

***Perelandra*: A Christian Myth**

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Introduction

There is an interesting episode concerning C.S. Lewis and his work *Perelandra*.

And Green remembers walking round 'Addison's Walk' at Magdalen in the middle of an idyllic summer night when the trees and spires stood out against a skyline lit by a low, unseen moon, and the dome of the sky was bright with stars. Brightest of all shone a superb planet: 'Perelandra!' said Lewis with such a passionate longing in his voice that he seemed for a moment to be Ransom himself looking back with infinite desire to an actual memory.¹

As the above episode proves, among his Space Trilogy—*Out of the Silent Planet* (1938), *Perelandra* (1943), and *That Hideous Strength* (1945)—*Perelandra* seems to have evoked the sense of longing most strongly in the author's mind as well as in its readers'. In fact, the greatest charm of *Perelandra* is this sense of longing, or *Sehnsucht*, which Manlove defines as "a longing, ultimately for, and sent by, God and heaven, awakened by certain images in his experience."² This sense of longing is what Lewis had been feeling with irresistible fascination since his childhood. Furthermore, it is also experienced by Ransom, the protagonist of *Perelandra*.

It was strange to be filled with home-sickness for places where his sojourn had been so brief and which were, by any objective standard, so alien to all our race. Or were they? The cord of longing which drew him to the invisible

isle seemed to him at that moment to have been fastened long, long before his coming to Perelandra, long before the earliest times that memory could recover in his childhood, before his birth, before the birth of man himself, before the origins of time. (211)³

Then what is this longing for? It may be natural to conclude it is for the paradise we had originally claim to live in, as we can see from the speech of the Unicorn in *The Last Battle* that proclaims the same feeling more directly when he finally reaches the new Narnia:

I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life, though I never knew it till now. The reason why we loved the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little like this. (171)⁴

Both Ransom and the Unicorn know by instinct where they originally belonged. The motif of longing appears repeatedly in Lewis' works, and as Manlove concludes, "it is in *Perelandra* that Lewis is most attempting to evoke *Sehnsucht*."⁵ We should also note that in *Perelandra*, the image of paradise is always associated with that of mother. Probably for Lewis, who lost his mother at the age of ten in 1908,⁶ the maternal warmth is the best vehicle to convey the idea of paradise.

In order to evoke the sense of longing in the reader's mind, Lewis chooses the form of myth as a framework of his story. In fact, classical mythology has been referred to for allegorical, symbolic, didactic, ornamental and romantic purposes ever since the Medieval era, and of all English writers, Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* is the direct model of *Perelandra*, "represents the climax of the Renaissance use of classical mythology."⁷ In his composition of *Perelandra* Lewis' major interest lies in creating a myth of his own, rather than in using myth for

allegorical or ornamental purposes, as Marjorie Nicolson points out.

Earlier writers have created new worlds from legend, from mythology, from fairy tale. Mr. Lewis has created *myth* itself, myth woven of desires and aspirations deep-seated in some, at least, of the human race... As I journey with him into worlds at once familiar and strange, I experience, as did Ransom, "a sensation not of following an adventure but of enacting a myth."⁸

The word myth originally refers to an old story whose origin may be uncertain but that has survived with the race for a long span of time. Myth, in other words, is something spontaneously born with a particular race in a particular circumstance. Therefore, creating a new myth of his own can be said to be an ambitious attempt.

His ambition of myth-making is understandable when we recall Lewis's inaugural lecture at Cambridge University in 1954, in which he called himself a 'dinosaur' feeling more affinity for the old 'discarded image' than the contemporary development of technology and scienticism.⁹ Although *Perelandra* belongs to the category of science fiction, only the journeys back and forth take the method of space-travel because Lewis needs to locate a new world where he can repeat the temptation of Eden. Once Ransom is in *Perelandra*, the mythic atmosphere and such Christian argument as the theme of the temptation in the Garden of Eden and the averted Fall dominate the story. As the theme of the novel is the averted Fall, Lewis naturally follows the outline of Genesis 3 and adapts some ideas from and makes some changes to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Thus, Lewis takes up a triple challenge in his creation of *Perelandra*: to present the argument of the temptation and the averted Fall in the first place, while creating a mythical world, and moreover, it is a world for which we cannot but feel longing as something

“at once strange and familiar.” This paper attempts to show Lewis’s interpretation of the temptation and how he fuses the Christian doctrine into a new mythical world while evoking a sense of longing for the new world. First, we will examine what image the landscape of *Perelandra* conveys and how it contributes to create a mythical atmosphere, and then the meaning of the Fixed Land, and finally the process of the temptation.

