

C. S. Lewis: Imagining Heaven

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This is a large and appealing subject, and I intend to travel through it slowly. I begin with the most obvious, with the fact that C. S. Lewis imagines heaven by calling 'Deep Heaven' the heavens of our own world, and by peopling this astronomic space with recession upon recession upon recession of fabulous creatures. Ransom, the hero of the space travel trilogy, meets many of these on Malacandra, or Mars, and on Perelandra, or Venus, while in the final volume earth itself, become Thulcandra, is invaded by a procession of planetary gods. The whole of what to us may be merely the star-lit blackness of the sky becomes for Ransom 'the fields of heaven', vibrating with life; a place rather than bare space. Voyaging to Mars, 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 holes or gaps in the living heaven—excluded and rejected wastes of heavy matter and murky air, formed not by addition to, but by subtraction from, the surrounding brightness'.¹ On the return voyage, 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 eggshell 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'.² It is a nice paradox, to subvert our customary way of seeing.

1. *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 44. For convenience I give throughout the page numbers of the paperback editions of Lewis's works, where these exist.

2. *Out of the Silent Planet*, pp. 170-71.

Re-imagining the World

For one realizes that Lewis's first concern—and this may be surprising and even disconcerting—is to imagine heaven by re-imagining the world 'as it is'; to discover the invisible not behind but within the visible. The beauty and the diversity of this re-imagining, with its ability to create in the reader, or at least in this reader, the appropriate sense of wonder, or what Ransom himself calls 'severe delight' seems to me a major achievement.³ For one thing, all the creatures Lewis devises give on to some kind of social or poetic or theological truth, and remain in the mind. One does not forget the main figures, such as the *sorns*, *hrossa* and *pfiffltriggi*, the intellectuals, warrior-poets and craftsmen of Malacandra, nor the numerous 'redundant' beings like the singing beast of Perelandra, whose 'evident wish' is 'to be for ever a sound and only a sound in the thickest centre of untravelled woods'.⁴ One is unlikely in particular to forget Perelandra's other Adam and Eve, to whom Ransom says, kneeling—but one needs to have followed the whole story to receive the power of his words, and to see why those creatures draw us so deeply: 'Do not move away, do not raise me up ... I have never before seen a man or a woman'.⁵ Nowhere in literature do I know of descriptions of angels as strong, or at least as persuasive, as those of *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*, or of the chapter 'The Descent of the Gods' in *That Hideous Strength*, when the angels of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Saturn and Jupiter pass through Ransom's house, with a counterpoint of effects, as in comedy, among the principals in an upstairs room and the lesser characters in the kitchen.

This act of imagination certainly succeeds, in that the cosmos appears as a result immeasurably more rich and alive. We know that Lewis was protesting in part against the so-called 'scientific' view of space as cold and arithmetical regressions of nothingness, a view summed up in the famous sentence of the *Pensées* which Pascal probably puts into the mouth of his hypothetical atheist: 'The eternal silence of those infinite spaces fills me with dread'.⁶ He was also protesting against the habit in H.G. Wells and others—and more particularly against the sources of that habit—of assuming that extra-terrestrial creatures would necessarily be

3. *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 34.

4. *Voyage to Venus (Perelandra)*, p. 177.

5. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 190.

6. Fragment 201 in the Penguin edition.

monstrous. But has he deceived us, by mixing the fictive with the real? It is a complex question, but one that needs to be asked, even if I seem to be criticising Lewis when I have only just begun what is intended to be a celebration.

There is presumably no problem with the *eldils*: no problem, I mean, either for Christian belief or for literary logic. As planetary gods they repeat the mediaeval notion that the pagan Mars and Venus and so forth were dim visions of real powers, of angels or archangels, whose natures had been misunderstood and corrupted as they entered the imaginations of fallen men. Such is the theory, indeed which Ransom learns on *Perelandra*: the universe is one, 'a vast whispering gallery', and traces of deep memory reach us even now over an almost infinite distance, so that mythology is 'gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility'.⁷ This is perfectly clear, and coherent, though no Christian has to be persuaded by it, and even Lewis's prose view, as it were, his view outside story when he is speaking in his own name, is rather more tentative. He writes in a letter of 29 December 1958 that '*if* the angels (who I believe to be real beings in the actual universe) have that relation to the Pagan gods which they are assumed to have in *Perelandra*, they might *really* manifest themselves in real form as they did to Ransom.' Within story, however, as the tutelary angels of planets, the *eldils* whom Lewis invents for Mars and Venus belong to the same system of angelical government as the devil, whom Lewis considers, in both his story world and in the actual world, to be the temporary lord of Earth, 'the fallen Archon under whom our planet groans'.⁸

