

Maria Luísa Franco de Oliveira Falcão

University of Lisbon, Centre for English Studies

From Madeira to Venus and Back

It may be a temptation to equate realism with ‘serious’, and fantasy with non-serious fiction. C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) does not ignore this frontier, but in some of his books he wants to experiment and find out what things that are important to him look like if you try peering through the other end of the looking glass. This is what he calls “supposal” or alternative story. In a supposal, fictional characters become real within the imaginary world; they are not an artful imitation but the genuine article. In *Voyage to Venus*, the contours of the plot are known to all of us. However, the farfetchedness of the narrative and the strikingly genuine characters sharpen our perspective and make us reconsider this familiar scene with new eyes.

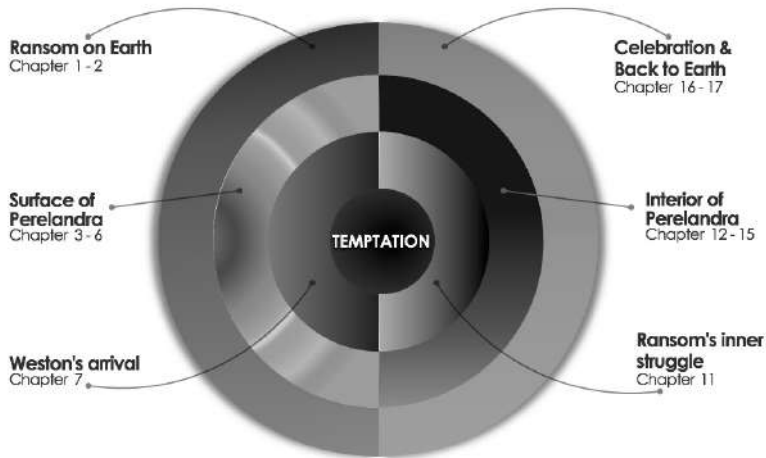
To start with, we must bear in mind that C.S. Lewis is a Platonist and a Christian. Both Plato’s allegories and the *Book of Genesis* imply that, due to a breach in a previous state of harmony, the truth we apprehend is now limited to a distant recollection of the “The Forms” or a pale copy of the “Real”. It has therefore become of the utmost importance to recover man’s unified knowledge in order to discern the symbolic meaning our concrete reality has retained. For Lewis, symbol puts the reader in touch with the reality that is behind it, and myths are symbolic descriptions of ultimate reality itself.

Some explanation should now be offered to account for the title of this paper: “From Madeira to Venus and Back”. *Voyage to Venus*¹, later published as *Perelandra* (and here usually referred to by this name),

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Voyage to Venus* (London: Pan Books Ltd, 1962).

is the second novel in C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*², but can be read on its own. It is a happy coincidence that this paper is about a book where an important part of the action takes place on islands – the stunningly beautiful “floating islands” on Perelandra/Planet Venus – and Madeira is also an island, equally endowed with lavish colours and landscapes. So, what better place could there be than Madeira to start our Voyage to Venus and then come back to share such an unforgettable experience?

As Sanford Schwartz in *C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier*³ points out, *Perelandra*'s seventeen untitled chapters are symmetrically organized. The protagonist is Professor Elwin Ransom, a philologist, and the narrator is a fictional C.S. Lewis, another Cambridge professor. The story, as we can see in the following image, forms a kind of loop, beginning with the departure from Earth and ending with the return to Earth:



² The first and third books in C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy*, also known as *Ransom Trilogy*, are, respectively, *Out of the Silent Planet* and *That Hideous Strength*.

³ Sanford Schwartz, *C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier: Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The book opens outside Worchester railway station, some 106 miles from Cambridge. Lewis has just arrived and is now setting out on a three-mile walk to meet Professor Ransom, who had already been on planet Mars in the first book of the trilogy. As the narrator approaches the cottage, he is invaded by an eerie feeling of being in the presence of something inhuman and evil. Fighting for each step, he eventually reaches the house just to find it empty and dark. On the door, a note from Ransom explaining he was going to be delayed. Lewis enters and hears Ransom's name pronounced:

The sound was quite astonishingly unlike a voice. It was perfectly articulate: it was even, I suppose, rather beautiful. But it was, if you understand me, inorganic. [...] more as if rock or crystal or light had spoken of itself⁴.

And this is what he sees:

What I saw was simply a very faint rod or pillar of light. [...] the column of light was vertical but the floor was not horizontal [...]. The impression [...] was that this creature had reference to some horizontal, to some whole system of directions, based outside the Earth⁵.

