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Humpty Dumpty in the Heavens: Perspective in *Out of the Silent Planet*

Abstract

Notes the Humpty Dumpty imagery in Ransom's dream of sitting on a garden wall in *Out of the Silent Planet*. Relates this to the importance of the ability to change one's perspective for Ransom and other characters.

Additional Keywords

Humpty Dumpty; Lewis, C.S.—Characters—Ransom; Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*; Perspective in *Out of the Silent Planet*

Humpty Dumpty in the Heavens

Perspective in *Out of the Silent Planet*

Douglas Loney

Acknowledging an offer of membership in the Walnut Creek, California "Society for the Prevention of Progress," C. S. Lewis wrote:

While feeling that I was *born* a member of your Society, I am nevertheless honoured to receive the outward seal of membership. I shall hope by continued orthodoxy and the unremitting practice of Reaction, Obstruction, and Stagnation to give you no reason for repenting your favour.¹

This sort of whimsy, in the same vein as Lewis' famous self-characterisation (in his inaugural address at Cambridge) as a "dinosaur" and a late-surviving specimen of "Old Western Man," inevitably arouses hostility in some of his readers. In Lewis' own day, he was attacked by J.B.S. Haldane for his "anti-scientific" and backward outlook.² Nearer the present, Jacques Sys has claimed to see evidence in Lewis' work of a pathological nostalgia which rendered Lewis blind to the problems of his own time; Sys suggests that Lewis and fellow-Inklings Tolkien and Williams may be seen as latter day Peter Pan figures: "a generation unwilling to grow up."³ But Lewis himself maintained that this sort of hostility betrays its own blindness, for it assumes as valid that "myth of progress" which he had come to see as utterly without foundation.

His "Great War" with Owen Barfield had taught Lewis to eschew such "'chronological snobbery,' the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited."⁴ In particular, Lewis rejected that "modern" view of reality which is predicated upon the assumptions of materialism and naturalism. He complained in "Christianity and Literature" that the modern man is ill-equipped to apprehend anything of a reality which might lie somewhere beyond his own circumscribed field of view:

Popularised science, the conventions or "unconventions" of his immediate circle, party programmes, etc., enclose him in a tiny, windowless universe which he mistakes for the only possible universe. There are no distant horizons, no mysteries. He thinks everything has been settled.⁵

In his apologetics, Lewis was of course able to advance (as a corrective to this "modern" conception of reality) the orthodox Christian view of a created universe and an infinite, personal Creator, one "who has purposes and performs particular actions, who does one thing and not another, a concrete, choosing, commanding, prohibiting God."⁶ In his scholarly work, Lewis' speciality was the literature of the Middle Ages and Renaissance in England, a body of works conceived when the philosophical con-

sensus was still emphatically Christian, the dominant world view like that which Lewis describes in *A Preface to Paradise Lost*:

For the Renaissance thinker . . . the universe was packed and tingling with anthropomorphic life; its true picture is to be found in the elaborate title pages of old folios where winds blow at the corners and at the bottom dolphins spout, and the eye passes upward through cities and kings and angels to four Hebrew letters with rays darting from them at the top, which represent the ineffable Name.⁷

But the devices available to the writer of fiction are not necessarily those of the apologist or the scholar: the "imaginative man" in Lewis, that aspect of himself which he insisted to be "older, more continuously operative, and in that sense more basic than either the religious writer or the critic"⁸ was obliged to use other methods.

In "A Reply to Professor Haldane," Lewis states explicitly that part at least of his intention in writing his first science-fiction novel was to expose and to counter that pernicious influence which "popularised science" may exert upon one's perspective:

Out of the Silent Planet . . . [attacks] a certain outlook on the world which is causally connected with the popularisation of the sciences, though it is much less common among real scientists than among their readers. It is, in a word, the belief that the supreme moral end is the perpetuation of our own species It was against this outlook on life, this ethic, if you will, that I wrote my satiric fantasy.⁹

In order to expose the poverty of such an ethic and the limitations of that meagre "outlook" within which it functions, Lewis used *Out of the Silent Planet* to open a window upon the "tiny, windowless universe." To point up the absurdity of the constricted "scientific" outlook, Lewis juxtaposed in his fiction a much richer and broader perspective, but his introduction to this serious theme is, characteristically, whimsical.

