument” more appealing. Narrative, as Lewis knew, had its own argumentative power, an inherent proving power unlike that of tendentious prose. By addressing the imagination and reason at once, the former directly and the latter by subterfuge, narrative allowed the teller of a “good story” to make a potent and persuasive case for or against a point of view. Lewis employed artistic vision to rhetorical ends, ends which for him were primary. In *Out of the Silent Planet* he is not an artist making arguments with symbol and metaphor; rather Lewis is here, as perhaps everywhere, primarily a rhetorician with vision, imagination and narrative among his tools for building arguments. Moreover, the arguments are not ends in themselves, but are supposed to bring about changes in the thinking and acting of readers. Thus, in Bacon’s famous formulation of the role of rhetoric, Lewis “applies reason to the imagination for the better moving of the will.”

Wayne Shumaker has written:

The qualities of mind that enabled Lewis to write dream allegories and allegorical fairy tales permitted him to show more meanings than he explained even in his quasi-realistic fiction, and thus relieved him, to a rather astonishing degree, from the necessity of arguing. (Schumaker, 59.)

But Lewis did not find arguing an activity to be relieved of. It was the very blood in his veins, and he sought every opportunity to engage in this activity. He didn’t use fiction to avoid argument, but as another means of pursuing his passion for argument. Shumaker says that

by embodying the doctrines in meaningful situations which coalesce as myth . . . [Lewis] has contrived to transpose his opinions into images and thus to resist a temptation to which many propaganda novelists succumb, the urge to drive every perception home by logical assertion. (Schumaker, 63.)

But Lewis in *Out of the Silent Planet* is not resisting an urge to which one ought not succumb; he is joyfully indulging himself in the practice of finding of yet another “available means of persuasion” as he seeks to make the most important argument of all.

Some evidence suggests that Lewis did not intend *Out of the Silent Planet* to be solely argumentative—he had literary motives as well in writing the book. “I wanted,” he states, “to write about imaginary worlds. Now that the whole of our planet has been explored other planets are the only place where you can put them.” (“Reply,” 76.) It

must also be noted that Lewis was interested in the romance’s ability to elicit a “feel” for a place or time. Thus, Schakel writes that “for Lewis, then, a central appeal in story is the invocation of a ‘feel’ or ‘sense’ that enables one to experience the danger and uncertainty.” (Schakel, 121.) He adds, “In *Miracles* and *Mere Christianity* Lewis offers arguments to prove the existence of God. In Narnia there is no argument: through story and imagination one experiences God in a way that renders proof unnecessary.” (Schakel, 129.)

So, what is Lewis principally up to in *Out of the Silent Planet*? Is he writing as apologist and advocate interested in forging an argument, or as artist concerned to bring his readers through an imaginative experience? Lewis’ interest in “atmosphere” is undeniable, as is his own assertion that he simply wanted to write about “other worlds.” But, in *Out of the Silent Planet*, I have argued, we find imaginative experience employed rhetorically as one means of persuading the reader. Atmosphere and imagination are pressed into the service of argument, and in this way are not ends in themselves but tools for doing another kind of work. Lewis is not, I have argued, principally intent on creating a world in *Out of the Silent Planet*, as he says he was in *Perelandra* and as Schakel says he was in the Narnia tales. In the first of his space novels Lewis creates a world in order to make an argument—argument, not atmosphere, is of principal concern in this book. Atmosphere is a tool Lewis the rhetorician uses as he seeks to persuade his audience of certain propositions that would not yield as readily or be as persuasive cast in traditional argumentative forms. The argument against scientism or Westonism—“a death dealing philosophy”—and the argument for a life lived in the presence of the divine are both advanced by the vehicle of “a good story.”

The atmosphere Lewis creates in *Out of the Silent Planet* is created to be enjoyed, but, alas, also to be polluted with Weston and Devine, scientism and greed. The reader smells both the sweet, warm air of the Malacandrian canals, and the stench of its pollution by human sin. We are to come away from the experience captivated and enthralled, but also persuaded and changed. By creating this world, Lewis argues that the philosophies of the two antagonists who invade it would not improve upon life in that happy place, or our unhappy one, but would destroy it. Lewis wrote *Out of the Silent Planet* not only to bring the reader to experience an atmosphere, but, once having experienced it, to accede to the world it implies, to be persuaded of the essential truth that lies behind it, and, in so believing, to be changed.

Notes

1. Evan K. Gibson, C.S. Lewis: *Spinner of Tales*. (Washington D.C.: Christian University Press), 25; William Griffin, *Citce Staples Lewis: A Dramatic Life*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 148.
2. Quoted in Peter Kreeft, C.S. Lewis: *A Critical Essay*. (Fort Royal, Virginia: Christendom College Press), 49.

3. Kathryn Lindskoog, *The C. S. Lewis Hoax*. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1988), 29.
4. Joe Christopher, *C.S. Lewis*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 93-94.
5. Wayne Schumaker, "The Cosmic Trilogy of C.S. Lewis," in *The Longing for a Form*, ed. Peter Schakel. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press), 51.
6. George Sayer, Jack: *C.S. Lewis and his Times*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 154.
7. Richard Purtill, *Lord of the Elves and Eldils*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 74.
8. Robert Houston Smith, *Patches of Godlight*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 154.
9. Joe Christopher, *C.S. Lewis*. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 93-94.
10. Peter Schakel, "Elusive Birds and Narrative Nets: the Appeal of Story in C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia," in *A Christian for All Christians*, ed. Andrew Walker and James Patrick. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), 121.
11. Thomas Howard, *The Achievement of C.S. Lewis*. (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1980), 56, 58 ff.
12. Gilbert Meilander, *The Taste for the Other*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 12.
13. Donald E. Glover, *C.S. Lewis and the Art of Enchantment*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1981), 82.
14. A.N. Wilson, *C.S. Lewis*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 154.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Several critics and biographers note Lewis' use of satire in the closing pages of the book. See for example: Gibson, p. 45, "Lewis satirizes Weston's speech"
17. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. (New York: Modern Library, 1954), trans. W. Rhys Roberts, book I.
18. Lois and Stephen Rose, *The Shattered Rind*. (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1970), 63.
19. C.S. Lewis, "Of Science Fiction," in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982), 64.
20. Paul L. Holmer, C.S. Lewis: *The Shape of His Thought*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 47.
21. C.S. Lewis, "Reply to Professor Haldane," in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982), 76.
22. C.S. Lewis, "Unreal Estates," in *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1982), 87. Lewis adds, however, "I've never started from a message or a moral"
23. *That Hideous Strength* may also be freighted with rhetorical intent, Lewis writing that "[Haldane] was told in the preface to *That Hideous Strength* that the doctrine behind that romance could be found, stripped of their fictional masquerade, in *The Abolition of Man*." "Reply," 75.
24. C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 167.
25. Quoted in Kath Filmer, "The Polemic Image: the Role of Metaphor and Symbol in the Fiction of C.S. Lewis," in *The Taste of the Pineapple*, ed. Bruce L. Edwards. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988), 162.

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