This mysterious presence, no matter how difficult to account for, put a stop to the utter panic Lewis had experienced all along the way from the station. He now felt sure that this creature, whatever it might be, was “good”, although he had some doubt as to whether he should feel safe. From what Ransom had long ago told him, he knew he was in the presence of an *eldil*, the archon of Mars, or, in other words, the *Oyarsa* of Malacandra. This is the state of mind Ransom finds Lewis in when he at last arrives, opens the door, and warmly greets his friend.

Before we proceed, it might be useful to look at some of the basic concepts and terminology concerning Perelandrian Cosmology and Language, as shown in the following table:

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

THE TRILOGY COSMOLOGY Some basic terminology	
Field of Arbol	the solar system
Deep Heaven	outer space
Malacandra	Mars
Perelandra	Venus
Thulcandra	the Earth (the Silent Planet)
Eldil (pl. eldila)	a lord or ruler
Maleldil	the Lord
Oyarsa (pl. Oyéresu)	the presiding eldil(s) of Malacandra and Perelandra
The Bent One	the Bent Oyarsa of Thulcandra
Old Solar	the language spoken throughout the Field of Arbol (except in Thulcandra, the Silent Planet)

In the long conversation both men engage in, Ransom explains to Lewis that the strange difficulties and eerie feeling he had experienced on his way to the cottage were neither more nor less than a psychological barrage built by Earth's bent eldila to prevent him from arriving at the cottage and helping Ransom to go to Planet Venus, or Perelandra. According to what Ransom had been told by his "contacts", the Black Archon – our own bent Oyarsa of Thulcandra – was planning some sort of attack on Perelandra, and Ransom had been ordered there on some as yet undisclosed mission by the Oyarsa of Malacandra – the very creature Lewis had met in the cottage. Ransom was well acquainted with him from his previous adventure on Mars, or Malacandra.

Lying on the floor of the cottage sitting room, Lewis had, in fact, already noticed a kind of box, of a strange, disquieting shape, large enough to put a man into, although he had not immediately identified what it was. Ransom now explains that this sort of coffin-shaped container is a spaceship, sent by the Oyarsa of Malacandra, where he is to undertake his voyage to Venus.

The shadow of the impending separation hovers over both of them. The two friends exchange the last few words. The hour has come. Ransom with no clothes on, lies down in the coffin and makes a still reluctant Lewis fasten the lid. The next moment he was gone.

More than a year goes by. One night the Oyarsa summons Lewis back to the cottage. After a few hours on the train, he finds himself in the small overgrown lawn where he had last seen the space traveller. There was a little speck in the sky against the rising sun and the casket lands in the garden. A naked voyager steps out on the grass, “almost a new Ransom, glowing with health and rounded with muscle and seemingly ten years younger”⁶. After a hot bath and, of course, a large cup of tea, he tells Lewis the story that follows. Along the following 15 chapters, Lewis, the narrator, tells us what had happened in Ransom’s Voyage to Venus.

Chapters 3 to 6 take place on the Edenic surface of Perelandra, with its large number of ‘floating islands’ and one continent or ‘Fixed Land’. Ransom is sometimes at a loss for words to describe what he had seen, not because he couldn’t recollect the sensations, but because they seemed much too real and beyond the descriptive power of words. “The sky was a burning dome of gold,” he tentatively said, and when he tells he remembered seeing life as a “coloured shape”, Lewis comments that this was all too vague to be put into words. Ransom’s answer is short and sharp:

On the contrary, it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can’t be expressed is that it’s too *definite* for language⁷.

These four chapters not only work as way into the dense core of the novel, but they also bear considerable thematic weight. They are crucial to understand what is at stake in *Perelandra* and they enlighten us on the real history of our own planet. Four central themes have been singled out:

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

- pleasure vs guilt
- otherness and reality
- time as the cornerstone of the universe
- the expected good vs the given good

When he reaches Perelandra, Ransom is so overwhelmed by such bounty – the juice of the great globes of yellow fruit, the delicious shower bath from the bubble trees, the bread-like green berries – that he is surprised not to feel guilty about such excessive pleasure, as Lewis, the narrator, reports:

... the strange sense of excessive pleasure which seemed somehow to be communicated to him through all his senses at once. I use the word ‘excessive’ because Ransom himself [...] was haunted, not by a feeling of guilt, but by surprise that he had no such feeling⁸.

Only later does he realise that this comes from his being on an unfallen planet, where nature had not yet been spoilt by evil.

In the following scene of chapter 4, Ransom had not long been in Perelandra, when he glimpses what he takes to be a green man on another distant island. Night falls. The next morning, the ocean brings the islands closer to each other, and the stranger is standing on the opposite shore, face to face with Ransom:

For one second the alien eyes looked at his full of love and welcome. Then the whole face changed: a shock of disappointment and astonishment passed over it. Ransom realised, not without a disappointment of his own, that he had been mistaken for someone else. [...] And the green man was not a man at all but a woman⁹.