In the early pages of *Out of the Silent Planet* the protagonist, Ransom, is given a very peculiar device:

It seemed to [Ransom] that he and Weston and Devine were all standing in a little garden surrounded by a wall. . . . Ransom kept on telling [Weston] not to go over the wall because it was so dark on the other side, but Weston insisted. . . . [Ransom] got astride on the top of the wall, sitting on his coat because of the broken bottles. The other two had already dropped down on the outside into the darkness, but before he followed them a door in the wall — which none of them had noticed — was opened from without and the queerest people he had ever seen came

into the garden bringing Weston and Devine back with them. They left them in the garden and retired into the darkness themselves, locking the door behind them. Ransom found it impossible to get down from the wall. He remained sitting there, not frightened but rather uncomfortable . . .¹⁰

Later in the story, the space ship by which Ransom and his kidnappers make their journey to Mars will be described as an "iron egg-shell." (159) Taken together, the dream's "wall" and the spacecraft as "egg-shell" clearly bring us to that corner of Looking Glass Land in which Humpty Dumpty chats with Alice.

Three important clues as to the significance of the Humpty-Dumpty allusion for Lewis are given by him in the paper "On Science Fiction" which he read to the Cambridge University English Club some seventeen years after the publication of *Out of the Silent Planet*.¹¹ The first two clues, closely related, appear in a passage enumerating what Lewis sees as the few legitimate uses of "the impossible" in a work of literature. He states his admiration for Abbott's *Flatland* for its capacity to convey "the sense . . . of our own limitations — the consciousness that our own human awareness is arbitrary and contingent."¹² Again, Lewis celebrates that type of science-fiction in which "the marvellous is in the grain of the whole work" for its capacity to extend the very limits of a reader's perception of life:

If good novels are comments on life, good stories of this sort (which are very much rarer) are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience.¹³

The relationship between these two functions is clear: Lewis celebrates fantasy's capacity for moulding the reader's own point of view, first by arousing a sense of the limitations of unimproved, unenlightened human perspective — its native poverty — then by suggesting what might lie just beyond the limits of the "natural" perspective—its potential wealth: a broader and deeper view of "the range of possible experience."

In the same address, musing on what he suspects to be the "political rancour" motivating one critic's charge that science-fiction is "escapist" entertainment, Lewis gives what I take as my third clue to his motive in casting his protagonist as Humpty Dumpty. Lewis develops an extended metaphor in which human society is likened to a ship and its crew:

If we were all on board ship and there was trouble among the stewards, I can just conceive their chief spokesman looking with disfavour on anyone who stole away from the fierce debates in the saloon or pantry to take a breather on deck. For up there, . . . what had seemed, in the hot, lighted rooms down below to be merely the scene for a political crisis, would appear once more as a tiny egg-shell moving rapidly through an immense darkness over an element in which man cannot live. It would not necessarily change his convictions about the rights and

wrongs of the dispute down below, but it would show them in a new light.¹⁴

Note the image of the ship as a "tiny egg-shell" once again: its suggestions of life self-contained, of delicate fragility and vulnerability, are as clearly appropriate in this context as they were when Lewis invoked them to characterise Weston's spacecraft on its dangerous journey through the heavens. But note more particularly here Lewis' implicit censure of those who demand undivided attention to the "fierce debates" below decks, and his approbation for the others, who feel the need for "a breather." Those in the first class seek to impose their own myopic and arbitrary perspective on those in the second, whose retreat from the "hot, lighted rooms" to the coolness of the ship's deck under the open sky irresistibly suggests another, and a fresher, perspective upon their experience of reality, suggests in fact "a new light."

The foolishness of Carroll's nursery rhyme figure derives from two qualities: the first is his baseless and arrogant—even blasphemous—assumption of authority: "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."¹⁵ The second of Humpty Dumpty's foolish qualities is his willful blindness to reality:

"Why, if ever I did fall off — which there's no chance of — but if I did —" Here he pursed up his lips, and looked so solemn and grand that Alice could hardly help laughing. "If I did fall," he went on, "the King has promised me — ah, you may turn pale, if you like! You didn't think I was going to say that, did you? The King has promised me — with his very own mouth . . ."¹⁶

If Alice turns pale it is surely not in awe of the King's name, but rather because she knows the "promise" (and knows what is to come of it) even before it can be declared: she understands how appallingly vulnerable the smug Humpty Dumpty really is. If ever a creature needed to have its "arbitrary and contingent awareness" corrected, or required "a sense of its own limitations," "an enlarged conception of the range of possible experience," that creature is Carroll's Humpty Dumpty.

