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Laurel Wood

Pepperdine University, laurel.wood@pepperdine.edu

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No Mere Materialism: Death as Crucible in C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy

C.S. Lewis brought a firm conviction to his fiction that stories had the power to teach, to bypass readers' ideological presuppositions and challenge them to consider ideas which he would normally dismiss. In "The Packed Reality of Heaven," Monika B. Hilder asserts that "the power of art to depict lived emotional experience is a...more enduring teacher than cool reason" (96). The didactic character of Lewis's fiction is almost universally recognized, with the Space Trilogy being no exception. An inversion of the idea of the hostile universe advanced by science-fiction writers such as H.G. Wells, Lewis's foray into the writing of 'scientifiction' presents a universe in perfect harmony with its Creator. The series' protagonist, Cambridge philologist Elwin Ransom, finds that the universe outside of earth affirms the Christian faith in ways he has never been able to conceive of, and that the rational inhabitants of other worlds love and worship Christ, whom they know as Maleldil. With Ransom, readers explore the unfallen world of Malacandra, where death is not feared but welcomed as the gateway to perfect union with Maleldil; journey to Perelandra, where temptation threatens a new Paradise; and return to Earth to battle what Lewis termed 'scientism,' a position held by evolutionary materialists who assert that there is no life beyond death. Scientism is the primary ideological opponent which Lewis designed the Space Trilogy to combat, defined in Lewis's "Reply to Professor Haldane" as "the belief that the supreme moral end is the perpetuation of our own species, and that this is to be pursued even if, in the process of being fitted for survival, our species has to be stripped of all those things for which we value it— of pity, of happiness, and of freedom" (*On Stories*, 109). The aim of the Space Trilogy is to demonstrate the ultimately demonic results of scientism in practice and to offer an alternative via the cosmically harmonious picture of Christianity illustrated by Ransom's interplanetary travels.

While much scholarship has been dedicated to the allegorical and apologetic qualities of these works, the peculiar role of death as an argument against materialism in the Space Trilogy has received little attention. In the philosophical sense, materialism is the belief that nothing exists save that which can be perceived by the five senses. Because God cannot be directly perceived by the five senses in any scientifically measurable way, this philosophy is necessarily atheistic. C.S. Lewis held to a version of this philosophy prior to his conversion to Christianity and ultimately repudiated it on the grounds that it could not account for the deepest yearnings and fears of the human heart—among them, the fear of death and of the uncertainty which lies beyond it. Careful observation of Weston's transformation from interplanetary imperialist to demoniac Un-Man, the N.I.C.E.'s diabolical experiments, and Dr. Ransom's character arc reveals that the fact of death unsettles materialist conceptions of the universe and raises the disconcerting question of what becomes of man beyond the grave. On an individual level, the anticipation of what happens to the soul after death motivates each characters' actions and transforms his philosophy. The person haunted by the idea of the afterlife, whether that be the Christian conception of Heaven, a Hellish abyss of decay, or simple nothingness and nonentity, is either inspired to perform great and courageous deeds or frightened into the depths of cowardice, going so far as to worship the Satanic "Force" or "Macrobes" to prolong life or bypass death altogether. Given its importance to the Space Trilogy's narrative, the role of death as an instrument of rhetorical argument deserves a closer analysis in light of Lewis's apologetic aims, an analysis which this paper seeks to provide.