We will later learn that the Green Lady, together with her Lord and King (absent now), make up the first and only human pair on the planet, where she lives in a state of original innocence. Apart from her colour,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

she is exactly like women on Earth, but this likeness highlights the deep differences in nature and behaviour. When Ransom tries to describe her, he has to resort to paradoxical images, for the Green Lady is both a real woman and the archetypal woman: she is endowed with “a calm which no storm has ever preceded¹⁰; she is

Beautiful, naked, shameless, young – [...] obviously a goddess: but then the face, the face so calm [...] made her a Madonna. [...] yet at any moment she might laugh like a child, or run like Artemis or dance like a Maenad¹¹.

Ransom and the Lady engage in a long dialogue and by listening to them we grow aware that the purpose of *Voyage to Venus* is a “quest for otherness” in the sense that Lewis does not use what is outlandish or bizarre for the sake of mere difference, but to invite us to take a mental step back and adopt a cosmic, theological view of the drama enacted in front of our own eyes. In other words, he wants to challenge us to drop certain prejudices responsible for our difficulty to accept that fiction may be the best way to help us recover our long lost “unified knowledge” and realise that all is part of the same broad plan, of the same Reality.

This is why it has been argued that C.S. Lewis did not write allegories but “supposals” or “alternative stories”. An allegory addresses the reader’s understanding, as distinct from imagination. In an allegory, the Green Lady is Eve; in a “supposal”, the Green Lady is who she is; she has a symbolic and mystic quality that appeals both to the intellect and to sensitivity; she represents and signifies at the same time.

In what could be considered a prefiguration of eternity, Time is presented as encapsulating an event that is the cornerstone of the whole universe. The narrator reports the Lady’s words to Ransom:

“[I]n your world Maleldil first took Himself this form, the form of your race and mine. [...] Since our Beloved became a man, how should Reason in any world take on another form? [...] Among times there is a time that turns a corner and

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

everything this side of it is new. Times do not go backward. [...] We are on this side of the wave [...]. All is new¹².

On another occasion, the Lady is wondering how it was possible that on Earth one might not welcome a wave sent rolling towards him by Maleldil. But then Ransom reminds her of her own disappointment when she had mistaken him for the King as they had first met. Had she not wished it to be otherwise?

The Lady bows her head in intense thought. But when she at last speaks, her words resonate with the joy of realising that, by conforming to Maleldil's will, she has acquired a new freedom:

You could send your soul after the good you had expected, instead of turning to the good you had got. You could refuse the real good; you could make the real fruit taste insipid by thinking of the other [...] [y]ou have made me see [...] that it is I, I myself, who turn from the good expected to the given good. [...] I thought [...] that I was carried in the will of Him I love, but now I see that I walk with it. [...] I thought we went along paths – but it seems there are no paths. The going itself is the path¹³.

All these issues on prohibition and freedom are compressed into the ban on the “Fixed Land”: Maleldil has forbidden the Lady and the King to sleep there. We are never told why, but it stands to reason that the Fixed Land is seen as a place of stability and appropriation, as opposed to the constant gift of the change and unexpectedness of the floating islands. Not surprisingly, it is during a brief visit to the Fixed Land that they see something falling from the sky. Ransom's guess proves to be right: it is Professor Weston, an evil scientist from Earth. We are now entering chapter 7.

Professor Weston is a diabolical agent of the Bent Eldil of Thulcandra (our planet) who uses the physicist's body to escape his long confinement on Earth and to carry destruction throughout the universe. The Un-man, as Ransom calls him, stands for the final degradation of humanity into

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

a state of mechanical hammering of the same empty utterances: “I am the Universe. I, Weston, am your God and your Devil. I call the Force into me completely...”¹⁴ The Un-man’s mission eventually becomes obvious to Ransom: he has been sent by the evil Force to tempt the Green Lady into disobeying Maleldil’s ban on the Fixed Land.

The Temptation Scene, in the central chapters 8-10, is a masterpiece of narrative art. Weston’s arguments are sickening, enervating, almost boring – but extremely dangerous. The reader himself does not escape the torture of being bombarded, flooded *ad nauseum* with lies, distorted truths, endless arguments, which work by mere exhaustion.

One scene is particularly insidious. Ransom had been telling the Lady that in his own world another woman had listened to another Weston, and she had done exactly what he was now telling her to do: go against Maleldil’s command. And because of it “all love was troubled and made cold, and Maleldil’s voice became hard to hear so that wisdom grew little among them”¹⁵. But Weston was quick to twist the argument:

He has not told you that it was this breaking of the commandment which brought Maleldil to our world and because of which He was made man. He [Ransom] dare not deny it!¹⁶.