Here, I think, is Lewis' purpose in the *Looking Glass* allusion. Although it is Ransom himself who sits on top of the wall in his strange dream, he does not share either the smugness or the myopia of Humpty Dumpty: although he had had no wish to ascend the wall in the first place, from the point of vantage it gives him Ransom does see very clearly. Indeed, he does not merely see what becomes of Weston and Devine at the hands of the "queer people" from beyond the garden, but goes on seeing reality on both sides, from atop the "wall" of Earth's celestial boundary. The dream predicts ironically that the would-be conquerors of space, Weston and Devine, ultimately shall be confined once more within the limits of Earth's little garden, but that Ransom himself will continue to enjoy a uniquely full perspective on what the universe really is: Lewis' purpose is that the reader should enter imagina-

tively into that new perspective, should share the "new light" upon reality which Ransom is to discover.

In the first pages of the novel, Ransom is introduced as one who stoically sets fortitude against reluctance, doing the right thing (in accepting his duty to have the boy Harry sent home to his mother) without taking much satisfaction in it. Although his sense of responsibility is clear, his fear of involvement, and his reluctance in the face of "adventure," rob him of resolution. It is only when his sense of duty is explicitly evoked — when he hears Weston and Devine struggling with the boy—that Ransom can bring himself to act. John Hollowitz rightly notes that Ransom's intervention on Harry's behalf (which results in his taking the boy's place as Weston's victim) is "the first of many puns in the trilogy on the name 'Ransom.'"¹⁷ But this hardly qualifies as a true act of ransoming, since the payment that delivers the boy is made unwittingly: Ransom does not yet see clearly enough to know what he does.

In his description of the interior of "The Rise," Lewis suggests the cause of Ransom's ambivalence and irresolution. The mixture of contraries in the room unsettles him: he finds himself unable to accommodate the

strange mixture of luxury and squalor . . . [in which] cigars, oyster-shells and empty champagne-bottles [jostle] with tins of condensed milk and opened sardine-tins, with cheap crockery, broken bread, and teacups a quarter full of tea and cigarette-ends." (10)

Ransom has no adequate point of view from which to focus this blur of impressions, and his response to his "hosts," soon his kidnappers, accordingly lacks resolution. Significantly, Ransom is betrayed (as poor Harry had been betrayed) by his concentration upon the unopened bottle of whisky cradled in Devine's hands, which Ransom desires not merely for its capacity to quench the thirst of a weary walker, but also for its promise of at least partial and temporary relief from the burden of rational thought: he finds it particularly hard to *think* in this place. At base, Ransom's difficulty is that the room described in its "luxury and squalor" is a microcosm of a world in which the luxury of a wholly good creation is everywhere tainted by the squalor of human sin: this is of course Lewis' Christian view of our own broken world. Ransom needs a point of view from which his mind can accommodate both the original good of the world and the parasitic evil entwined around it. He needs the view from atop the "wall".

The decision to ascend the "wall" is not Ransom's own, but is made for him by his kidnappers. Once the interplanetary journey has begun (relieving the kidnapped victim of the need to make further decisions), Ransom again has the sense of poised opposites within himself, but opposites of now immense mass and energy — his ambivalence remains, but he recognises now that the stakes are much higher: he feels himself to be "poised on a sort of emotional watershed from which . . . he might at any moment pass into delirious terror or into an ecstasy of joy." (19) Although his situation has not changed appreciably

since the moment in which he went to Harry's defense, Ransom can now perceive with some clarity just what his position is. Much against his own will, Humpty Dumpty has been put upon the top of the wall.

Ransom is not at first able to make good use of his new vantage point, for his fear becomes the enemy of his understanding. Early in the voyage, Ransom "[does] not know what he [is] afraid of: the fear itself [possesses] his whole mind, a formless, infinite misgiving." (21) Soon, however, the fear is traced to its root in those images of "space" Ransom's mind has gleaned from Wellsian science-fiction:

At the back of his thinking for years had lurked the dismal fancy of the black, cold vacuity, the utter deadness, which was supposed to separate the worlds. He had not known how much it affected him till now . . . (29)¹⁸

But from his new vantage point aboard the "iron eggshell," Ransom finds his senses testifying against the validity of those received images of the "silent void" of space; he discovers indeed that his very faculties of perception seem able to grow here, in order to receive the extraordinarily intense new sensations offered them:

Both [heat and light] were present in a degree which would have been intolerable on Earth, but each had a new quality. The light was . . . the palest of all imaginable golds, . . . the heat . . . seemed to knead and stroke the skin. (26)

The very name "Space" [now] seemed a blasphemous libel for this empyrean ocean of radiance in which they swam. . . . He had thought it barren: he saw now that it was the womb of worlds . . . (29)

Chad Walsh was the first of Lewis' critics to demonstrate just how insistent and pervasive is this motif of birth and rebirth in Lewis' trilogy; Jacques Sys goes further, to identify such imagery explicitly with the Christian paradox that one must "die" if one is truly to find life.¹⁹ Lewis introduces the motif at this point in the tale to signify that Ransom is about to be "reborn" upon an alien planet, subsequently to discover that he must learn "as a little child" a new way of seeing, a perspective suitable to this new world.

