

"AM I A BEAR OR A HEDGEHOG?" LANGUAGE AND SILENCE IN THE WORKS OF C.S. LEWIS.

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Whereas Wittgenstein claims that language can only say that which can be said and, since language constructs only a world of simple objects, GOD is, as the OTHER, probably the ultimate challenge to language — the OTHER of whom one can neither speak nor write. One of the tasks of literature, however, is to write the unwriteable and to say the unsayable. Language can only impinge on this realm of silence by means of metaphor and myth. For C.S. Lewis myth is metaphor writ large.

For the purposes of this paper, I shall be concentrating on Lewis's so-called science fiction trilogy — *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra (Voyage to Venus)* and *That Hideous Strength*. It seems to me that these texts are better regarded as mythopoeic novels than as science fiction. In the trilogy Lewis creates a series of experimental worlds which owes more to myth than it does to science fiction. A.N. Wilson describes *Out of the Silent Planet* as "quite un-put-downable ... The theology does not wage war on the story ... it is not 'theology' dressed up as as 'literature'; rather it makes its best literary effects when it is at its most religious because the religious matter is what most engages the author's imagination".¹ That observation, to some extent, might be applied to the whole trilogy. The GOD dimension may be seen as being played out by very serious games of silence and language.

The question of the relationship between language and reality is at the heart of literary theory. But are reality and truth the same thing? For Lewis it is "myth that gives life",² and "what flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something but reality is that *about which* truth is)".³ May one then apprehend and demonstrate GOD by means of

metaphor, through myth? Or can GOD only be apprehended through silence?

For many Christians silence is the optimum way of approaching GOD. For them language is like the "white noise" that, rather than silence, deconstructionists often suggest underlies text. Although it may be suppressed it is nonetheless present and distracting. Language is a distraction. So we rely on silence to approach and communicate with the GOD who, in Christian theology, is most often presented as "LOGOS", the creative WORD or the idea. Is GOD then silent, as seems to be the practical experience of so many people, or is silence the context in which GOD is experienced? In both asking such questions and in attempting to find and understand answers, surely we are using language metaphorically.

"For all of us", Lewis says, "there are things which we cannot fully understand at all, but of which we can get a faint inkling by means of metaphor".⁴ Our understanding depends rigidly on three conditions. They are that the imagery should be originally well chosen; that we should apprehend the exact imagery and that we should know that the metaphor is a metaphor.⁵ Lewis held that the person who does not consciously use metaphors talks without meaning.⁶ Indeed, as a self-styled rationalist, Lewis saw reason as the natural organ of truth, but "imagination [as] the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth but its condition ... [All] our truth, or all but a few fragments, is won by metaphor".⁷

For Lewis then, myth and metaphor are merely differences of scale. The only type of science fiction that interested him was that which might be called the marvellous or fantastic and which was:

simply an imaginative impulse as old as the human race working under the conditions of our own time ... [Those] who wish to visit strange regions in search of such beauty, awe, or terror as the actual world does not supply have increasingly been driven to other planets or other stars. It is the result of increasing geographic knowledge ... As the area of knowledge spreads, you need to go further afield ...⁸

It may be that Ransom was transported to Mars or Malacandra in a space ship in his first extra-terrestrial experience but the "science" in the fiction is at best peripheral. Lewis says "I took a hero once to Mars in a space-ship, but when I knew better I had angels convey him to Venus".⁹ Ransom's overriding experience of the journey, apart from his apprehension, is that "all was silence" and as a result "he could not fear ... Space was the wrong name. Older thinkers were wiser when they named it simply the heavens ... which declared the glory ...".¹⁰ Such is the silence of "space" that Ransom comes to see "the planets ... as mere holes or gaps in the living heaven ...".¹¹ As he comes to terms with the various other worlds which he visits, Ransom sees a richness of life on each that belies this early notion of them as mere gaps or holes, but he never loses his sense of "the living heaven".

To attempt to tap the richness of Lewis's space mythology is beyond the scope of this paper. References to the interplay of silence and language abound, however, throughout the novels, as do tantalising inferences as to the relationship between language and reality. There is also a consistent doubleness, if not multiplicity and slipperiness, about both language and silence. The central character, Ransom — whose name suggests somewhat simplistically his role in the story — is a philologist. He is at first a very unwilling participant in these extra-terrestrial adventures, imagining his destiny to be that of a human sacrifice to the depraved or monstrous inhabitants rather than the divinities of some distant world. As the trio of Weston, Devine and Ransom approach the first unknown world which turns out to be Mars, or Malacandra, to give it its "correct" name, Ransom's perceptions of what lies ahead for him can only be constructed in terms of what Devine and Weston apparently know and say. From them Ransom frames a worldview which presents Malacandra as essentially hostile. It is a picture of "*Sorns*, human sacrifice, loathesome sexless monsters ... But the reality would be worse: it would be an extra-terrestrial Otherness — something one had never thought of, could never have thought of".¹² Such is his initial response to his situation.