One senses in Lewis the storyteller, in fact, a strong will to believe what he is imagining. When Ransom stands before the *eldils* on *Perelandra* and thinks to himself, 'with deep wonder': 'My eyes have seen Mars and Venus. I have seen Ares and Aphrodite',⁹ does not Lewis's writing pleasure depend on the conviction that one could actually have that experience? And does not our reading pleasure, if we are Christian readers, depend on the possibility that Lewis is right—not because we too might go to Venus and see the gods but because certain of the pagan deities might really be figures of angels and could one day become known

7. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 187.

8. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 187.

9. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 186.

to us? Perhaps I am misunderstanding what Lewis means, in the same letter, by a 'supposal', and he is using the awe that we can imagine feeling on meeting Mars (a pure hypothesis) as an analogy to suggest the awe we should feel on meeting an archangel (a probable future event). Yet Ransom also wills to believe in the *genius loci*. Wandering in a cave on Perelandra and encountering a quite alien creature of 'insufferable majesty', he wonders if there might not be 'some way to renew the old Pagan practice of propitiating the local gods of unknown places in such fashion that it was no offence to God Himself but only a prudent and courteous apology for trespass'.¹⁰ One sees from the last phrase that even if one rejects the speculation, there is still—and this is the force of so much of Lewis's writing—some truth and some lesson here to take away.

The real problem, if it is one, lies elsewhere. How are we to understand this reflection of Ransom's on Perelandra? 'He remembered how in the very different world called Malacandra ... he had met the original of the Cyclops ... Were all the things which appeared as mythology on Earth scattered through other worlds as realities'.¹¹ A later formulation of that same surmise¹² serves as epigraph to 'Forms of Things Unknown' in *The Dark Tower and other stories*—Lewis's story of astronauts encountering a Gorgon on the moon. We can assume that Lewis does not believe that there are sorcs on Mars or Gorgons on the moon; but then, what does he believe, since Ransom is not simply shown to be wrong. On the contrary: these are his thoughts on the journey back from Malacandra: 'if he had felt some such lift of the heart when first he passed through heaven on their outward journey, he felt it now tenfold, for now he was convinced that the abyss was full of life in the most literal sense, full of living creatures ... His brain reeled at the thought of the true population of the universe'.¹³ 'Literal' is the word to notice. At the end of the story, in a letter supposedly written to the author, Ransom addresses him like this: 'If we could even effect in one per cent of our readers a change-over from the conception of Space to the conception of Heaven, we should have made a beginning'.¹⁴

10. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 170.

11. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 39.

12. See *Voyage to Venus*, p. 92.

13. *Out of the Silent Planet*, p.171.

14. *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 180.

Either, one might think, there really are creatures on other planets—not 'literally' sorns on Mars but literally something somewhere—in which case we can rejoice in a space transformed into a inhabited heaven; or there are not, so that as soon as we quit Lewis's fictions we find ourselves back once again in the star-strewn void. It is true that we might want to say that this very superfluity of the universe is a wonder and a revelation. It seems to serve no purpose other than the very lofty one of simply *being*. It has a size which not only shows us our own smallness but also suggests, what is far more important, something of the infinity of God's being and the exuberance of his creativity, the hyperboles of his limitlessness—his 'eternal power', indeed, 'and Godhead' (Romans 1:20). It does so, moreover, with a beauty which overtops even the sublime, and is quite other than our aesthetic categories. But Lewis wants us to see the universe as peopled, and whatever we think of the way he has tried to convey that sense of a space bursting with lives (by sometimes both requiring and disallowing a suspension of disbelief), we can surely agree that he is justified. Ransom reels at the thought of the true population of the universe, and if we are Christian, shouldn't we? We don't know *where* they are, nor very much *what* they are, but if we are still visited with the old belief, we do know that hosts of angels and archangels, of cherubim and seraphim, of thrones, dominions, principalities and powers, throng somewhere in the realm of heaven, and that Lewis's desire to imagine other forms of rational life is met in reality by the existence of 'all the company of heaven', of rank on rank of God's creatures. Lewis's fiction transforms, or gives another substance to, one's image of fact.