Thus the "iron egg-shell" may indeed be seen as a kind of artificial womb within the infinitely greater "womb of worlds"; Ransom's "birth" from it is accomplished by exiting "head and shoulders through the manhole." (39)²⁰ But the image remains also a reminder of the Humpty Dumpty allusion, for Ransom is engaged, even while they descend to the planet's surface, in re-interpreting his conception of the universe, posing the perspective formerly acquired on the earthbound side of the celestial "wall" against the new perspective afforded him aboard Weston's space-craft:

What had been a chariot gliding in the fields of heaven became a dark steel box dimly lighted by a slit of window. They were falling out of the heaven, into a world. Nothing in all his adventures bit so deeply into Ransom's mind as this. He 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 . . . he saw the planets . . . as mere gaps in the living heaven. (37)

No other vantage point but this could have allowed Ransom so to reinterpret his knowledge of reality. Had he but known it, Weston has worked a radical change in Ransom's way of seeing.

Though the beginnings of growth in Ransom's perspective were not at his own instigation, it is increasingly clear that, if such growth is to continue, he must accede to it with his own will. His preconceptions concerning "space" yield to his new experience as he discovers warmth, life and light where he thought to find only a silent and deadly void: the former parochial view of the Earth itself is revised to complement his fresh understanding of "the heavens." As Lewis chronicles the process of change in Ransom's perspective, as it gradually broadens to admit these unexpected truths, he writes that Ransom feels himself to be "a second Dane . . . 'sweet influence' pouring or even stabbing into his surrendered body." (35) The "surrender" here is crucial, explicitly invoking the action of Ransom's will in the continuing process of his perspective's growth and development. By alluding to the myth of Dane, Lewis displaces the atheistic Wellsian "Presence" of the void with St. John's image of the immanent God, who infuses life into all things living, "the light of men [which] shines in the darkness." (Jn. 1:4-5) vital in himself and (like Zeus in the old myths) irresistibly imparting vitality to his creatures. In the second book of this trilogy, Lewis will bring Ransom to a new perspective upon such tales: he will acknowledge in them "gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility."⁴¹ Thus Ransom's sense of "sweet influence" here deftly anticipates the essential introduction of spiritual agents—the eldila, Oyarsa and ultimately Maleldil himself—to the novel.

But Ransom's gradually broadening perspective constricts violently once more when he overhears that Weston has brought him along to Malacandra to be presented to the *sorrs*, presumably as a human sacrifice. The same myths of "space" which had filled him with a dread of the illimitable night beyond Earth's atmosphere now supply fantastic and horrible images for what these *sorrs* might be:

He saw in imagination various incompatible monstrosities — bulbous eyes, grinning jaws, horns, stings, mandibles. Loathing of insects, loathing of snakes, loathing of things that squashed and squelched, all played their horrible symphonies over his nerves. But the reality would be worse: it would be an extra-terrestrial Otherness . . . (33)

Here Lewis allows his reader a perspectival advantage over his protagonist, for the Danæ allusion just past points the way toward release from Ransom's terrible fear, if the fear itself did not blind him to the prospect. Dane too felt an "extra-terrestrial Otherness" impinge upon her, but that meeting was cause for joy, not terror. Ransom tem-

porarily loses his place on the pinnacle of the "emotional watershed," and succumbs once more to those fears inculcated in him when his outlook was darker. The debilitating dread of what extra-terrestrial life might be prevents for a time any further re-shaping of Ransom's perspective: for the remainder of the voyage to Malacandra, Ransom's spirit writhes under the crushing weight of this new terror.