Within each volume of the trilogy, the fear of death and the uncertainty of the afterlife function as a means to create a sense of urgency in both characters and readers, preparing them

for Lewis's argument in favor of the Christian Gospel. In his 1992 essay "C.S. Lewis and Narrative Argument in *Out of the Silent Planet*," Jim Herrick categorizes Lewis's fiction works as "narrative arguments," synthesizing the best elements of storytelling to advocate for the Christian faith. Confronting his audience with the reality of death serves as a prelude to Lewis's primary goal: the invitation to seriously consider Christianity in light of eternity ahead. In Lewis's hands, death becomes a profoundly apologetic instrument, a rhetorical tool which inspires change in his readers while it transforms his antagonists and protagonists. Most importantly, death shatters the materialist pretensions of Lewis's readers and villains, effectively dismissing the spirit of the age which blinds modern man to eternity. Death is the cornerstone of the *Space Trilogy*'s narrative argument, the ultimate test of human ideologies' staying power—a test which materialism consistently fails. By establishing a cosmic system which precludes the validity of materialism and scientism, Lewis forces his audience to confront death as the gateway to the next life, one of eternal bliss or everlasting torment.

As a scientific materialist turned demoniac, Weston functions as the primary antagonist of *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*, serving as a cautionary tale that demonstrates the horrific fate of those who reject God. In *Out of the Silent Planet*, Weston arrives on Malacandra as an evolutionary imperialist who wants to claim the planet to "place [humanity] for ever beyond the reach of death" (*Silent Planet* 135). Weston's goal, like the rest of humanity, is to avoid death, but he considers the question on the level of the human species rather than individual level. In other words, for Weston, the death of one man—be it Ransom, whom he kidnaps and brings to Malacandra as a potential human sacrifice; or himself—is of little consequence as long as the evolutionary future of the human race is secure. Weston's speech to Oyarsa, the angelic ruler of Malacandra, is delivered with the air of a martyr, intended to evoke admiration. Indeed, if his motives were not malicious and his circumstances were not known by the reader to be ridiculous—the *hnau* of Malacandra have no intention of killing Weston even after his murder of Hyoi—his speech would inspire, if not the admiration he seeks, at least pity for a man so dedicated to his cause. Weston's fearlessness stems not from the belief that there is no afterlife, to which he vehemently clings, but from a faith that the human species will last forever, which, for him, serves the same purpose. He may not become immortal, but the human race, by reproducing forever, will. This assurance emboldens Weston as he faces what he believes is certain death.

The Weston who arrives on *Perelandra* has undergone a complete ideological reversal from materialistic scientism to a form of spiritualism, reflecting the natural progression from materialism to spiritual awareness in the face of the unknown afterlife. In Weston's first conversation with Ransom, he reveals that his motives for interplanetary travel have shifted from "a duty to Man as such" to a desire to "spread spirituality" with the goal of becoming "pure spirit: the final vortex of self-thinking, self-originating activity" (*Perelandra* 78-79). In other words, Weston now seeks spiritual immortality instead of the evolutionary immortality of the human race and has consulted a new ally in his quest which he terms the "Force." Some scholars have characterized Weston's ideological reversal as a flaw in character construction. George Sayer observes that "critics sometimes complain that Weston and Devine are cardboard characters" (qtd. in Herrick 18). Weston's shift from scientism to spiritualism seems disjointed to these critics, but it is, in fact, an organic progression in his quest for immortality, one echoed by the scientists at the N.I.C.E. The secret of immortality cannot be found in science, as not even the rocks last forever. In order to discover how to bypass death, one must contact that which

transcends it entirely, as Weston does by “call[ing] that Force into [him] completely” (Perelandra 82). Weston’s abandonment of mere materialism for its inability to answer his longing for immortality demonstrates the ideology’s powerlessness in the face of the human desire for eternity. Hilder observes that, through his stories,

“Lewis want[s] readers to experience what he spoke of as our often unrecognized but real desire for Heaven. Whether we are shy about our longing for eternity with God, obtuse or even rebellious when those longings arise, they are part of our spiritual DNA and Lewis worked to awaken Heaven-ward desire.” (96)

In this context, Weston’s “Heaven-ward desire” naturally leads him beyond materialism into spiritualism, discarding the old ideology when it cannot provide him with the knowledge he desires.