For the non-Christian reader, as also for the Christian, is there not a challenge to reconsider the vocabulary we use of the cosmos and the value-judgements that it implies? We talk of 'dead' planets, and of the interstellar 'void'. The stars themselves are 'mere' matter. To redeem the universe for human emotion we do not need to imagine deities, and the raining of influence. We need to see human life as one kind among many. No matter is 'mere'; each heavenly body has a life of its own; even the distance between stars is, on our scale, a miraculous magnitude. The universe does teem with life, and the further such life is from the life that we know, in us and around us, the more it takes us out of ourselves, places our 'I am' in a larger 'there is', and frees us into the generosity of being.

I have laboured the point deliberately since Lewis's first and somewhat unwonted way of imagining heaven is to imagine it as *here*. He places it in this world, by using the confusion, in English as in other languages, between 'heaven' as a quite other dimension belonging to God, and 'heaven' or 'the heavens' as the physical universe visible to us, in small part, as the night sky. The confusion, it seems to me, is itself suggestive, and not to be dismissed as mere mythical geometry, as the naive spatialisation of thought of those who have not yet come of age. Another way is that of the chronicles of Narnia. These too make use of pagan mythology, and more fully of fairy story, but they do so to create a parallel world existing alongside this one. The characters enter it by magic as the figure of grace, and although it is not heaven (it is not Aslan's own country) all the children who are admitted there know it to be better than this world. It stands between our life on earth and our future life in heaven, and it represents in part, as I understand it, the experience of heaven that we have on earth. But its main feature is the fact that one has to go there, and that the going is a rare and totally unpredictable gift.

Heaven as here; heaven as decidedly not here. Those are the two narrative ways, different and differently suggestive, in which Lewis imagines heaven, in the science fiction trilogy of 1938 to 1945 and the seven tales of Narnia of 1950 to 1956. (Whether he intended them or not, I am sure he was pleased by the power and centrality of the numbers 3 and 7 which govern the two series.) Those are also the two ways which I want to explore, and in considering, first, heaven as here, one can also glance at two further, specific means of proposing heaven as a present reality.

Heaven as Here

The first describes heaven by conceiving a world without a Fall. Both Malacandra, which has nevertheless been struck by the devil from afar and includes a region without life, and especially Perelandra, whose first Man and Woman are in danger of a Fall but resist the temptation, are heavenly in the sense that there is no transgression, and God, or Maleldil, is everywhere present. They are the imagining of what it would have been like to live on an unfallen earth, in perfect communion with God, with each other, with the creation, with time; almost free of the sense of a distinction, and with no sense of a separation, between 'earth' and 'heaven'.

Lewis goes even further back, in *The Magician's Nephew*, to imitate the Creation itself, in Aslan's founding of Narnia. This is one of the major imaginative moments of the chronicles, as Aslan's ever-changing song brings into being a world much like our own yet with a gladness that one usually meets only in poetry or (even better) in certain moments of righted vision. Like the experiences of Ransom on Perelandra ('There was a exuberance or prodigality of sweetness about the mere act of living which our race finds it difficult not to associate with forbidden and extravagant actions'¹⁵), it impels one to re-read the opening chapters of Genesis, and enables one to recover something of the surprisingness, the delight, the ordered plenty, of a narrative whose grandeur has been considerably dignified for us by the weight of piety.

The ambition of Lewis's project, and also the perfection of his structuring of the overall story, can then be seen in the fact that, after the creation of Narnia, there follow in *The Last Battle*, the next and final book, its destruction and re-creation. There is an intimation here not of what it would have been like, but of what it will be like to live in a re-created world, in the 'new heavens' and the 'new earth' of the carefully worded promise (2 Peter 3:13), when the earth shall once again be heavenly. But only an intimation. The closing pages can only reach to the beginning of the new world and of the real story, and Lewis, like anyone else, 'cannot write' what will happen there.