In his account of the spacecraft's descent to the alien planet Lewis gives a symbolic representation of just how hard it may be to forsake an old point of view, in order to adopt a new one:

Their bodies, in response to the planet that had caught them in its field, were actually gaining weight every minute . . . All sense of direction disappeared in a sickening confusion. . . . Sensations of intolerable height and of falling — utterly absent in the heavens — recurred constantly. (43)

"Humpty Dumpty had a great fall." Part of the agonies endured by Ransom, Weston and Devine — their sensations of intense heat, heaviness and constriction—are caused by their entry into the Malacandrian atmosphere, and Lewis is strictly within the bounds of science-fiction convention in reporting these effects as he does. But the worse symptoms — the confusion of their sense of direction, and their terrible vertigo and nausea — are brought on because they are suddenly, violently compelled to adopt the Malacandrian "vertical" after a voyage of some days in which all direction had been defined by the structure of the spaceship itself. Accustomed to a local and arbitrary standard of direction, the space-travellers find themselves accountable to the Malacandrian *absolute*. This "vertical" is literally the basis for that point of view suitable to the planet, for it defines all other direction: it is not for nothing that the humble plumb-bob remains the pre-eminent means of establishing architectural integrity. But of course Lewis has in mind something other than mere physical orientation: the more difficult re-adjustment to be made is a matter of the mind and spirit.

Ransom's outlook has been re-educated and redefined considerably since that evening in which Weston plucked him up bodily from the earth and bundled him off to Mars. But, not too surprisingly, Ransom finds new experience overtaking him rather more quickly than it can be accommodated from his new vantage point — and it would hardly be a credible characterisation if Lewis had decided otherwise. The torture of his descent to Malacandra is token of the further pains of re-adjustment Ransom must yet endure, the battle with his Wellsian fear of "Otherness" chief among them.

His dread of sentient extra-terrestrials must be confronted directly when Ransom meets the *hross* Hyoi. He has some help in the matter in that his academic training (as a philologist) fits him to recognise language (and therefore also reason) in the Malacandrian. But the new fact of extra-terrestrial rationality must be accommodated within a suitable perspective, and Ransom discovers that his own is simply not yet adequate to the task:

When the rationality of the *hross* tempted you to think of it as a man . . . it became abominable — a man seven feet high, with a snaky body, covered, face and all, with thick black animal hair, and whiskered like a cat. But starting from the other end you had an animal with everything an animal ought to have — glossy coat, liquid eye, sweet breath and whitest teeth — and added to all these, as though Paradise had never been lost and earliest dreams were true, the charm of speech and reason. Nothing could be more disgusting than the one impression; nothing more delightful than the other. It all depended on the point of view. (59)

Ransom discovers that his perspective is still too tightly bound to terrestrial memory to admit certain aspects of Malacandrian reality: that he has not fully admitted the new definition of "vertical." But to recognise the prejudice is, for Ransom, to begin to see past it, and he soon acknowledges the fundamental likeness between man and *hross* which is expressed in the *hrossian* word "*hnau*." The word is glossed later in the narrative by Oyarsa, who explains to Ransom that both of them are "*copies of Maledild*"; (135) thus the meaning of Lewis' word *hnau* is perhaps best rendered in English by the Biblical phrase, "the image of God." By invoking this concept of common descent from God as the basis of kinship between Ransom and the *hross*, Lewis establishes that the genuine "vertical," the absolute standard against which one's perspective must be calibrated, is neither of the Earth nor of Mars: it is not a matter of physical orientation at all, but of spiritual.²²

The extent to which the spiritual "vertical" becomes Ransom's own standard is shown vividly when the *hnakra* hunt ends with Weston's murder of Hvoi: with bitter irony Lewis describes (as from Ransom's point of view) the sound of the shot as "terrestrial, human, and civilised," leaving implicit the contrast between the great-hearted *hrossian* hunters and the human murderers. In an agony of guilt for bringing death upon Hvoi by his own presence, Ransom confesses to the dying *hross* that men are "only half *hnau*." (92) What had been the measure of normalcy for Ransom is itself measured against the celestial standard, and found wanting.

Lewis suggests clearly in his characterisation of Weston why man is best described as a broken creature, "only half *hnau*," whose unenlightened point of view is patently inadequate to the task of discovering reality. Ironically, Humpty Dumpty's blindness to reality, and his absurdly smug assumption of authority, fall to the novel's forward-looking prophet of "progress," the great physicist whose vision it had been to attempt the Malacandrian odyssey in the first place. Though he was responsible for putting Ransom "atop the wall," and so contributed indirectly to the reforming of Ransom's point of view, Weston is himself unwilling to suffer the adjustment in perspective necessary to allow entrance to the marvellous new perceptions Ransom enjoys. If it were a matter simply of accommodating himself to strange circumstances, of adjusting his practical mode of seeing and understanding physical reality, Weston would seem to be ideally suited to the task:

very early on their voyage, as he and Ransom discussed the sphericity of the space-ship, and its effect of distorting one's judgement as to the planes in which lay walls and ceiling, Weston remarked, "It is just the same on Earth, of course, only we are not big enough to see it." (25) But even earlier, before their journey had begun, Weston had betrayed the limits of his spiritual "vision" for mankind, when he referred to the simple Harry as "the sort of boy who in a civilised community would be automatically handed over to a state laboratory for experimental purposes." (21-22) When Ransom (whose intervention on Harry's behalf argues for precisely the opposite view) challenges Weston to justify his acts of battery and kidnap, the physicist expands upon that ugly concept of human "progress" suggested by his earlier, chilling use of the term "civilised":

"We have learned how to jump off the speck of matter on which our species began . . . the rights or the life of an individual or of a million individuals are [not] of the slightest importance in comparison with this." (23)

Thus it is Ransom, and not Weston, who recognises language, rationality and a common ancestry among himself and the natives of Malacandra; it is Ransom too who ultimately will be allowed that freedom of travel among the planets for which Weston so long has sought.

The disparity between the points of view held by these two men is illustrated whimsically when Ransom's audience with Oyarsa, the tutelary spirit of the planet, is interrupted by the procession which brings Weston and Devine under guard before them. Lewis describes the spectacle as it is seen through Ransom's eyes, to play upon a sudden reversion from Malacandrian to terrestrial perspective:

They were much shorter than any animal he had yet seen on Malacandra, and he gathered that they were bipeds, though the lower limbs were so thick and sausage-like that he hesitated to call them legs. The bodies were a little narrower at the top than at the bottom so as to be very slightly pear-shaped, and the heads were neither round like those of the *hrossa* nor long like those of *snorns*, but almost square . . . Suddenly, with an indescribable change of feeling, he realized that he was looking at men. . . . He, for one privileged moment, had seen the human form with almost Malacandrian eyes. (135)

This startling re-vision demonstrates that Ransom's parochial prejudices have been almost completely overcome: he sees things now which he could not have seen from the earthbound side of the celestial "wall."

While he had been engaged in reforming his own perspective upon "space," Ransom had speculated on the "peculiar twist of imagination which [had formerly] led him to people the universe with monsters"; (47) in Weston's interrogation by Oyarsa, Lewis exemplifies that deliberate wrenching or distorting of the perspective implicit in Ransom's use of the phrase "twist of the imagination." Weston's arrogant assumption of superiority brings

him to treat his angelic interlocutor and audience as if they were infants or savages:

To Ransom's intense discomfort, Weston . . . whipped out of his pocket a brightly coloured necklace of beads, the undoubted work of Mr. Woolworth, and began dangling it in front of his guards, turning slowly round and round and repeating, "Pretty, pretty! See! See!" (138)

His contorted perspective upon the heavens and upon Oyarsa himself leads Weston into this monstrous error. While some of Lewis' critics (notably Haldane) have objected to the buffoonery in this passage, Lewis uses it to make a serious thematic point: one's perspective does dictate one's response to reality; if that perspective is twisted and distorted, one's response can not be rational, either in large matters or in small. Lewis' comments on the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* suggest how one is meant to "take" Weston's characterisation:

It is a mistake to demand that Satan . . . should be able to rant and posture through the whole universe without, sooner or later, awaking the comic spirit. The whole nature of reality would have to be altered in order to give him such immunity, and it is not alterable. At that precise point where Satan . . . meets something real, laughter *must* arise, just as steam must when water meets fire. . . .²³

Like Milton himself, Lewis will allow no grand villains in his fiction: having credibly chosen darkness over light, Weston loses the ability to see at all.

When at last he is forced to recognise the power and intelligence (if not the authority) of Oyarsa, Weston attempts to show by his oratory the greatness of the "cause" he espouses. Lewis strips Weston's "scientific" philosophy of its high-flown rhetoric by having Ransom translate Weston's English into the Malacandrian tongue, which is then supposedly re-translated for the benefit of the reader:

"Life is greater than any system of morality; her claims are absolute."