Where Weston damns himself is his acceptance of the Bent One’s promise of eternal life without death, the “false infinite” (*Perelandra* 70). In a twist of horrific irony, Weston does encounter immortality, when his soul is cast into a dark abyss and his body is reanimated by the Bent One in an ominous foreshadowing of the N.I.C.E.’s project in *That Hideous Strength*. When Weston resurfaces in his own body for the last time, he describes the despair and horror of eternal separation from God as he sinks through the physical reality of the universe—the “rind”— into an abyss of “darkness, worms, heat, pressure, salt, suffocation, stink” (*Perelandra* 144). It is no accident that Weston’s description of this dark and decaying place resembles conventional pictures of Hell, the “outer darkness” referenced by Jesus in Matthew 22:13. In this context, Ransom’s appeal to Weston to “repent [his] sins” and trust Christ is an appeal to the reader as well—an attempt to save the unbelieving antagonist and unbelieving reader from the horrors below the rind (*Perelandra* 146). However, what Ransom does not realize until the Un-Man resurfaces is that it is too late for Weston to repent, as he has already tasted death and his soul has “pass[ed] out of [God’s] ken” (*Perelandra* 143). By the time Weston realizes the folly of his new view of the universe, nothing can save him. Weston’s demise is a warning of the horror that waits after death for the unbeliever. Consequently, Ransom’s appeal and the image of an outstretched hand to the dying man strikes a poignant chord with the reader, one designed to convince him or her of the urgency of faith in Christ.

Expanding his critique of scientism from the individual to the institutional level in *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis examines the consequences of man’s quest for godhood: confusion, chaos, and the very fate which it seeks to avoid. Beneath its façade of scientific objectivity and social improvement, the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments, or N.I.C.E., is the organizational incarnation of Weston’s scientism, pursuing “the old dream of Man as God” through transgressive experimentation (*Hideous Strength* 200). Benjamin C. Parker astutely observes that “the very title of [the novel] invokes collective hubris, referring to the description of the Tower of Babel in sixteenth-century poet David Lyndsay’s *Ane Dialog*” (Parker 118). Just as the Biblical Tower of Babel represents humanity’s first attempt at becoming godlike, to “make a name for [itself]” and thus obtain immortality, the N.I.C.E. pursues the dream of Babel by keeping the head of the murderer Francois Alcasan alive after his decapitation (Genesis 11:4). In an interesting twist, Alcasan’s head is revealed not to be speaking with his own voice, but with the voice of what Frost calls the “Macrobes,” superhuman intelligences implied to be the dark eldils, demonic forces dominating Earth. Like Weston’s transformation from a pure scientific materialist to a Life-Force worshipper, the N.I.C.E.’s Satanic experiments demonstrate the

inability of materialism to account for the human fear of death. While there is undoubtedly an instinct to preserve the physical body—as Ransom experiences on Malacandra—the scientists’ desire to create an immortal man without a body indicates a deeper horror of death than that which arises from the thought of physical demise.

Lewis’s descriptions of the Head and of the bloodbath at the N.I.C.E. banquet invoke particularly gory images more closely associated with the horror genre than with the blend of apologetics, allegory, and fantasy for which his works are known. This is intentional; incorporating elements of horror—a genre which plays on the human fear of death, torment, and decay—thematically reinforces the anxieties to which Lewis appeals as an apologetic instrument. These terrifying images are Lewis’s decisive blow against materialism, which, as Mark Studdock discovers during a sleepless night at Belbury, “is in fact no protection” against the horrors of death and Hell (*Hideous Strength* 202). The scientific pursuit of immortality, the vain attempt to avoid death forever, ends in the same display of shattered pride as Babel—the confusion of language—before the tortured animals kept by the N.I.C.E. are unleashed on the banquet in a carnival of horrors. The descriptions of this scene, with “dead and dying bodies everywhere,” people trampling each other and being slain by beasts, and an elephant “tramping in a pash of blood and bones, of flesh, wine, fruit, and sodden tablecloth,” are intended to appall the readers, inviting them to consider the fates of the Belbury crowd as opposed to Ransom’s (*Hideous Strength* 346-347). Rather than dedicating his life, like the N.I.C.E. and Weston, to the avoidance of death, Ransom faces his fear of death and conquers it by faith in Jesus Christ—Maleldil, in the language of Heaven. Paradoxically, the man who has learned not to fear death does not die, but is taken by the Oyarsa of Perelandra to dwell in Third Heaven “with Enoch and Elias and Moses and Melchisedec,” Biblical figures who are said to have never experienced physical death (*Hideous Strength* 271). Lewis’s point in sending Ransom to dwell with Enoch and Elijah is not to indicate that the Christian will never die, but that paradise awaits the one who overcomes the fear of death through faith in Christ.