The other way of suggesting heaven is to describe this world, or the story-world, as suddenly, even if quite mundanely, marvellous. After a great deal of time spent in the underground world of Underland, the children in *The Silver Chair* finally make their way back to the surface. Again, one needs to have read all the foregoing to get the force of their reaction; 'They had not only got out into the upper world at last, but had come out in the heart of Narnia. Jill felt she could have fainted with delight'. 'Jill rejoined Eustace and they shook one another by both hands and took in great deep breaths of the free midnight air'.¹⁶ Heaven, or so the suggestion goes, is like coming out into real air.

This concentration on our own world comes partly from Lewis's unwillingness to think too much about what heaven will really be like. The unwillingness comes in its turn, first, from his

15. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 32.

16. *The Silver Chair*, pp. 185, 189.

conviction that such thinking cannot lead anywhere. 'I wasn't at all questioning the life after death you know', he writes in a letter of 16 October 1960, 'only saying that its character is for us unimaginable.' The last word has a particular force coming from Lewis, who continues: 'The Bible seems scrupulously to avoid any *description* of the other world, or worlds, except in terms of parable or allegory'. So Lewis's own versions of heaven, without being specifically parables or allegories, will be adumbrations having their origin in this world. But he was also *wary* of thinking about heaven. What counts is the life now and for ever with God, and the idea of heaven can actually distract us, while our need for it may be wrongly motivated. In *Reflections on the Psalms*, he writes: 'Most of us find that our belief in the future life is strong only when God is in the centre of our thoughts; that if we try to use the hope of "Heaven" as a compensation (even for the most innocent and natural misery, that of bereavement) it crumbles away. It can, on those terms, be maintained only by arduous efforts of controlled imagination; and we know in our hearts that the imagination is our own'.¹⁷ Note the suspicioning of the imagination, and also the persuasion that the future and the other world is most vivid when we are fully alive in the here and now. We are not to look for an after-life through disappointment with life, nor 'seek' another 'country' (Hebrews 11:14) from despair of this one.

And after all, although we talk of heaven as another world, don't we do so in part because of the inadequacy of speech and of human comprehension—or of the speech and comprehension of *fallen* humans? Since the physical universe is what we know, we assume that heaven is somewhere else, even though we also assume (rightly or wrongly) that it does not have the normal characteristics of a place: a number of dimensions and a passage through time. But the eldil of Malacandra tells Ransom that everywhere is the heavens, 'there is nowhere else', but that he is not 'here' on Mars altogether in the way that Ransom is.¹⁸ One then recalls certain moments in the Bible when heaven is 'here', though not quite as we are. On waking from a famous dream of angels ascending and descending a ladder which reaches up to heaven and to God, Jacob says to himself, not that in the other dimension of dream he has had a true vision, but: 'Surely the Lord

17. *Reflections on the Psalms*, pp. 39-40.

18. *Out of the Silent Planet*, p. 139.

is in this place; and I knew it not ... this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven' (Genesis 28:16-17). Heaven brims over, as it were, from an experience in the mind to an actual place, somewhere between Beer-sheba and Haran. When Elisha's servant is afraid because of the Syrian army, Elisha prays for his eyes to be opened, 'and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire' (2 Kings 6:17). The mountain is real and located near the city of Dothan, and no less so are the fiery horses and chariots. And what of the Transfiguration? Jesus appears to Peter, James and John still not, I presume as he really is, but with a semblance much closer to his heavenly reality, as do also Moses and Elijah. The disciples are not given a telescopic vision of an event occurring in a distant elsewhere. Their eyes are opened so that they can see better and differently: so that they can glimpse the heaven which is nearer to us than anything else but also, because of sin, terribly and, but for grace, irremediably, distant.

One might also recall that in Matthew's gospel, the message of John the Baptist (3:2), of Jesus (4:17) and of the disciples (10:7), is that 'the kingdom of heaven is at hand', or 'is upon you' according to the New English Bible, or 'has drawn near' according to the Greek. (This is announced, to be sure, not as a new piece of theological information but as a reason for repentance.) The consequence of all this is that imagining heaven means attending, first, to the everyday earth, to the world in space and time that we have been set to inhabit: to '*this* place', since *this* is the house of God and *this* is the gate of heaven. It means, not beaming up to a totally different otherwhere but responding to, and indeed loving, what Lewis was still prepared to call the real. The real was neither something he suspected nor something rather dull and inferior to be tolerated grudgingly in the absence of, or on the way to, a superior world. He speaks with excitement of the real, and for reasons which are aesthetic as well as theological. In his talk, 'Is Theology Poetry?' he says: 'The contemplation of what we take to be real is always, I think, in tolerably sensitive minds, attended with a certain sort of aesthetic satisfaction—a sort which depends precisely on its supposed reality ... for the gravity and finality of the actual is itself an aesthetic stimulus.' I believe he is right, and that he knows something, incidentally, which in our own day the varieties of post-structuralism and post-modernism, and indeed all thinking which ends - not which begins