Thus, based on the language of Weston and Devine, Ransom constructs a reality in which he is the potential victim and his first reaction is to flee for his life. During his flight and at his first meeting with an inhabitant of Malacandra his perception is still

so coloured. At first he can make no sense of his surroundings. "He knew nothing yet well enough to see it: you cannot see things till you know roughly what they are."¹³ This proposition takes us back into the speculative realm of language and reality. Can one name something without knowing it? Can one know it without language of some sort? Once Ransom comes to the appreciation that Malacandra is beautiful and his eyes begin to master the landscape and vegetation, it is in fact *language*, and his own love both of knowledge and language, that enables his imagination to leap "over every fear and hope and probability of his situation".¹⁴ It is his desire to listen and to learn the languages and stories of the hrossa, sorns, and other inhabitants of Malacandra that enables him to use language later to intervene when the captive, unintelligibly babbling Weston and Devine are brought before the Oyarsa. In the meantime Ransom, although unable to hear or see them, has learnt about the existence of the *eldila*, whom he likens to the bright, elusive people sometimes appearing on the Earth. His acknowledgement that "We have no Oyarsa in my world",¹⁵ is seen as proof positive that he comes from Thulcandra, the silent planet, the realm of the Bent One. Thulcandra is, according to the Oyarsa of Malacandra, "the world we do not know. It alone is outside the heaven, and no message comes from it",¹⁶ although it was not always thus. The difference between the worlds (and the way that this is constructed by language) is perhaps epitomised when, as Ransom is interpreting for Weston, he breaks off to say "I cannot say what he says, Oyarsa, in your language".¹⁷ For Ransom the journey to Malacandra has been, in some sense at least, a journey out of silence and into an awareness of a reality and language which has begun to prepare him to meet Maleldil, the GOD figure.

In the second book of the trilogy, Ransom is now able to see, to hear and to understand the *eldila*. Whereas in his first adventure Ransom's worldview was changed a number of times as he heard the stories and perceived Malacandra through the eyes of different groups of inhabitants and, finally, as he spoke with Oyarsa, it is as though his *Voyage to Venus* and his experience there is more of an evolution of his own understanding. This time he already has the language he needs and the sense of fear which initially accompanied him on his first journey is here replaced by a sense of trust and abandonment. The experience seems to be summed

up in an exchange recorded early in the text — even before the Perelandran part of the story begins. The narrator:

... had incautiously said, "Of course I realise it's all rather too vague for you to put into words," when he took me up rather sharply, for such a patient man, by saying, "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 language".¹⁸

Throughout the early stages of the story Ransom appears to be drinking in his solitude and silence which added "a last touch of wildness to the unearthly pleasures that surrounded him".¹⁹ This he recognised as *desire*, and almost immediately he seems to recognise an opposition between reason and desire. He saw reality and thought it was a dream and, moreover, "had a sensation not of following an adventure but of enacting a myth".²⁰ Much has already been written about *Perelandra* as the reworking of the creation myth but I simply wish to draw attention to the centrality of language in the Un-man's assault on the Green Lady's innocence. In the context of this story silence seems to be swept away before a torrent of language but, as in the first story, GOD or Maleldil is not ultimately disadvantaged by this. It is as though Maleldil bides his time. Weston appears on Perelandra talking. Ransom wakes from the abstraction caused by Weston's sudden and unexpected appearance to discover that for some time "Weston and the Lady had been conversing fluently, but without mutual understanding."²¹

As the battle is joined for the mind and soul and innocence of the Green Lady, Weston uses language as a weapon to overpower not only the silence but also Ransom's reason and experience. He fails to win over the Green Lady simply because her experience does not match, and cannot match in any way, the language he is using. For example, the Green Lady thinks it strange to think about what will never happen although Weston tries to persuade her that the world is made up not only of what is but of what might be. Further, he argues, "Maleldil knows both and wants us to know both". The Lady is prepared to ponder this although she does not understand it but, when Weston suggests that she can prove her obedience to the will of Maleldil by recognising that He (Maleldil) "is letting go of your hand a little", she is bewildered. "How could He? He is wherever we go."²² Finally the battle, "the

great concourse of noises" which is what language had become in the mouth of the Un-man, is won as Ransom pursues the creature down through the caverns and finally destroys it. Here, in the Un-man, we have seen the Other as pure evil and it is volubility. In the safe atmosphere of the mountain top the King observes that "there are too many new words in the air. I had thought these things were coming out of your mind into mine, and lo! you have not thought them at all. Yet I think Maleldil passed them to me through you, none the less".²³