"He says," began Ransom, "that living creatures are stronger than the question whether an act is bent or good — no, that cannot be right—he says it is better to be alive and bent than to be dead — no — he says, he says — I cannot say what he says, Oyarsa, in your language." (147)

By reducing the tenets of Westonism to Ransom's unambiguous terms, Lewis lays bare the pretentiousness and unreason of the physicist's philosophy. We are reminded forcefully that the same man who here claims ultimate pre-eminence for the abstraction "Life" had been more than willing to bring a human sacrifice (as he thought) to the *sorins*, had considered Harry's life negligible, had murdered Hyoui. As Oyarsa demonstrates in the diagnosis which follows Weston's performance, the absurdity and cruelty of Weston's philosophy derive ultimately from a flaw within his perspective, a kind of blurring of the spiritual vision:

"I see now how the lord of the silent world has bent you. There are laws that all hnau know, . . . and one of these

is the love of kindred. He has taught you to break all of them except this one. . . . [which] he has bent till it becomes folly and has set it up, thus bent, to be a little, blind [god] in your brain." (150)

The corrective appropriate to Weston's condition is, of course, to replace the little, blind god in the brain with Maleldil, the Malacandrian name Lewis gives to God himself, since for Lewis an adequate perspective upon reality depends upon a right relationship with reality's author. Here again, Oyarsa offers the real alternative to Weston's twistedness:

"It is the Bent One, the Lord of your world, [Satan], who wastes your lives and befools them If you were subjects of Maleldil you would have peace." (152)

But Weston will have none of it, and returns to the Silent Planet with his understanding as dark as before, still full of fears, but sure of the absolute rightness of the cause in which he struggles. Although he is perhaps not quite so smug as Humpty Dumpty — his assurance rests, after all, on the ultimate survival of his *species*, rather than upon his own invulnerability — he remains as blind to reality, for Oyarsa (who was present before human life began, and who will see its last hour) tries in vain to make Weston understand that no species — indeed no world — is made or meant to last forever.

Ransom, however, finds himself changed utterly by his sojourn in the heavens. Although the return journey is more perilous by far than the outward voyage had been, he is too full of wonder to have much place for fear; his point of view is changed altogether from what it had been before he was first set atop the wall:

He could not feel that they were an island of life journeying through an abyss of death. He felt almost the opposite — that life was waiting outside the little iron egg-shell in which they rode, ready at any moment to break in, and that, if it killed them, it would kill them by excess of its vitality. . . . Often the sense of unseen presences even within the space ship became irresistible His heart became steadier than it had ever been. (159)

Oyarsa had promised for Ransom's return journey the protection of "the *eldila* of deep heaven"; (154) this intimation of "unseen presences" surrounding him is Ransom's assurance that the promise has been kept. It seems almost that "all the King's horses and all the King's men" have become this reluctant Humpty Dumpty's guard of honour, as he ends his first adventure in the heavens. ¶

ENDNOTES

1. *Letters of C. S. Lewis*, (London: Bles, 1966), 204.
2. "Auld Hornie, F.R.S.," *Modern Quarterly*, N.S., I, 4 (Autumn, 1946).
3. "Nous pourrions dire que se dire vu comme une angoisse-nostalgie par Lewis et ses amis Tolkien et Charles Williams les a contraints se rendre aveugles aux problèmes de leur temps. Lewis, par exemple, refusait systématiquement de lire les auteurs modernes et se divertit lors de son cours inaugural Cambridge comme un vieux dinosaure. Nous avons ici, sur un autre mode, un développement du mythe de Peter Pan, celui d'une génération qui n'a pas voulu grandir." "L'expérience métaphysique dans la 'science-fiction' de C. S. Lewis," *Aspects de la littérature populaire (XVIIe - XXe siècle)*, 10 (1977), 105.

4. *Surprised by Joy*, (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), 167; see Lionel Adey, C.S. Lewis' "Great War" with Owen Barfield (Victoria, B.C.: English Literary Studies 1978).
5. *Christian Reflections* (Glasgow: Collins, 1981), 7-8.
6. *Miracles* (London: Collins, 1960), 85.
7. *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (London: Oxford University Press paperback, 1961; repr. 1977), 75.
8. *Letters*, 260.
9. *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1966), 76-77.
10. *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York: Macmillan, 1943, repr. 1978), 13-14. Subsequent references to this volume are given in the text.
11. "On Science Fiction" was first presented November 24th, 1955; it has been printed in *Of Other Worlds*, 59-73.
12. *Of Other Worlds*, 69.
13. *Ibid.*, 70.
14. *Ibid.*, 66-67.
15. Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (repr., New York: Random House, 1965), 94.
16. *Ibid.*, 88-89.
17. "The Wonder of Passage, the Making of Gold: Alchemy and Initiation in *Out of the Silent Planet*," *Mythlore* 41 (Winter/Spring 1985), 18.
18. Compare, for example, Bedford's desolate view from the moon, in H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon* (repr. New York: Heinemann, 1982), 347:
Over me, about me, closing in on me, embracing me ever nearer, was the Eternal, that which was before the beginning and that which triumphs over the end; that enormous void in which all light and life and being is but the thin and vanishing splendour of a falling star, the cold, the stillness, the silence — the infinite and final Night of space . . . an overwhelming Presence, that stooped towards me, that almost touched me.
19. See especially "The Womb of Space," fifth chapter of Walsh's *The Literary Legacy*, and Sys' "L'expérience métaphysique."
20. See Walsh, *Legacy*, 87.
21. *Perelandra* (London: Bodley Head, 1943), 232.
22. Michael Collins demonstrates that Ransom's facility in the Malacandrian language is intended by Lewis to reinforce the concept of common spiritual ancestry between *hman* of different planets. See "Jespersen on Toast": Language Acquisition in C. S. Lewis."
23. *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"*, 95.