The Landscape of *Perelandra*

In *Perelandra* we encounter the Green Lady, the Satanic tempter, the Hesperian dragon, mermen, singing beasts, spiritual beings, and the King in the Edenic world of floating islands. These elements may be enough to create a mythical atmosphere, but the landscape needs to be suitable enough to accommodate the Christian argument of the temptation in its unique form. For example, the Fixed Land, the counterpart to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, must play the same role as the tree, yet, at the same time, it must bear a meaning unique to the world of floating islands.

Lewis says that the starting point of *Perelandra* was a mental picture of floating islands and then, only then, the story about the averted fall developed.¹⁰ Since only half the book is concerned with the plot of the story and “the remainder is largely undisturbed contemplation of the planet and its inhabitants,”¹¹ the landscape plays as important a role as the story itself. As one might expect from Lewis’s motive of writing *Perelandra*, the landscape he presents before our eyes has a strong impact on us and we are at once immersed in the sensuous world of rich colors, smells, tastes, sounds and textures.

There was no land in sight. The sky was pure, flat gold like the background of a medieval picture. It looked very distant—as far off as a cirrus [cirrus] cloud looks from earth. The ocean was gold too, in the offing, flecked

with innumerable shadows. The nearer waves, though golden where their summits caught the light, were green on their slopes: first emerald, and lower down a lustrous bottle green, deepening to blue where they passed beneath the shadow of other waves. (165)

Upon reaching *Perelandra*, Ransom immediately senses the maternal warmth of the planet.

The water gleamed. The sky burned with gold, but all was rich and dim, and his eyes fed upon it undazzled and unaching. The very names of green and gold, which he used perforce in describing the scene, are too harsh for the tenderness, the muted iridescence, of that warm, maternal, delicately gorgeous world. (165)

We should note such maternal images are prevalent in *Perelandra*. For example, when Ransom sees the sleeping Queen before the combat against the Un-man, he wishes to have seen Eve: "As he stood looking down on her, what was most with him was an intense and orphaned longing that he might, if only for once, have seen the great Mother of his own race thus, in her innocence and splendour." (246) And also, Ransom's recuperation after the combat is compared to infancy when he repeats only eating and sleeping like a baby.

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. (270)

Here Lewis denies the image of Venus as an amorous deity but attributes a maternal image to her. These descriptions, though only a part of many, have more direct and sharper impact on the modern reader who is not so familiar with the classical

mythology than does the enumeration of exotic names from the classical mythology like that of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Lewis chooses the maternal image to describe the new paradise since it is something every reader remotely remembers and feels longing for. This must be also due to the loss of his mother in his childhood.

In such a new world the temptation of Eden is repeated. In Eden eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was prohibited, but in Perelandra, as the background is so different from that of the earth, sleeping on the Fixed Land is prohibited. The purposes behind the prohibitions are the same: man must show his obedience to God on his free will.¹² It is important to see what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents in the context of Eden and what the Fixed Land does in the context of Perelandra so that Lewis's interpretation of the Biblical prohibition may be made clearer.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Fixed Land

Let us first examine what eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil means in *Paradise Lost*. The serpent tells Eve that if she eats from the tree, she will be all-knowing like God.

he knows that in the day
Ye eat thereof, your eyes that seem so clear,
Yet are but dim, shall perfectly be then
Opened and cleared, and ye shall be as gods,
Knowing both good and evil as they know.

(Book IX.705–9)¹³

But, after all, it proves that they know only evil through the loss of good:

since our eyes
Opened we find indeed, and find we know
Both good and evil, good lost and evil got,

Bad fruit of knowledge, if this be to know, (Book IX.1070–3)

Milton paraphrases the meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as follows:

It was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil from the event; for since Adam tasted it, we not only know evil, but we know good only by means of evil. For it is by evil that virtue is chiefly exercised, and shines with greater brightness. (*Christian Doctrine*, Book I.x.A)¹⁴

Before the Fall, becoming godlike through knowledge alone is emphasized and it is not suggested that Adam and Eve are conscious that knowing good and evil means rebelling against God by taking the place of their Creator. But rather, Adam makes an excuse saying that they could co-exist with God as angels or two of many other gods. According to Lewis, Milton's and his contemporaries' understanding of sin is much influenced by St. Augustine: to be interested in oneself rather than in God is the sin of pride.¹⁵ First, Satan committed this sin and seeing the inclination to commit the same sin in everyone else, he tempted Eve to disobey God.¹⁶ However, it is not clear whether Milton thought that knowledge itself would lead man to fall, as he only seems to imply that knowledge will lead one to God in the sense of all-knowing.