but which ends—by placing the word 'real' in inverted commas, cannot know.

I would add from my own experience something that others must realise better that I do: that what people who are not Christians call 'Christianity' or 'religion' is in no way a hopeful or even a convinced speculation about something more tenuous than the real—more marvellous, perhaps, yet less substantial—but that, on the contrary, any contact with God is an illuminating of reality such that everything outside that way of seeing, of believing, of sensing even, becomes unreal, part of the mere dream of the fallen self.

So heaven for Lewis is both other and the same. It is first, the real enhanced. Readers of *Perelandra* will remember the heightened sensations of Ransom as soon as he wakes on the new planet. He gets a mouthful of sea water: 'it was drinkable—like fresh water and only, by an infinitesimal degree, less insipid. Though he had not been aware of thirst till now, his drink gave him a quite astonishing pleasure. It was almost like meeting Pleasure itself for the first time'. He encounters the smells of the forest: 'To say that they made him feel hungry and thirsty would be misleading; almost, they created a new kind of hunger and thirst, a longing that seemed to flow over from the body into the soul and which was a heaven to feel'.¹⁹ He still experiences hunger and thirst, not something entirely different, but his sensations have become more capacious than on earth. It is even said of the sweet and completely satisfying drink which is tasted in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* that it is 'real water', 'stronger than wine'.²⁰

For Lewis imagines heaven as the world changed, as the more-than-real, as the really real. (This is also something which animates a great deal of poetry, including much that is not otherwise Christian. Is it perhaps the central *anima* of all poetry?) And this is accompanied by the conviction that it is *we* who shall know heaven, not some ghostlier version of ourselves, not some ethereal and disembodied soul. 'We shall eat of the tree of life', he says in 'The Weight of Glory' (surely one of the great English sermons), and the eating will be done by the whole man, including this risen body.

19. *Voyage to Venus*, pp. 30, 36.

20. *Voyage of the Dawn Trader*, pp. 193, 198.

Lewis begins another sermon, 'A Slip of the Tongue', with the following anecdote: 'using the collect or the fourth Sunday after Trinity ... I found that I had made a slip of the tongue. I had meant to pray that I might so pass through things temporal that I finally lost not the things eternal; I found I had prayed so to pass through things eternal that I finally lost not the things temporal.' Lewis goes on, naturally, to criticise the mistake, as an unwitting disclosure of a secret dread which I dare say he is not alone in undergoing: 'I come into the presence of God', he says, 'with a great fear lest anything should happen to me within that presence which will prove too intolerably inconvenient when I have come out again into my "ordinary life".' Properly meant, however, the inverted prayer is surely a good one: a prayer that Lewis might endorse. Let me not so understand, or misunderstand, heaven, that I lose, if only temporarily, an earth and humanity which he intends not to abandon but to transfigure.

To meet the real, however, to know even the outer edge of reality in this life, is also (and this too the poets say) to encounter death. It is to discover the necessary supersession of the self and of its world as they are now. When Prince Caspian tastes the sea in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, he says, 'That's real water, that. I'm not sure that it isn't going to kill me'.²¹ It is as if reality and death were natural or supernatural allies, so that dying itself becomes real, and a cause for jubilation. When Eustace meets the resurrected Caspian at the end of *The Silver Chair*, he draws back, and says to Aslan, 'Hasn't he—er—died?' to which the comeback is this: "Yes," said the Lion in a very quiet voice, almost (Jill thought) as if he were laughing'.²² Lewis is excellent at thus changing one's angle of vision on things, and he makes Aslan continue: 'He has died. Most people have, you know.' At the end of the chronicles of Narnia, on the final page of *The Last Battle*, this is how the children react to the thought that they might be dead: 'Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.'