As the story of the Great Dance (or the Great Game) gathers to its climax and the *eldila* declaim "'Set your eyes on one movement and it will lead you through all patterns and it will seem to you the master movement. But the seeming will be true', ... by a transition which he did not notice, it seemed that what had begun as speech was turned into sight ... he thought he saw the Great Dance".²⁴ After this, Ransom was drawn by "cords of infinite desire" into the stillness of the Dance. "He went up into such a quietness, a privacy, and a freshness that at the very moment when he stood farthest from our ordinary mode of being he had the sense of stripping off encumbrances and awaking from trance and coming to himself."²⁵ He is ready, through this stillness and tangible silence, to return to Thulcandra. There, in the final episode of the trilogy, he will be much of the time withdrawn into silence and solitude although still, enigmatically, a channel through whom Maleldil acts.

That Hideous Strength is, as Lewis says in the Preface to the Pan edition, "a tall story about devilry". The organizing structure and the language of the novel create an extremely claustrophobic atmosphere by establishing a series of concentric and descending spheres of action. They become progressively denser and tighter yet, simultaneously, separate into dual and opposing centres of influence. This duality, and the tension it generates, can be seen in the way in which language and communication break down. It appears that there is an ever increasing gap between language and reality. It is Dr Dimble who draws attention to this when, in conversation with Jane Studdock, he refers to the doubleness of Arthurian legend:

... there are two sets of characters. There's Guinevere and Launcelot and all those, all very courtly and nothing very

British about them. But then in the background there are all those dark people like Morgan and Morgawse, who are very British indeed And usually more or less hostile. Mixed up with magic ... [And] Arthur himself ... a man of the old British line, but a Christian and a fully trained general with Roman technique trying to pull this whole society together ... And always that under-tow, that tug back to Druidism.²⁶

In this context Merlin emerges as the really interesting figure — not evil yet a magician; obviously a Druid, yet he knows about the Grail".²⁷ And when he finally emerges into the "real world", Merlin speaks a language which only Ransom (now known as Mr Fisher-King) can understand. This links back to the notion, first enunciated in *Out of the Silent Planet*, that there is an old common language which has been lost or effectively silenced on Thulcandra as a result of the joint efforts of the Bent One and humanity. From England, to Edgestow then, finally, to Belbury (NICE) and St Anne's (the Manor) we descend. And with the descent there settles a mantle of silence which, in this novel, has nothing to do with GOD or Maleldil. Rather it has everything to do with secrecy, distortion and the manipulation of truth and reality. In the workings of the NICE (the National Institute for Co-ordinated Experiments) at Belbury we see in microcosm the evil which has for so long resulted in Thulcandra being separated from the rest of the universe; which has resulted in its being the silent planet, shrouded in a pall of evil and silence which it seems Maleldil either cannot or will not penetrate.

The profound silence which underpins the work of NICE is maintained by an external barrage of disinformation which at once uses and demonstrates the power of language to create "reality". It is not for nothing that Mark Studdock is told to write *down* an account of NICE's work — "only for the present, of course. Once the thing gets going we shan't have to bother about the great heart of the British public. But in the meantime it *does* make a difference how things are put".²⁸ Throughout this apocalyptic text Lewis explores the doubleness or slipperiness inherent in the relationship between words, silence and reality. Mark is determined to learn the appropriate language to ultimately penetrate "the inner ring". For him language is power. Jane, on the other hand is unsettled by recurrent dreams and she needs to be persuaded that, far from being

a disease, such vision (which one might call an operation of language in silence) is "the power of dreaming realities".²⁹

This battle *within* language — since both the community at St Anne's and the Inner Ring at Belbury are equally concerned about the use of language, although to totally different ends — resolves itself in the great banquet at Belbury,³⁰ and in the descent of the gods at St Anne's and the final dinner there.³¹ The Belbury banquet quickly turns into a rout on the scale of the Tower of Babel or Babble. No-one escapes. The coming of the gods to St Anne's marks the ascendancy of the good *eldils* at last, the return of Logres to England — in a sense the reintegration of the whole: the return of Maleldil.

But what then of silence and language? There is a sense in this text that in the reintegration of Logres and England, the REAL and the real as it were, that language and silence are likewise reintegrated and that they work together to construct meaning. The doubleness and slipperiness of both language and silence is, for Lewis, characteristic of fallen creation. Redemption and reintegration mean that "Perelandra is all about us, and [we] are no longer isolated".³²

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