Next, let us see what the Fixed Land, the counterpart to the tree of Eden, means in *Perelandra*. Lewis's interpretation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is reflected in *Perelandra*. In the world where everything is floating, the nature of human beings there is not fixed, either. The Green Lady, the Queen and "Eve" of *Perelandra*, is constantly growing up unlike Milton's Adam and Eve who were created as mature beings from the beginning.¹⁷ Maleldil's education of the Queen is described in the image of his rolling new waves towards her, and she accepts such form of education obediently; "But how

can one wish any of those waves not to reach us which Maleldil is rolling towards us?" (187)

In such a world as Perelandra, the Queen does not have a home as of the terrestrial standard and yet the whole world is her home.¹⁸ At the same time she has no concept of possession.¹⁹ Even if she cannot hold on to a particular island, a new island sent by the waves seems good enough for her. This is one of the big differences between her and Ransom. For when Ransom lands on an island by chance and leaves there for a short period of time, he certainly feels homesick for the island.²⁰ On the other hand, the Queen never feels longing for anything particular. Then we can conclude that this sense of longing is unique to the one who has eternally lost the very best, i.e., paradise, because this sense does not suit the nature of Perelandra where one is expected to accept what Maleldil rolls towards him. Complete trust in Maleldil is emphasized in Perelandra. Even the obtainment of food is chance-met. Ransom does not know where to find the fruit he liked but he is given a fruit as good or even better the next time. While the whole nature of the world is as such, the desire for something fixed seems to be against the plan of the world. The following speech of the Queen near the end clarifies the meaning of the Fixed Land:

The reason for not yet living on the Fixed Land is now so plain. How could I wish to live there except because it was Fixed? And why should I desire the Fixed except to make sure—to be able on one day to command where I should be the next and what should happen to me? It was to reject the wave—to draw my hands out of Maleldil's, to say to Him, "Not thus, but thus"—to put in our own power what times should roll towards us...as if you gathered fruits together to-day for to-morrow's eating instead of taking what came.²¹ That would have been cold love and feeble trust. And out of it how could we ever have climbed back into love and trust again?(286)

To command where she should be next and what should happen to her is indeed to become her own god as an old *sorn* once said on Malacandra that in the bent world of Thulcandra everybody wants to become a little Oyarsa.²² Therefore, to live on the Fixed Land means to be one's own god, and this is certainly Lewis' interpretation of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Argument of the Temptation

The Un-man, the tempter, tries to persuade the Queen to live on the Fixed Land. Just like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the Un-man first appeals to the Queen's imagination, and after that, to her will. In the final stage of the temptation he robes her in a feather gown and tells her to look in a mirror to see how she looks in the gown. The Queen immediately realizes that the face in the mirror is her own but fears and dislikes the inorganic reflection of her face. Vanity of the artificial mirror is contrasted to the rich reflection of the waves on the roof of the sky:

He saw the golden roof of that world quivering with a rapid variation of paler lights as a ceiling quivers at the reflected sunlight from the bath-water when you step into your bath on a summer morning. He guessed that this was the reflection of the waves wherein he swam. It is a phenomenon observable three days out of five in the planet of love. *The queen of those seas views herself continually in a celestial mirror.* (165) [Italics not in the original.]

To the Un-man's question as to what is fearful in the mirror, she answers as follows:

"Things being two when they are one," replied the Lady decisively. "That thing" (she pointed at the mirror) "is me and not me."

“But if you do not look you will never know how beautiful you are.”

“It comes into my mind, Stranger,” she answered, “that a fruit does not eat itself, and a man cannot be together with himself.” (236)

In response to her the Un-man attempts to ensnare her into narcissism:

“A fruit cannot do that because it is only a fruit,” said the Un-man. “But we can do it. We call this thing a mirror. A man can love himself, and be together with himself. That is what it means to be a man or a woman—to walk alongside oneself as if one were a second person and to delight in one’s own beauty. Mirrors were made to teach this art.” (236)

Of course we can learn from the Ovidian story of Echo and Narcissus, that the one who loves himself suffers from the sense of split within because he can never be united with himself.²³ This whole passage will remind the reader of Milton’s Eve who barely escaped from narcissism warned by the voice of God right after her creation.

As I bent down to look, just opposite,
 A shape within the wat’ry gleam appeared
 Bending to look on me, I started back,
 It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
 Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
 Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
 Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,
 Had not a voice thus warned me, ‘What thou seest,
 What there thou seest fair creature is thyself,
 With thee it came and goes: . . . (Book IV.460–9)

But long before Milton there was a tradition which attributes the Fall of man to narcissism. Hermes Trismegistus wrote about the creation of the universe and Man and his Fall in *Poimandres*.²⁴ When Man descended from Heaven to the Earth, he saw his face reflected in the water in lower Nature, loved it, desired to live in it, and the wish was realized. The Un-man gives a trinket mirror as a gift from Deep Heaven. The mirror, when we think of the fact that the archetype of which, i.e., the surface of water, has caused destruction of man in various stories, takes on a very symbolic meaning. The arrival of Weston's space-ship which fell out of Deep Heaven corresponds to *Poimandres* in which Man fell from the top of the universe to the Earth.²⁵