This is, of course, a devilish perversion of St. Augustin’s *Felix Culpa*, for no evil can force God, as divine mercy is pure gift. And when Ransom challenges the Un-man to tell whether it had rejoiced that Maleldil had become a man, “the body that had been Weston’s threw up its head and (...) gave a long melancholy howl like a dog”¹⁷.

The temptation scene goes on and on, relentlessly, and even the reader feels he will not be able to endure it much longer. The Lady proves resilient but Weston changes tactics and lures her into all the well-known paths of human temptation, varied in a thousand forms.

While the Lady has to struggle against the hammering of the Tempter’s words, in chapter 11, Ransom goes through his own spiritual

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

ordeal. The unfairness of the whole situation strikes him: The Enemy had sent Weston, but where was Maleldil's representative? Come, how could he, a Cambridge man, fight an immortal enemy? The task was too formidable for him to face it all on his own. Only a miracle could save the Lady...

In the silence of Someone's Presence Ransom realizes that if a miracle was needed, *he* was the miracle. If Weston had landed in Perelandra, so had he. "If the issue lay in Maleldil's hands, he and the Lady *were* those hands"¹⁸. It dawned on him that when Eve had fallen, God was not Man. But now, it was different; through other men He would henceforth save and suffer. Ransom realises that the coincidence of his name: "Ransom" – a price paid to set someone free – was no mere accident. Appalled by the weight put upon his shoulders, he decides to obey the Voice ordering him to drive the Un-man from the surface of Perelandra.

In the symmetrical structure of the novel, chapters 12 to 15 – in the interior of Perelandra – are the antithesis of chapters 3 to 6, which portray the Edenic surface of the planet. Ransom is now entering the final phase of his physical and spiritual ordeal in an archetypal journey down to the dark regions, where he chases the Un-man and succeeds in wounding it. The dying physicist exploits Ransom's vulnerability, both by tearing his flesh with its claw-like nails and by conjuring terrifying visions of hell and eternal despair and damnation:

"Do you not know who I am?" [asked the Un-man].

"I know *what* you are," said Ransom. Which of them doesn't matter."

"And you think, little one," it answered, "that you can fight with me? You think He will help you, perhaps? (...) Could He help Himself?" – and the creature suddenly threw back its head and cried in a voice so loud that it seemed the golden skyroof must break, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama, sabachthani.*"¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁹ "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15, 34).

And the moment it had done so, Ransom felt certain that the sounds it had made were perfect Aramaic of the First Century. The Un-man was not quoting; it was remembering. These were the very words spoken from the Cross”²⁰.

The fight goes on at agonising length until Ransom, summoning all his strength, kills Weston’s body and shoves the corpse over the edge of the cliff.

In the final chapters (16 and 17), an exhausted Ransom, slowly emerges from the regions of darkness and is carried upward by a stream, which leaves him on the mild and sunlit surface of Perelandra. The colours, sounds, smells, the joyful, overflowing bounty of that young planet welcomes him again.

He eventually ascends to a mountain top, where he has the revelation of what had been accomplished through him. He witnesses the transfer of power and authority from Malacandra and the Oyarsa of Perelandra to Tor and Tinidril – for these are the real names of the King and Queen, who now assume the role of guardians over Perelandra.

Ransom realises that the Earth is, after all, not the centre of the inhabited Universe, and is appalled by the idea of a universe without a centre – he remembers Weston saying that there was no meaning, no design or purpose in the universe.

But when he beholds the Great Cosmic Dance, he realizes that each of Maleldil’s creatures is the centre, and there is no opposition between the centre and the periphery of creation. Malacandra is the centre, Thulcandra is the centre, Perelandra is the centre – because Maleldil is the centre.

The great Hymn of Praise, with the refrain “Blessed is He”, addresses the glory of the Creator and sings the glory of the creatures, for they are all invited to freely enter the dynamic harmony of the mysteries of Deep Heaven. And we hear the echo of Corinthians 15, 28: “... when all things shall be subdued unto him [...], that God may be all in all.”

The vision fades and Ransom is alone with Tor and Tinidril. The moment has come for him to return to England – and we to Madeira, on our Silent Planet – no longer so silent, because, having listened to the

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 140.

Music of the Spheres and beheld the Great Dance in Deep Heaven, we
have now learnt how...

To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour²¹.

References

- Blake, William, "Auguries of Innocence", in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Blake, Complete Writings (with variant readings)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 431.
- Lewis, C.S., *Voyage to Venus* (1955; London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1962).
- Manlove, Colin, *C.S. Lewis: His Literary Achievement* (1987; Cheshire: The Winged Lion Press, 2010).
- Schwartz, Sanford, *C.S. Lewis on the Final Frontier – Science and the Supernatural in the Space Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence", in Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Blake, Complete Writings (with variant readings)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 431.