Three Artistic Versions of 'The Death of Glorfindel'

Sarah Beach, Patrick Wynne and Paula DiSante

As a special artistic treat in this issue, we give you three versions of "The Death of Glorfindel." This project began with an idea from Paula DiSante, who suggested to her friends, Pat Wynne and Sarah Beach, that each of them attempt independent renderings of an agreed subject. The idea was put forward at Mythcon in Vancouver, where a fourth party (one Paul Nolan Hyde) selected the subject. The choice was made by eliminating often-done scenes (such as "The Mirror of Galadriel"). The basic passage chosen was from *The Silmarillion*, Chapter 23.

There was a dreadful pass, Cirith Thoronath it was named, the Eagles' Cleft, where beneath the shadow of the highest peaks a narrow path wound its way; on the right hand it was walled by a precipice, and on the left a dreadful fall leapt into emptiness. Along that narrow way their march was strung, when they were ambushed by Orcs, for Morgoth had set watchers all about the encircling hills; and a Balrog was with them. Then dreadful was their plight, and hardly would they have been saved by the valour of yellow-haired Glorfindel, chief of the House of the Golden Flower of Gondolin, had not Thorondor come timely to their aid.

Many are the songs that have been sung of the duel of Glorfindel with the Balrog upon a pinnacle of rock in that high place; and both fell to ruin in the abyss. But the eagles coming stopped upon the Orcs, and drove them shrieking back; and all were slain or cast into the deeps, so that rumour of the escape from Gondolin came not until long after to Morgoth's ears. Then Thorondor bore up Glorfindel's body out of the abyss (S, p.243)

Each of the artists has written a brief description of what contributed to his or her picture. The descriptions

are given in the order of the dramatic sequence (see pages 21, 39 and the back cover). We hope you will enjoy the results of this project.

Sarah Beach: My rendering of "The Death of Glorfindel" is actually for the moments before the event, the about-to-happen moments. I limited the figures to Glorfindel and the Balrog because I wanted to focus on the conflict of good and evil. Also, I rendered them without weapons, focusing on the spiritual nature of the battle. I suspect I was influenced in this by what Gandalf says to Frodo in Riven-dell, "You saw him for a moment as he is upon the other side." (FR, p.294)

Patrick Wynne: My depiction of "The Death of Glorfindel" closely follows the account given in *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two*, p. 194. Using a highly stylized approach seemed a good way to echo visually the pseudo-archaic, mannered prose of *BoLT*, and it gave me an opportunity to indulge my love of curvilinear forms. Stylization also made it easier to achieve the sense of space I was after — the sweeping curves of the chasm walls, as though viewed through a fish-eye lens, convey (I hope) a feeling of vast height which would have been difficult to portray with a more realistic technique. The curling plumes of smoke owe more than a little to Tolkien's rendition of the campfire in his illustration "The Trolls" for *The Hobbit* (see *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien*, No. 2), and there are other visual references to the work of certain current Tolkien fan-artists (I will let you figure them out for yourselves). I felt there would be a great deal of dramatic potential in depicting not simply the death-plunge of Glorfindel and the Balrog but the death-plunge a split second before its noisy, and no doubt messy, conclusion. My Balrog is a rather corporeal-looking creature, more like a gigantic Orc than the dimly-glimped horror of fire and shadow described in "The Bridge of Khazad-dûm", and this is in keeping with the description of these monsters in *BoLT* (cf. Joe Abbott's article in ML 59). My love of the Elvish languages led me to include as an integral part of the composition a panel describing the

(Continued on page 25)