While the fates of Weston and the N.I.C.E. are intended as a warning, Ransom’s example is meant to encourage the Christian and to invite the nonbeliever to seriously consider his faith. Like the reader, Ransom was not born fearless. His journey to Malacandra and Perelandra and his subsequent struggles force him to confront his fear of death and become the courageous believer who organizes the fight against the N.I.C.E. in *That Hideous Strength*. Scholars have critiqued Ransom’s character along the same lines as Weston’s, with George Sayer writing that “Ransom is the one character who ought to be real, yet he never quite comes alive. He has no faults or idiosyncrasies, and we are told little of his spiritual life and intimate thoughts” (qtd. in Herrick 18). While it is true that Ransom is exceedingly virtuous, he does, in fact, have one fault which Oyarsa, the angelic lord of Malacandra, points out to him: “You are guilty of no evil, Ransom of Thulcandra, except a little fearfulness. For that, the journey you go on is your pain, and perhaps your cure: for you must be either mad or brave before it is ended” (*Silent Planet* 142). While Oyarsa’s comment directly refers to Ransom’s impending voyage home, his entire interplanetary journey becomes the “cure” for his fear of death, beginning with his experiences among the Malacandrian natives. These rational beings, inhuman in shape but fully capable of intelligent thought, introduce Ransom and the reader to the proper perspective on death, the one held by every rational species outside of Earth. The *hrossa*, a species of otter-like hunter-gatherers with an affinity for poetry, neither fear death nor long for it to the exclusion of loving the present life. Rather than lamenting the fact that life ends, the *hrossa* hold that the next life is

“second and better” while “this [is] first and feeble” (*Silent Planet* 130). This perspective makes the *hrossa* fearless monster-hunters. For Ransom’s friend Hyoui, it suffuses all of life with beauty—“I do not think the forest would be so bright, nor the water so warm, nor love so sweet, if there were no danger in the lakes” (*Silent Planet* 76). This noble, courageous outlook contrasts sharply with not only Ransom’s fear of death, but the reader’s as well, death being a terror common to all men. While Ransom’s Christian faith causes him to assent, at least intellectually, to the *hrossa*’s perspective, the threat posed to his physical body still frightens him and causes him to disobey the *eldil*’s order to go to Oyarsa, whom he fears may devour him. The fact that Ransom alone among rational beings is afraid of dying demonstrates that the fear of death is a uniquely human phenomenon, one which originates in man’s separation from God as a result of the Fall. The implication for Ransom and for the reader is that death ought not to be feared, at least not for those who know God and are sure of eternal union with Him after death. The *hrossa* are certain of their eternal destiny; Ransom, who knows his own fallenness, is not. The cure for this is detailed in the Scriptures which he, as a Christian, reveres—Ransom must “work out [his] own salvation with fear and trembling,” facing his worst nightmare with the aid of his savior in order to conquer it forever (Philippians 2:12). For that, Ransom must travel to a new planet and confront a new, even more terrifying enemy.