The Un-man, however, goes farther and gives the mirror to the Queen "to keep." The concept of keeping is to teach the Lady who has no concept of possession, and ultimately the convenience of the Fixed Land. But the whole point of the temptation at this stage is to manipulate the Queen at the subtler level. By showing her image through the mirror, the Un-man tries to show the image of her great soul; to awaken the sense of ego. That is to see oneself objectively. Lewis calls this the "dramatic conception of the self." When Ransom saw the Queen in her feather robe, "for the first (and last) time she appeared to him at that moment as a woman whom an earth-born man might conceivably love." (235) She looks like a great queen in a great tragedy. Here Lewis is against self-dramatization. By playing a role on stage, one can emancipate some restrained feelings but probably Lewis thinks that this means to enter the Lady's 'alongside world' and become an outsider, and this is what the Un-man was deliberately teaching the Queen. This will lead the Queen to the eventual disobedience because playing a role as if on stage in real life means denying the role Maleldil has given the Queen to play. This attitude is the same as the wish to live on the Fixed Land as the Lady later finds out. Thus, the Un-man tries to persuade her to become her own

god by awakening her ego.

Conclusion

Through the close reading of *Perelandra*, Lewis's interpretation of the meaning and the process of the temptation have been made clearer. While Milton is subtle about whether knowledge itself will lead man to fall, Lewis clearly states that living on the Fixed Land means making sure what comes next, and thus, becoming one's own god. In *Perelandra* the Fall is averted and it is witnessed by Ransom who has eternally lost Eden of his own world. Ransom's longing for the lost garden and wish to prevent the new one from falling evoke the longing for the lost garden of our own as well as for the preserved one with its rich blessings. It is the longing for something which we can never take hold of, however precious it is, for we know we have lost it for ever. As we have seen, it is the maternal image that Lewis uses in order to evoke this sense of longing in his myth, *Perelandra*. For Lewis, who lost his mother in his young age, there was a glimpse of paradise in the image of mother.

NOTES

1. Roger Lancelyn Green & Walter Hooper, *C.S.Lewis: A Biography* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 171.
2. C.N.Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* (Cambridge University Press, 1975), 110.
3. All the quotations from *Perelandra* are from *The Essential C.S.Lewis* ed. by Lyle Dorsett (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), 145-296.
4. C.S.Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978).
5. Manlove, 110.
6. See Green & Hooper, 24-5 for a detailed account of his mother's death and its effect upon his family.
7. Mark Morford & Robert Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (Longman, 1977), 474.
8. Green & Hooper, 165-6 quoting from Marjorie Nicolson, *Voyages to the Moon* (1948), 251-5.
9. C.S.Lewis, "De Descriptione Temporum," in *They Asked for a Paper*, in *The Essential C.S.Lewis*, 481.
10. Hooper, ed., *Of Other Worlds* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 87. In his discussion with Kingsley Amis and Brian Aldiss, Lewis denies the idea that he constructed *Perelandra* for a didactic purpose but many readers question it.
11. Manlove, 105.
12. See *Paradise Lost*, Book III and *Perelandra* Ch. 9 where Ransom says, "I think He made one law of that kind in order that there might be obedience. In all these other matters what you call obeying Him is but doing what seems good in your own eyes also... Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless He bids you do something for which His bidding is the *only* reason?" (223)
13. All the quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Scott Elledge (W.W.Norton & Company, 1975). This is one of the numerous examples of the idea that knowledge will make one all-knowing therefore like a god. See Book IX, 716-6, 758-9, 789-90, 893-4, 863-6, 932-7, and 1053-5.
14. John Milton, 328.
15. See C.S.Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (Oxford University Press, 1942), 66.
16. See Lewis, *Preface*, 66.
17. See Lewis, *Preface*, 117. "Adam was, from the first, a man

in knowledge as well as in stature.”

18. “Which do you call my island?” said the Lady.
 “The one you are on,” said Ransom. “What else?”
 “Come,” she said, with a gesture that made that whole world
 a house and her a hostess. (184)
 “What is *home*?”
 “The place where people live together and have their possessions
 and bring up their children.”
 She spread out her hands to indicate all that was in sight.
 “This is my home,” she said. (185)
19. “Keep it?” she asked, not clearly understanding. (237)
20. See the quotation in the Introduction.
21. The idea of gathering fruits for the next day echoes the
 miracle of manna in *Exodus* 16, according to which the Israelites
 were not allowed to keep the manna until the next morning.
22. See C.S.Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (Macmillan Publishing
 Co. Inc., 1965), 102.
23. See my “Splits in the Story of Echo and Narcissus: *Metamorphoses*
 3. 339–510,” *Bulletin of the College of General Education, Niigata
 University*, No.22 (1991), 171–7.
24. See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Beacon Press, 1958),
 150–1.
25. See *Perelandra*, 193.