Heaven as not Here

But for those of us who are not dead, this transfiguration, this realising, of the universe, is painfully incomplete, and an attention to 'this place', though right for the time being, is not enough. We are still in history, and as Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, 'God

21. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, p. 193.

22. *The Silver Chair*, p. 203.

has no history. He is too completely and utterly real to have one'.²³ It is true that we are not God, and maybe had there been no Fall we should have experienced history nonetheless, only with no sense of limitation, of diminished reality. But there has been a Fall, and living in a fallen world we long for a world unfallen. Half-alive, we long for life. It is also true that this continues to be the earth which God made and sustains each day: if we do not desire it we cannot truly desire heaven. Yet equally, if we do not want the earth—despite our desire or perhaps precisely because of our desire—to change, we cannot claim that we know it to be fallen.

For what we have on earth is of course not heaven but glimpses of heaven. Ransom in the science-fiction trilogy can only experience 'heaven' for a length of time by leaving the earth altogether and travelling to the re-imagined planets of Mars and Venus. On his return, he is sick with longing. The children in the Narnia stories pass through a wardrobe, a painting, a door in a wall, into a more heavenly world having points of contact with this one. They gain access to another land and to a time which expands magically in the split second during which they are absent from earth. It is, in a way, a common idea, associated with shrines, with holy places: the sense of a sacred otherness which, though unfamiliar, impinges on the familiar. Although the children continue, moreover, to experience a sort of time, they do not really age, so that the reader enters a seeming timelessness, as a figure of the greater timelessness (if that is the correct word) of God and of heaven. It is an experience which Eliot had explored, and which one can know fitfully in prayer. It relates to what Lewis himself discusses at the end of *Reflections on the Psalms*. Commenting on the statement of St. Peter's that, not only are a thousand years as one day with God (as in Psalm 90:4), but 'one day ... as a thousand years' (2 Peter 3:8), he argues that the conception of 'the timeless as an eternal present has been achieved. Ever afterwards, for some of us, the "one day" in God's courts which if better than a thousand, must carry a double meaning. The Eternal may meet us in what is, by our present measurements, a day, or (more likely) a minute or a second; but we have touched what is not in any way commensurable with lengths of time, whether long or short. Hence

23. *Mere Christianity*, p. 134.

our hope finally to emerge ...' The children too hope finally to emerge, but in the meanwhile they are continually thrust back into the every-day world of rooms and schools.

The ideal would be to pass through the glimpses of a heavenly, or haunted, earth into the fullness beyond: to come out on the other side. For Lewis, the longing for heaven is not that we should shuffle off this mortal coil and go elsewhere but that we should *enter*, and advance always 'farther up and farther in.' Again in 'The Weight of Glory' he says: 'At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door ... We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get *in*.' One finds the same spatial metaphor in *Perelandra*, when Ransom is yearning to return to Malacandra-Mars: 'I get the real twinge ... on hot summer days - looking up at the deep blue and thinking that *in there* ... there's a place I know'.²⁴ We should normally have spoken of Mars a being 'out' there; Lewis has one again overturned our perspective. Indeed, his metaphorical space is always surprising. The sermon continues: 'Nature is only the image, the symbol; but it is the symbol Scripture invites me to use. We are summoned to pass in through Nature, beyond her, into that splendour which she fitfully reflects. And in there, in beyond Nature, we shall eat of the tree of life.'

'In through', 'in beyond': these are most careful ways of describing the relation of heaven to an earth both fallen and capable of re-creation. But because that prepositional movement is precisely what, for the time being, we cannot achieve, we also feel pain. It is again, in part, a matter of aesthetics. 'The Weight of Glory' also says: 'We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see ... to become part of it. That is why we have peopled earth and air and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image.' It is an interesting suggestion, and partly explains why, even in contemporary writing, we cannot get such creatures out of our minds. Hence what Lewis calls in the preface to the new and

24. *Voyage to Venus*, p. 17.

revised edition of *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 'sweet desire'. It is an 'intense longing' characterised by the fact that though the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight'. Indeed, it cuts across our ordinary distinctions between wanting and having. To have it is, by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it'.²⁵ He returns to this in a much later letter, of 5 November 1954: 'All joy (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more amusement) emphasises our pilgrim status: always reminds, beckons, awakes desire. Our best havings are wantings.' One recognises the definition of joy in *Surprised by Joy*, and its even more haunting association there with distress: it is 'an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction... and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure ... it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief.'²⁶