On *Perelandra*, Ransom’s battle with the Un-Man cures his fear of death by forcing him to face it head-on, providing a model for the Christian reader of how this anxiety can be overcome. In one of his first conversations with Tinidril, the Green Lady, Ransom expresses the horror of death common to his fallen race when the Lady “wonders...if [he was] sent here to teach” her and her husband “death” (*Perelandra* 58). Ransom rejects this proposition outright, insisting that “it is horrible. It has a foul smell. Maleldil Himself wept when He saw it” (*Perelandra* 58). From Ransom’s description of the soul’s departure from the body, the Lady immediately perceives the wonder inherent in life after death, calling humans “favoured beyond all worlds” because Maleldil takes them to Himself (*Perelandra* 58). However, Ransom, despite his experiences on *Malacandra* and the journey back to Earth during which he longed “to dissolve into the ocean of eternal noon,” still dreads physical demise (*Silent Planet* 145). For that, there is no cure except facing the demonic Un-man and attempting to kill it. Convinced that he will lose the battle and be tortured to death in grisly ways, Ransom is frightened not only of the pain of “ripping off narrow strips of [his] flesh” and “pulling out tendons,” but also of the certainty of damning himself under duress by “[begging] for mercy, [promising] it help, worship, anything” (*Perelandra* 122). Ransom feels that he must threaten not only his physical fate but his spiritual one as well, and that death may yet be the gate to unknown horrors. Nevertheless, at Maleldil’s command and with His encouragement, Ransom performs his most courageous deed yet: going “voluntarily into those dead yet living arms” to stop the assault on *Perelandra*’s innocence (*Perelandra* 125). For the Christian reader, Ransom’s willing leap into the arms of death itself is analogous to the life of faith, of trusting an unseen God to protect one’s soul from corruption. For the unbelieving reader, it is an act of insane, suicidal courage, a testimony to the power of the Christian faith to inspire noble deeds and heroic struggles. Richard L.W. Clarke writes of Ransom’s battle with the Un-Man as an “initiation by the *eldila* into the purposeful and ultimately providential nature of reality,” a reality governed by a loving God who gives eternal assurance to the faithful believer (72). It is this initiation which cures Ransom of the fear of death once and for all. Having confronted his worst nightmare and found it far less horrible than he had reckoned, Ransom is able to tell Weston, as well as the reader, “It’s only death, all said and done” (*Perelandra* 141). Ransom’s unlearning of the fear of death is a powerful narrative argument for

the Christian faith as an antidote to this terror—with the assurance of his salvation, Ransom is purged of his fearfulness and emerges victorious from a battle with the devil himself.

Taken together, the three volumes of C.S. Lewis's Space Trilogy make full use of death as an appeal to the reader, one which pierces the flimsy structure of materialistic contentment and emphasizes the urgency of trusting Christ in the face of death. As the trilogy progresses, recurring characters' views of death evolve, with Ransom embracing the outlook of his Christian faith and learning to conceive of death as the gateway to eternal union with Maleldil. Weston, on the other hand, descends from his evolutionary materialism to a fear of death which he had once considered primitive or "savage." Even the scientists of the N.I.C.E. discard materialism, creating a prideful vision of man's evolutionary future which ends in hellish carnage. Whatever the end product of these ideological evolutions, there is no room for mere materialism in the face of death. Lewis's use of death in the Space Trilogy as the defining test of all human religion and ideology exposes materialism for what it is—an unsubstantial anodyne for the man trying to forget his supposedly childish fears of Hell. Indeed, death forces the one beholding it to return to the Christian view of the afterlife, whether he realizes it or not. If there is any shred of human reason or emotion left in him, he will learn to fear the next life or long for it. He may try to delay it, to combine it with visions of a Heaven or Hell on Earth, or to skip over it entirely by evolving man into an immortal being, but he cannot ignore it or value it at naught. The end of the life of the body is only the beginning of the next—that which is everything beautiful and perfect, or that which is an empty, howling wilderness of decay.