So one needs another perspective on to death. It would be a cause for rejoicing if we could die and see God, but we cannot. Hence, though mercifully only at certain moments, the ache of exclusion. This is how Lewis phrases it in the letter just quoted: 'About death, I go through different moods, but the times when I can *desire* it are never, I think, those when this world seems harshest. On the contrary, it is just when there seems to be most of Heaven already here that I come nearest to longing for the *patria*.' Psyche was to say, in *Till We Have Faces*: 'It was when I was happiest that I longed most ... for death.'²⁷

Lewis goes directly from this thinking about 'sweet desire' to his practice as a storyteller, and also to his reflection on narrative. In the essay 'On Stories', he homes to the specific power of story to create an otherness of imaginative atmosphere. He says of his boyhood reading of tales about 'Red Indians': 'I wanted not the momentary suspense but that whole world to which it belonged', and he sees the aim of science fiction as being not to suggest 'merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance' but to realise 'that idea of otherness which we are always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space'. The point about a giant in a story is similarly not that he is a danger but that he is a giant. Yet there is no question here of mere escapism. On the

25. *The Pilgrim's Regress*, pp. 7, 8.

26. *Surprised by Joy*, p. 20.

27. *Till We Have Faces*, p. 82.

contrary. One is only capable of fully appreciating this otherness if one can achieve something like it for oneself in the times and spaces of daily life: 'No man would find an abiding strangeness on the Moon unless he were the sort of man who could find it in his own back garden.' And he sees the otherness, as ever, not as a way out of life but as a way back into it, saying of a particular book: 'the whole story, paradoxically enough, strengthens our relish for real life. This excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual.' The book in question—and this is typical of Lewis's willingness to follow his admirations and his thought wherever they take him—is *The Wind and the Willows*.

The difficulty of story, for Lewis, is that while its theme is usually 'something other than a process and much more like a state or quality,' it is always in danger of losing the state or quality in the process, of dissipating the strangeness in the necessary successiveness of things happening. His explanation for this is that life is like that too. We are constantly looking forward to something, a homecoming, say, or reunion with a beloved, but it eludes our grasp: 'something must happen, and after that something else ... can any such series quite embody the sheer state of being which was what we wanted?' What we want is indeed to *be*, but we find ourselves moving through time, just as the imaginative otherness of story has to advance through the plot. Yet we have more chance in story than in life of capturing the elusive bird of being, and that is what stories are for: not to relieve us of the responsibility of searching in real life for the being, the otherness, the 'timelessness', that we know in imagination, but to show us something of what such a state would be like. Precisely because it is fiction and artifice, story can move slightly outside fact and nature.

As I said, the relation which Lewis is arguing between earth and heaven implies not that this earth is enough, nor that its evil demands that we go elsewhere but that the beauty of earth, the joy of life, are such that they call us 'in beyond' themselves to 'another country', to what Digory, finding himself in the re-created Narnia, calls 'more like the real thing'.²⁸ For Lewis, this involves imagining a world somewhere between the two, since he can neither be content with describing this world nor presume to

28. *The Last Battle*, p.153

describe heaven. One sees here the Romantic Lewis, but also Lewis the Renaissance scholar and Lewis the Platonist. I should like to close by exploring those two contexts for his work, not so as to 'place' him but so as to see what we can learn.

The Lady on Perelandra finds it strange to 'think about what will never happen', but someone from Earth replies: 'in our world we do it all the time. We put words together to mean things that have never happened and places that never were: beautiful words, well put together. And then tell them to one another. We call it stories or poetry ... It is for mirth and wonder and wisdom... Because the worth is made up not only of what is but of what might be'.²⁹ In Lewis's usual way, with no assumption of authority (through eloquence or the signalling of momentousness) but with a simple vocabulary going about its work, he has surely offered a perfect apology for literature, and indeed for language. Words when they form patterns that intend beauty and order detach themselves ever so slightly from what is, so as to create another world—in Lewis's case Narnia, Malacandra, or Perelandra itself—which is not quite this one but stands to it in a relation of virtuality. One recognises the Sidney of *An Apology for Poetry*, commending true poets who 'borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shall be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be.'

Indeed, as one remembers the most famous passage in the *Apology*, which contrasts the brazen world of nature with the golden world of the poets, one realises how apposite Sidney's thinking is to Lewis's narratives. 'Nature never set forth the earth ... with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers' as the poets have done, or, one might add, as the poet in Lewis has done in his invented worlds. Lewis too has grown 'in effect another nature', whose purpose, as in Sidney, is not to lead away from nature as we know it but to conduct the reader back to the earth. Art leads us away from the earth so as to return us to the earth in its becoming, just as a belief in heaven makes the here and now not less but more desirable.

One remembers that the seven books of Narnia, although they lead eventually to heaven, lead also to England. In travelling to Narnia and then to Narnia re-created, the children come in the

29. *Voyage to Venus*, pp. 93-4

final pages of *The Last Battle* (as does the speaker of Eliot's *Four Quartets* in the final pages of 'Little Gidding') to where they started, to 'the real England', the 'inner England' of which 'no good thing is destroyed'.

The Platonism of Lewis is equally clear. When Digory explains to the children, again at the end of *The Last Battle*, that the old Narnia was a shadow or a copy of the 'new Narnia', the 'real Narnia', just as England and our world are a shadow or copy of something in heaven,³⁰ he refers explicitly to Plato, and so places the whole series of the chronicles in part under Plato's aegis. 'Shadow' and 'copy' relate, moreover, to another word which teems over these pages, the word 'like', and it is here that I want to concentrate my final thoughts. Even within our own world, it is arguable—and poetry argues this—that we need 'like', we need comparison of one thing with another, not only so as to have a world, a totality rather than a number of discreet items, but even so as to have the individual thing with which we start. Only by placing it in relation to something else do we begin to see it. We come to know the world by a process of likening. (The etymology of the word also encourages one to say, rather surprisingly, that we come to know the world by liking it.) But 'like' is also the means by which we move beyond the world. It takes us out of our reality without merely projecting us into an absolute elsewhere. We can make story worlds and poetry worlds which are 'like' ours though different, and a Christian will explain this ability in part by the fact that another such world actually exists: that earth is 'like' heaven, and heaven 'like' earth.

One could add that the other way of exiting from this world, in time rather than in space, is by returning to origin, and there too one finds that the Bible comes to our assistance with a 'like'. The first humans are said to be created in the 'image' and 'likeness' of God (Genesis 1:26), and part of the implication of that origin seems to be that we have the capacity to liken, in and especially out beyond our world, because we carry likeness'within ourselves.

Do we not also desire at times to reach a point beyond likeness, to find a something so grounded that it has no need of similitude and so much itself that it does not continually surrender part of its reality by being compared? Once again the

30. *The Last Battle*, pp. 153-54.

Bible has gone ahead of us, for as Aquinas said, although we are like God, God is not like us. God in Himself is the incomparable. 'I am God, and there is none like me', He says in Isaiah (46:9). 'Who in the heaven can be compared unto the Lord?' asks a psalmist; 'who among the sons of the mighty can be likened unto the Lord?' (Psalm 89:6).

'Like' is a small word from which one can derive a view of not less than everything. In pushing beyond likeness to the Being of God, Lewis is also careful to take to its proper extremity the otherness of the same. Heaven is not like earth in the sense that it is our world made dazzlingly better, since we are told that there will be 'new heavens' and a 'new earth' and we do not know what they will be like (any more than we know what we shall be like ourselves). So I shall close by moving from Lewis to St. Paul, for a comparison which he uses makes this perfectly clear, while also creating just that 'Romantic' sense of wonder of which Lewis so approved. The resurrection of the dead, Paul says in a famous passage which all readers of poetry and story can meditate, is like a wheat seed which turns, beyond all expectation, into wheat: the body is 'sown' in the ground as a natural body and is raised as a 'spiritual body' (I Corinthians 15:37-44). Heaven is like this world, our future bodies are like our present bodies, but only as a wheat field is like a sack of grain. That is why, as Lewis says, it is unimaginable. Living in the world we know and trying to imagine heaven is like living in world where corn existed only in the form of seeds and trying to imagine acres of wheat shining in the sun and swishing in the wind.